

Starting Strong VIII Country Notes

Japan

The Translating Research into Policies for Quality and Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) policy review was initiated to support countries and jurisdictions in reviewing how recent research advancements on child development, learning and well-being coming from multiple disciplines could help them revisit ECEC policies and identify areas and directions for improvement. Over the last two decades, science made significant progress in understanding the factors that shape early child development, fuelled primarily by advancements in neuroscience but also benefiting from the growing attention that education and social sciences research pays to early childhood. This knowledge holds promise for policies that set strong foundations for life-long learning and socio-emotional well-being and resilience.

However, translating research into policies is a complex endeavour. The policy review built on recurrent and structured exchanges between country representatives of Ministries in charge of ECEC policies (the OECD ECEC Network) and a multidisciplinary group of experts to engage in a collaborative review of evidence that could inform directions for improving ECEC policies. At the beginning of the project, policy-makers indicated ECEC areas or challenges where they perceived a need for additional or updated research evidence to inform policy directions in their countries. This led to the identification of the theme of the policy review, which is on how to design ECEC policies to ensure that they help mitigating inequalities in the short- to long-terms. The project's final report, *Reducing Inequalities by Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care* (OECD, 2025^[1]), was published as part of the OECD Starting Strong series.

Five countries (Australia, Bulgaria, Ireland, Japan and Korea) engaged more actively in the project. Representatives from these countries were invited to engage in consultation meetings to identify their priority areas and key issues for the development of the ECEC sector, aligned with the objectives and themes of the Starting Strong VIII report. Two workshops were organised to foster dialogue between experts and country representatives, focusing on the key issues identified during the consultation meetings. The information gathered during the consultation meetings and project workshops as well during the preparation of the Starting Strong VIII report informs this country note.

Context

In Japan, 12% of children lived in relative income poverty in 2021, slightly below the OECD average (see Figure 1.1, Chapter 1). As in other countries, inequality of opportunity translates into inequality in students' achievements, as evidenced by the gap in mathematics scores according to the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) between children from high and low socio-economic status families. In Japan, this gap remained broadly stable between 2015 and 2022 and slightly below the OECD average. Japan is also the country where PISA score in mathematics for socio-economically disadvantaged students is the highest in OECD countries.

Japan faces critical demographic challenges, including an ageing population and workforce shortages especially in young ages, largely resulting from one of the lowest fertility rates among OECD countries. To address these issues, three key policy strategies have shaped Japan's approach: i) supporting families through enhanced family policies, such as extended parental leave, family and child allowances, and measures to reduce the financial burden of raising children; ii) promoting women's labour force participation by improving access to ECEC services; and iii) easing labour migration to mitigate workforce shortages and demographic imbalances. Japan's investment in ECEC is at the centre of these strategies. ECEC can help achieve multiple goals: supporting both parents' labour market participation and families more globally to boost fertility rates, but also equalising opportunities from the early years as the population becomes more diverse and setting the foundations for equal and strong skills development in light of workforce shortages.

These demographic shifts and policy responses are reshaping societal structures and driving changes in the demand for ECEC services, which are serving a growing number of children from diverse backgrounds and with varying needs. During consultation meetings and project workshops, representatives from Japan highlighted that a key priority for the country is to support equity in and through ECEC as well as enhancing its quality given the increasing diversity of children's backgrounds, strengths and needs within ECEC settings.

The note is structured around the policy areas of the roadmap for ECEC with a lasting impact on equity and inclusion presented in Chapter 1 of the report. It also summarises some of the main findings of the report.

Reducing gaps in participation in ECEC

With evidence showing that the early years play a key role in children's learning and development trajectories, and that learning opportunities in family environments vary widely between children (see Chapter 3), extended participation in ECEC beyond the almost-universal year before primary education in Japan is a key policy direction to address early inequalities. Despite substantial increases in total enrolment rates in recent decades in most OECD countries, some children, because of their characteristics and socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, have weaker opportunities to engage in ECEC. In Japan, enrolment rates for children aged 3 to 5 consistently exceed 90%, surpassing the OECD average. Comprehensive international data on participation rates for younger children is lacking but available data suggests that enrolment for two-year-olds remains lower at 10% (see Table 1). National estimates that include participation rates across different types of formal ECEC settings, however, indicate significantly higher participation rates for children under 3, reaching almost 70%—above the OECD average. Participation gaps disproportionately affect families in disadvantaged circumstances, including those with specific socio-economic and cultural characteristics (Kachi, Kato and Kawachi, 2020^[2]).

Multi-faceted and inter-related effects of personal and environmental factors influence participation in ECEC (see Chapter 5). Some barriers to participation are direct, relating to the availability, accessibility, and affordability of ECEC services, while indirect barriers (complex administrative requirements, lack of awareness of ECEC benefits, social norms or a low level of trust in provision quality) hinder access to otherwise available services. Direct and indirect barriers tend to disproportionately affect families from low socio-economic and immigrant backgrounds. Reducing gaps in participation in ECEC involves addressing both direct and indirect barriers.

Providing effective support to make ECEC affordable to all families and progressively moving towards universal free access is a key direction to reduce direct barriers to participation. Japan's plan to expand the free ECEC programme to children as young as 6 months by 2025 is a step toward this goal. This initiative builds on the programme introduced in 2019 for children aged 3 to 5 that grants free ECEC up to an established financial limit. The 2019 programme covers tuition fees for licensed kindergartens, day-care

centres, and centres for early childhood education and care, with free ECEC services also available for children aged 0 to 2 in households exempt from municipal residence tax. Under the scheme, which will be expanded in 2025, all eligible children are expected to be allocated up to 10 hours of ECEC services per month. As a result of these policies, families' ECEC expenses have declined over the past decade, with out-of-pocket costs for a two-earner couple family representing 11% of average earnings in 2023, below the OECD average (see Figure 5.5). Although standard tuition fees in private settings are subsidised, families remain responsible for additional costs such as meals, uniforms and teaching materials, with subsidies available only for low-income families in certain cases. These supplementary expenses can substantially increase the financial burden on households. Evidence from research indicates that free or publicly subsidised ECEC access requires adequate ECEC investments that can drive expansion in infrastructure and recruitment of qualified staff and alleviate costs for families experiencing vulnerability.

Developing flexible ECEC provision can help address the diverse needs of families and promote greater participation in ECEC services. With some of the longest average working hours among OECD countries, parents in Japan face challenges in balancing work and childcare responsibilities (OECD, 2018^[3]). These challenges lead to barriers to women's labour force participation, the use of ECEC services, and children's well-being (Bilodeau, Mikutra-Cencora and Quesnel-Vallée, 2023^[4]; OECD, 2018^[3]). The Comprehensive Support System for Children and Child-rearing, introduced in April 2015, expanded the range and flexibility of ECEC services and positively influenced women's employment (Zhang and Managi, 2021^[5]). Research indicates that flexibility in operating hours, duration, frequency and types of provision can enhance accessibility for families facing various responsibilities and constraints. When designed to be accessible and affordable, flexible ECEC arrangements can support greater participation of women in the labour force (see Chapter 5).

Understanding the role of ECEC in children's lives is necessary for motivating parents to use these services and enhancing ECEC participation in many OECD countries. Some parents of children under the age of 3 may view ECEC services as a childcare solution rather than as an experience supporting child development. While financial pressures and shifting attitudes in Japan have driven some families to view ECEC as essential, socio-economically disadvantaged families remain underrepresented, even in free or low-cost programmes (Seki, 2019^[6]). Barriers such as limited awareness of available services and the benefits of ECEC contribute to these disparities (Zhou, 2019^[7]). Research from OECD countries highlights the role of information services and support networks in closing participation gaps for socio-economically disadvantaged or immigrant families (see Chapter 5). Integrating these channels into frequently used early childhood services, such as healthcare, social services and other social hubs accessed by families, can play a key role in reaching vulnerable families, ensuring that even those who may not actively seek information are well-informed (see Chapter 10). In addition, strengthening trust in ECEC in communities with low participation rates requires fostering engagement with communities, ensuring transparency and promoting shared leadership where community members and parents are involved in service delivery. Services led in collaboration with community members can respond to and prioritise the social and cultural needs of families and foster an inclusive environment that matches the expectations of parents.

The view that ECEC services are not suitable for younger age groups is also related to social norms that emphasise the importance of home-based childcare, particularly provided by mothers. In Japan, traditional norms, such as "3-year-old myth" (*sansaiji shinwa*, 三歳児神話), which advocates for mothers to provide home-based care until children reach age 3, continue to influence parental attitudes towards ECEC. These views are reinforced by tax and social benefit structures that disincentivise maternal workforce participation (Yamada, 2024^[8]); (Zhou, 2019^[7]). Evidence shows that policies that encourage shared parental leave combined with ECEC supports can help shift caregiving expectations more equitably between parents, further normalising maternal workforce involvement while increasing ECEC enrolment (see Chapter 5).

Supporting meaningful interactions between children and ECEC staff

In addition to broader participation, the quality of ECEC, and particularly the quality of children's interactions with others within ECEC settings (process quality), matters for children's development, learning and well-being. However, a large body of evidence documents variability in the quality of ECEC between and within types of ECEC (see Chapter 6), which is problematic when more vulnerable children consistently receive lower quality services, as this means that children's experiences in ECEC settings are unlikely to level the playing field among children. Particularly in systems with a variety of types of provision, participation in more regulated and intense forms of ECEC tends to be lower among children from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds, often making them experience lower levels of process quality. In Japan, private ECEC centres which enrol 79% of children for pre-primary education often operate with greater autonomy in budget planning and staff recruitment than public ones, and leaders in these settings tend to have higher levels of educational attainment compared to their counterparts in public centres. This autonomy and variation in leadership contribute to differences in process quality, particularly in staff-child interactions and the design of learning activities (OECD, 2019^[9]).

Curriculum frameworks informed by the high-quality features identified by research and applicable to a broad range of settings and types of provision can strengthen quality and equity across an ECEC system (see Chapter 6). In contrast, the fragmentation of curriculum frameworks and lack of coverage of some segments of the sector can lead to inconsistencies in quality provision within ECEC systems and therefore requires attention to alignment between frameworks. In Japan, the *Course of Study for Kindergarten*, developed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), provides the framework for kindergartens (*yōchien*), while the *Childcare Guidelines*, issued by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, guide the provision of care in nursery centres (*hoikuen*). Both frameworks are designed with a shared structure and are closely aligned in terms of learning content, ensuring coherence across different ECEC settings while adapting to children's development stages.

Developing a skilled ECEC workforce is paramount to ensuring a successful implementation of the curriculum framework and high-quality interactions with all children. Initial education that includes training specifically to work with children, covers a broad range of areas, and includes a practical component can support staff in all roles and types of provision with their work. Continuous professional development (CPD) can also play an instrumental role in supporting staff working in more challenging ECEC settings to enhance quality for those who need it the most. While Japan's pre-service education for ECEC staff provides a strong foundation – most staff hold ISCED Level 5 qualifications and complete practical training – barriers to CPD remain significant. High costs, insufficient staffing during training and conflict with work schedule are commonly cited challenges (OECD, 2020^[10]); (OECD, 2019^[9]). Evidence shows that comprehensive policy approaches that bring together enhanced professional development opportunities with the provision of additional staff and financial incentives can be effective at attracting teaching staff and ensuring quality in settings in disadvantaged areas.

System-wide standards for structural quality features such as child-staff ratios remain important to reduce variation in the capacity of ECEC staff to establish positive relationships with children across different types of settings and forms of provision. In Japan, municipal-level ECEC services for children aged 0-2 encompass a variety of formats, including family-style day-care (serving five or fewer children in home-like environments), small-scale childcare services (serving 6 to 19 children), and one-on-one home-based care. Standards for staff-child ratios and environments vary across these services (Cabinet Office Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2024^[11]). Evidence shows that consistent, system-wide standards for smaller class sizes and more favourable staff-child ratios can enable staff to reduce the amount of time spent on classroom or playgroup management and focus more on the needs of individual children, thereby establishing richer relationships with them. However, the benefits of improving child-staff ratios and group sizes alone in contexts where they are

already adequate are modest according to research and can therefore be targeted in settings serving younger children and those with higher concentrations of vulnerable populations.

Finally, system-level monitoring and related quality support through financial incentives and capacity-building can steer improvements in programme quality in more fragmented and marketised systems (see Chapters 6 and 9). Further, making monitoring results available and considering users' views and experiences can contribute to family and community trust and engagement in ECEC (see Chapters 5 and 6).

Making ECEC inclusive for all children

Increasing social and cultural diversity characterises the populations of children participating in ECEC across OECD countries. Growing levels of diversity are driven by multiple factors, including the expansion and greater accessibility of ECEC services as well as global migration and forced displacements. Further, most children with special education needs participating in ECEC do so in mainstream settings. ECEC can support inclusion by focusing on the strengths that come with diversity, leaving behind deficit views on the capacities and potential of children from disadvantaged or minority backgrounds and by combining universal and targeted approaches, in line with tiered models of support for young children.

Compared to other OECD countries, Japan's ECEC settings show lower levels of cultural and linguistic diversity, with fewer than 2% of centres reporting a high proportion of children with different first languages in 2018 (González-Sancho et al., 2023^[12]). However, in the OECD Starting Strong Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS Starting Strong), 17% of centres reported that at least 10% of their children experience socio-economic disadvantage or have special educational needs. While the overall complexity of inclusion challenges faced is relatively lower in Japan, ECEC centres with a high proportion of children with special educational needs are more likely to experience shortages in human resources (González-Sancho et al., 2023^[12]; OECD, 2023^[13]).

Curriculum frameworks can promote inclusive practices in ECEC settings. An inclusive ECEC curriculum makes diversity a building block in providing high-quality learning and development experiences for all children. Diversity can be valued and sustained across all settings within an ECEC system, not only in settings serving large shares of children from diverse backgrounds. ECEC staff need flexibility for adapting the curriculum to local forms of diversity, including by engaging with families and communities. Focusing on the needs of children with disabilities and diverse needs has the potential to improve the experiences of all children. Indeed, all children require some level of individualised support and accommodation, and while these needs may be more pronounced for children with disabilities, the skills that general education teachers develop to teach children with disabilities more effectively will ultimately benefit all children.

In Japan, the National Guidelines for Care and Education at Day Nursery and the National Curriculum Standard for Kindergartens underscore the importance of inclusion and diversity (Japan Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2017^[14]; Shishido, 2008^[15]). These frameworks advocate for individualised support tailored to children's developmental needs and backgrounds, while also allowing for flexibility in curriculum implementation. Specific recommendations include addressing the needs of children with disabilities, children with limited Japanese language proficiency, and those returning from abroad. The curricula further encourage engagement with local communities, integration of cultural traditions, and fostering an appreciation for diversity and international understanding.

Continuous professional development is key to support ECEC staff in developing more inclusive practices and implementing a curriculum framework that values diversity. In Japan, participation in CPD is high and in 2018, the percentage of the ECEC staff with diversity included as a topic in CPD activities over the last 12 months prior to the survey was 77% in (highest among the participating OECD countries) (OECD, 2020^[10]). Nevertheless, as in other surveyed countries, ECEC staff reported a strong need for ongoing

training on working with children with special education needs and with multilingual children. This might relate to staff often lacking opportunities to reflect on biases and develop strategies to foster equity within their settings through informal, centre-based professional development activities such as mentoring, peer observation and workshops, but this could also come from strong awareness of challenges relating to diversity (OECD, 2020^[10]). Transversal competences and attitudes (e.g. addressing biases, valuing diversity) are a foundation for more specific and targeted skills (e.g. supporting home languages). Delivery can favour team-level, guided reflection, and practical responses to diversity in local contexts. Continuous training specifically targeted at leaders of ECEC settings can play a pivotal role in creating a school or setting-wide culture of respect and appreciation for diversity and in enabling staff to deal more effectively with diverse classrooms.

Targeted staffing is one of the main mechanisms to be mobilised for better equipping ECEC settings to serve populations of children with diverse characteristics (see Chapter 7). This involves allocating human resources such as support or specialised staff where they are needed most and creating multi-professional teams within ECEC settings (see Chapter 7). The presence of an additional professional in the classroom can facilitate that children receive more individual help and attention during activities, from either the support staff member or the teacher, which in turn means that their needs are more likely to be met.

In turn, system- and setting-level monitoring and assessment can help authorities and staff to better understand and identify variability in children's needs and strengths, and to assess the quality of the targeted supports provided to children, as a complement to the monitoring of more general aspects of quality in ECEC.

Connecting ECEC services with families, schools and communities

The co-ordination and combination of ECEC policies with policies targeting families and communities can launch vulnerable children on more favourable trajectories (see Chapter 8). Intentionally developing ECEC programmes that support parents to foster children's well-being and early learning, especially programmes that integrate well into parents' habits and do not add to existing stress burden, can amplify children's positive experiences in ECEC and lead to sustained effects over time (see Chapter 10). Among the various options for better co-ordinating services, integrated service hubs can further support ECEC services to connect with families and communities by providing a soft entry point to education and care services, with which families facing adversities may not otherwise engage (see Chapter 5). Such service hubs bring together an array of services to support families with young children and can be organised with different combinations of programmes and tailored goals to match community needs and interests (see Chapters 4 and 10).

In Japan, ECEC centres promote family engagement through workshops and courses on child-rearing and development (OECD, 2019^[9]). Services such as the Comprehensive Support Centres for Child-rearing Generation (子育て世代包括支援センター), established in 2017, provide health consultations, parenting classes and guidance on ECEC enrolment. These centres act as one-stop support hubs, particularly for families with children not enrolled in formal ECEC. To extend reach, local governments collaborate with community organisations and private stakeholders, offering mobile support units and home visits, especially in underserved rural areas. Further, ECEC services with higher populations of children with special educational needs or from diverse backgrounds collaborate more frequently with child, family and social services to provide additional support (González-Sancho et al., 2023^[12]). To further enhance the functions of these services, local governments are encouraged to reform the existing "Comprehensive Support Centres for Child-rearing Generation" into "Child and Family Centres" from April 2024. These centres are expected to serve as integrated support hubs, providing more effective child welfare and family support services.

Despite existing initiatives, some parents – especially mothers of children aged 0-2 – experience isolation and face challenges such as unemployment, financial difficulties and limited partner support (Yamazaki et al., 2022^[16]). Immigrant families face additional barriers, including language difficulties and unfamiliarity with local services (Yamamoto, 2013^[17]). Evidence from OECD countries shows that integration or co-ordination of policies and services organised with respect to a specific target population can support the reach of these services. These target groups may be defined by age (e.g. children under age 3), by family migration or language background, by income levels or any number of other population characteristics. This approach entails identifying the factors that lead to vulnerabilities in early childhood and targeting these needs in service provision and can involve tailored outreach programmes, specialised resources, and culturally sensitive practices to address the unique challenges faced by specific groups (see Chapters 5 and 10).

To sustain the benefits of high-quality ECEC, continuity across children’s developmental stages and education settings is essential. This includes aligning curricula, learning expectations and pedagogical practices to ensure smooth transitions and gradual exposure to enriched content, particularly for more vulnerable children, avoiding unnecessary redundancy of content (see Chapter 8). In Japan, the "Bridging Programme for ECEC and Primary Education," introduced in 2022, fosters collaboration between ECEC staff and primary school teachers and provides continuity between ECEC and primary school to support such transitions. The "Ideal Image by the End of Childhood" framework outlines shared developmental goals, helping educators implement consistent pedagogy and prepare children for primary education (Japan Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2017^[14]). However, challenges persist, particularly for vulnerable children, as many schools rely on parental assistance due to shortages of special education needs educators (Ishikawa et al., 2022^[18]). ECEC curricula that are designed to build broad or “unconstrained” cognitive skills (e.g. vocabulary rather than narrow school-readiness skills such as identifying letters), social-emotional skills and skills that support learning across domains (e.g. executive functions) can be expected to produce longer-lasting positive effects for vulnerable children. Co-ordination within ECEC and between ECEC and the next levels of the education sector is critical to avoid curricular redundancy and support the continuity of pedagogical approaches, including those that emphasise active learning through play and interaction, and curriculum guidelines in Japan explicitly mention the need for alignment among different education levels to ensure seamless transitions for children (Shuey et al., 2019^[19]).

Improving governance and funding

A policy mix that aims to increase ECEC enrolment, ensure that all children benefit from quality services, and provide enhanced support proportionate to children and families’ needs requires adequate funding and mechanisms that steer the system towards these objectives (see Chapter 9). Japan has made significant strides in overall public investment in children and families, rising from 0.6% of GDP in 2003 to 2.0% in 2020 (Jones, 2024^[20]). The introduction of free pre-primary education for all children and free ECEC access for 0–2-year-old children from low-income families in 2019 eased financial burdens on families and expanded ECEC access. As a result, the share of private expenditure in total pre-primary expenditure decreased markedly (see Figure 9.2).

Experience from other countries highlight that ensuring quality and equal access to ECEC in the presence of private provision requires comprehensive policies. Quality monitoring, regulation of private providers (with particular attention to for-profit players), funding conditionality and measures to limit family costs are several policy levers that can help mitigate the risks that can emerge in mixed ECEC systems and ensure the efficiency of public and private investments.

Enhanced co-ordination and alignment between different funding sources (e.g. central and sub-central) but also funding areas (e.g. measures targeting ECEC affordability, infrastructure, workforce, quality

assurance) can steer a more effective development of ECEC that ensures sector expansion meets equity and quality criteria (see Chapters 5 and 9). In Japan, local government contributions to ECEC funding before inter-governmental transfers is below the OECD average but above the OECD average after inter-governmental transfers, with a relatively high share of funding coming from the regional level. This decentralised funding structure has the potential to exacerbate disparities in service availability and quality across regions, disproportionately disadvantaging families in less affluent areas. Urban municipalities, for example, often experience higher service shortages and longer waiting lists (Jones, 2024^[20]). Funding allocation mechanisms between levels of governments based on detailed analyses of local resources and demand for ECEC services as well as on population growth can lead to more funds to areas or communities with insufficient ECEC services, and thereby mitigate inequalities.

Workforce wages are a significant component of ECEC expenditure across OECD countries. Low compensation hampers the ECEC sectors' capacity to attract and retain qualified individuals, especially when other working conditions are also challenging. A high turnover of staff can be highly detrimental to process quality since children need to develop a stable relationship with a limited number of adult figures and since staff teams need time and continuity to engage in effective collaboration and peer learning.

The ECEC sector in Japan faces significant workforce challenges, including a high staff turnover rate (OECD, 2020^[10]). While professionals generally report high levels of job satisfaction, only 23% expressed satisfaction with their salaries, and 31% felt valued by society in 2018 (OECD, 2020^[10]). Resource constraints, including limited funding, insufficient materials and inadequate staffing levels, coupled with substantial administrative responsibilities, are key sources of stress for ECEC staff. Full-time staff in Japan work the longest hours among OECD countries, averaging 50 hours per week. This is partly driven by time spent on tasks without children, with administrative work identified as one of the primary sources of stress in the sector. These challenges contribute to a higher likelihood of staff leaving the sector, which can undermine the stability and quality of ECEC services (OECD, 2020^[10]). Ensuring wages are aligned with staff roles and responsibilities and allocating additional funding to recognise the more challenging working conditions staff face in settings in disadvantaged areas can help address staff shortages while leading to more uniform quality across settings (see Chapter 9).

Placing ECEC policies as part of a broader landscape of social and education policies can help reduce inequalities of opportunities. This requires aligning funding and governance for a more integrated policy approach. In particular, a whole-of-government approach calls for high-level policies and national commitments to support co-ordinated services throughout childhood (see Chapter 10). In Japan, the Children and Families Agency was established in April 2023, as an external and independent body under the Cabinet Office, led by a dedicated Minister of Children and Families. The agency aims to foster a society where all children can thrive as healthy and independent individuals. The agency's broad mandate includes addressing declining birth rates, expanding access to ECEC for very young children, preventing child abuse, and supporting children with disabilities, among other critical areas. At its inception in 2023, the Children and Families Agency was allocated a budget of nearly USD 33 billion (JPY 4.8 trillion), with a significant portion dedicated to ECEC subsidies and child allowances for families. Evidence shows that setting objectives for equity and quality at the system level can be further supported with the development of indicators to track progress and achievement of such objectives (see Chapters 9 and 10). Data systems that support monitoring and continuous quality improvement at the level of programmes can ensure local flexibility is balanced with national oversight in ways that meet programme goals and quality standards. These efforts, however, require building the capacity of actors to collect and use sufficiently disaggregated data for decision-making.

Box 1. A selection of pointers from the policy roadmap for ECEC with a lasting impact on equity and inclusion

A policy roadmap informed by research evidence and other countries' experiences can ensure ECEC leads to stronger outcomes for children (especially more vulnerable ones), supports inclusion and mitigates inequalities with a lasting impact. This box highlights key policy pointers (see Chapter 1) that are relevant in Japan's context, as well as policy examples drawn from other countries.

Policy pointer 1: Address both direct and indirect access barriers to reduce gaps in participation in ECEC. In Japan, despite existing policies aimed at supporting ECEC participation, social norms and limited availability of flexible ECEC options contribute to many women exiting the labour market to care for children at home. Policy directions to address direct and indirect barriers to participation gaps for children under the age of 3 in Japan are important and key policy directions for Japan include:

- *Enhance ECEC infrastructure planning, combining local and national investments, with a focus on areas with vulnerable children and service shortages.* Canada, for example, has developed a collaborative funding approach for ECEC expansion, aligning federal, provincial and local efforts to ensure access to affordable, high-quality services, especially in underserved areas, while involving local governance and communities (see Chapter 5, Box 5.1).
- *Provide flexible or alternative forms of ECEC provision to better meet the constraints for participation of vulnerable families.* Local information and support points in the Flemish Community of Belgium, for example, demonstrate an exemplary approach, offering flexible childcare options tailored to families with atypical working hours and urgent needs (see Chapter 5, Box 5.3).
- *Set up accessible information channels and streamline administrative processes for enrolment in ECEC service.* In Germany, for example, a research project providing support for parents to navigate ECEC enrolment processes and offering targeted assistance to vulnerable families has demonstrated successful outcomes in enrolment rates. In Korea, the "Go First School" website simplifies pre-primary education enrolment with English translations and is used to prioritise the needs of vulnerable families, enhancing accessibility and efficiency (see Chapter 5, Box 5.3).

Policy pointer 2: Set mechanisms for quality improvement and equitably expanding opportunities to experience high levels of process quality to support meaningful interactions between children and ECEC staff. In Japan, different types of ECEC provision and standards in quality lead to quality variations in the system. Staff shortages in ECEC centres lead to challenges for staff to participate in professional development programmes that play a key role in ECEC quality. Policy directions to ensure children consistently experience high quality interactions in ECEC settings are important and key policy directions for Japan include:

- *Provide opportunities for high-quality continuous professional development for all staff, prioritising centre-based delivery and peer learning and feedback, and target supports for participation to staff working in settings with high shares of vulnerable children.* In Norway, a mentoring scheme for newly employed graduate teachers in ECEC supports their transition into the profession, helping to recruit, develop and retain skilled ECEC teachers and leaders. Financial incentives are provided to ECEC providers to compensate for staff absences during training, ensuring high-quality professional development is accessible and sustainable, particularly for staff working with the youngest children and in vulnerable communities. (OECD, (2020): Chapter 2).

- *Regularly monitor both structural and process aspects of quality within settings and provide incentives and support for improvement.* In Flanders (Belgium), for example, the Measuring and Monitoring of Quality (MeMoQ) project has implemented a comprehensive pedagogical framework for children under 3, supporting continuous quality improvement in both centre-based and family-based childcare (see Chapter 6, Box 6.2). In the United States, Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) provide quality benchmarks, financial incentives and technical assistance to ECEC providers (see Chapter 9, Box 9.2).

Policy pointer 3: Identify and respond to variability in children’s needs and strengths to make ECEC inclusive for all children. In Japan, social and cultural diversity is increasing, and ECEC settings that serve a growing number of children from diverse backgrounds face resource constraints. ECEC staff report a significant need for professional development to effectively work with diverse groups of children. Policy directions to support the ECEC sector in responding to a broader range of needs from children and families are important and key policy directions for Japan include:

- *Ensure services for children and families provide support in which the intensity and personalisation of measures increases with the level of need, following a tiered model approach.* In Iceland, service co-ordinators are based in settings families already access, such as healthcare and ECEC centres, to implement the Prosperity Act. While all children are entitled to high-quality, preventive services, co-ordinators ensure more targeted supports address complex needs, reducing barriers and helping families navigate across various service sectors (see Chapter 10).
- *Monitor the inclusiveness of practices within settings and the quality of specific supports provided to children and ensure that staff and leaders receive actionable feedback for improvement.* For example, Observe, Reflect, Improve Children’s Learning (ORICL) tool developed by researchers in Australia supports educators working with children from birth to age 2 by focusing on individual children’s behaviours, interactions and interests. Aligned with Australia’s Early Years Learning Framework, ORICL helps personalise planning for each child’s unique needs while also considering their group participation (see Chapter 7, Box 7.5).
- *Provide continuous professional development, primarily at the team level, that helps ECEC staff adopt more inclusive practices by addressing both attitudes and specific skills.* For example, Ireland’s Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) promotes inclusion in ECEC through a professional development programme that equips practitioners to implement inclusive practices and trains Inclusion Co-ordinators to lead these efforts. Additional training covers topics such as sign languages and sensory processing disorders (see Chapter 7, Box 7.3).

Policy pointer 4: Build on ECEC together with other social services and schools to better support vulnerable families. In Japan, co-ordinated services to support families with young children are in place. However, vulnerable families face difficulties in accessing and benefiting from these services. Transitions from ECEC to primary school remain challenging for vulnerable children, and staff shortages make these transitions more difficult. Policy directions to enhance the co-ordination and combination of ECEC with other policies targeting parents and families, as well as with primary education, are important and key policy directions for Japan include:

- *Consider the development of national quality frameworks covering an array of services around families and children, possibly applying to service hubs.* In Hamburg, Germany, for example, parent-child centres (Eltern-Kind-Zentren or EKIZ) in disadvantaged neighbourhoods serve as hubs for families with children under age 3. These centres combine support for parents and children, offering ECEC-like benefits and easing transitions into formal ECEC settings through joint participation (see Chapter 4, Box 4.1).

- *Ensure that curriculum frameworks throughout early and primary education do not expose children to unnecessarily redundant content, especially vulnerable children.* In Boston, United States, the Focus on Early Learning programme aligns content, instruction and teacher training from pre-kindergarten (age 3) through second grade (age 7) to ensure continuity while preserving the unique features of early learning, avoiding the push to make earlier years resemble traditional schooling (see Chapter 6, Box 6.1).
- *Support co-ordination among ECEC and primary education staff, particularly with the goals to ease transitions for vulnerable children.* In Victoria, Australia, the Our Place model integrates services within primary schools, including ECEC, health services, adult education and well-being programmes, allowing co-ordination between staff to improve transitions for vulnerable children and families (see Chapter 10).

Policy pointer 5: Set funding and monitoring mechanisms to steer the system towards quality and equity and better integrate ECEC within the broader landscape of social and education policies. In Japan, ECEC funding largely comes from local governments, leading to variations in the resources available to services. High workforce turnover, partly due to funding constraints, further challenges the sector. To address these issues, Japan is putting in place an important reform of the governance of services around families and children. Policy directions to support the diverse needs of vulnerable families through integrated policies, as well as funding and monitoring mechanisms, are important and key policy directions for Japan include:

- *Design funding allocation mechanisms between levels of governments (e.g. conditional grants, equalisation systems between local authorities) that provide support and incentives to steer funding recipients towards quality and equity.* In Singapore, the Anchor Operator (AOP) and Partner Operator (POP) schemes condition funding on fee caps, quality certification and staff professional development, with additional support for disadvantaged children and those with special needs (see Chapter 9, Box 9.2). In Canada, a federal Infrastructure Fund aims to address gaps in childcare provision by funding provinces and territories to create spaces, prioritising not-for-profit and public providers (see Chapter 5, Box 5.1).
- *Design funding mechanisms that ensure wages are aligned with ECEC staff roles and responsibilities and incentivise workforce quality, particularly in settings with high shares of vulnerable children.* In Virginia, United States, the Teacher Recognition programme reduced staff turnover by providing financial support to ECEC educators. New Zealand's Equity Funding helps providers in low-income or culturally diverse communities improve quality through higher spending on staff and curriculum. Providers hiring more qualified staff receive additional resources to offset costs, encouraging workforce quality (see Chapter 9, Box 9.3).
- *Build data systems and processes that are meaningful to monitor quality and equity and inform directions for improvements.* In Australia, the Restacking the Odds initiative has developed "lead indicators" to help co-ordinated services to collect and share data, enabling informed policy, funding and programme decisions. The initiative also supports frontline providers in building capacity for sustained and consistent data collection and use (see Chapter 10, Box 10.3).

Table 1. Indicators of quality and inclusive early childhood education and care

Report ref.	Indicator	Ref. year	Indicator type	Japan	OECD average ¹
Context					
Fig. 1.1	Relative child poverty rate	2021	%	11.5	12.4
Fig. 3.3	Gini coefficient of income equality (<i>ranges from 0: max. equality to 1: max. inequality</i>)	2022	Gini coefficient	0.34	0.31
Fig. 3.4	National population below relative poverty threshold	2022	%	15.4	11.1
Fig. 1.2	Socio-economic gap in maths performance, age 15 (<i>adv. - disadv.</i>)	2022	Mean score diff.	81	93.5
Policy area 1: Reducing gaps in participation					
Fig. 1.3	ECEC enrolment rate, age 4	2022	%	98.1	89.1
Fig. 1.3	ECEC enrolment rate, age 2	2022	%	9.5	45.4
Fig. 1.4	Trend in socio-economic participation gap, age 4	2005-2015	Trend	No change	No change
Fig. 5.5	Out-of-pocket childcare costs for a two-earner couple family	2023	% of avg. earnings	11	12
Fig. 5.6	Agreement with statement “preschool children suffer with a working mother”, adult population	see Annex B	%	13.4	33.5
Policy area 2: Supporting meaningful interactions between staff and children					
Fig. 6.2	Enrolment in private ECEC, ISCED 02	2022	%	<i>m</i>	32.2
Fig. 6.2	Enrolment in private ECEC, ISCED 01	2022	%	<i>m</i>	50.3
Fig. 1.5	Diff. in maths performance by ECEC participation, age 15 (<i>>2 years - =2 years participation</i>)	2022	Score diff.	8.1	5.2
Policy area 3: Making ECEC inclusive for all children					
Fig. 7.1	Children reported as multilingual in ECEC, age 10 in reference year	2019	%	<i>m</i>	13.4
Fig. 7.2	Children with special educational needs in mainstream settings	2020/21	%	<i>m</i>	79.0
Policy area 4: Connecting ECEC services with families, schools and communities					
Fig. 3.6	Socio-economic gap in home activities for early literacy and numeracy (<i>adv. - disadv.</i>)	2019	Percentage points	14.6	22.1
Policy area 5: Improving governance and funding					
Fig. 9.1	Expenditure on ECEC per child, ISCED 02	2021	PPP USD	9 368	11 735
Fig. 9.2	Share of private expenditure on ECEC, ISCED 02	2021	%	23.5	14.2
Fig. 9.5	Local government share of expenditure after inter-governmental transfers, ISCED 02	2021	%	73.2	57.6
Fig. 9.4	Local government share of expenditure after inter-governmental transfers, ISCED 01	2021	%	<i>m</i>	67.0
Fig. 9.7	Share of per capita spending on family benefits and education (0-17) for children aged 0-5	2019	%	30.2	28.4

Note: m = Missing

¹ Countries included in the OECD average vary depending on data availability, refer to Annex B for further information. The average for Figure 7.1 includes only the following countries or sub-national entities: Belgium (Flanders), France, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland

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