



Results from the OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy 1998 – 2006

Introduction

The *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Policy* was launched by the OECD Education Committee in March 1998. Twelve countries - Australia, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States - volunteered to participate in the review. Eight more countries joined the review in 2002: Austria, Canada, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, South Korea and Mexico. Two major reports issued from the reviews: *Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care* (OECD, 2001) and *Starting Strong II* (OECD, 2006). In summary, these reports identified key elements of successful ECEC policy common to countries from different world regions; and promoted data collection and analysis in the early childhood field, according to agreed definitions and procedures.

The first round of the Starting Strong reviews

The first comparative report, *Starting Strong* (OECD, 2001), identified eight key elements of successful ECEC policy:

A systemic and integrated approach to policy development and implementation: An integrated approach calls for a clear policy vision for children, from birth to eight, and for co-ordinated policy frameworks at centralised and decentralised levels. This means, in principle, bringing together policy, regulation, financing and services for child care and early education under common governance. A lead ministry, which works in co-operation with other departments and sectors, can best ensure a unified vision and coherent policies for the age group. In this vision, the care and education needs of diverse families and of children 0-3 years need to be given greater attention.

A strong and equal partnership with the education system: Early childhood policy will recognise ECEC as an important part of the education process, the foundation stage of lifelong learning. It will encourage co-operation between early childhood services and schools and seek to ensure smooth transitions for children. The diverse perspectives and methods of both ECEC and schools should be brought together, focusing on the strengths of both approaches.

A universal approach to access: A universal approach to early childhood access seems more effective than targeting particular groups, although particular attention should be given to children in need of special support. In universal access systems, coverage is greater for all children (including for targeted groups) and quality tends to be better. Within universal services, it is important to ensure that all children have equal opportunities to attend quality ECEC, regardless of family income or status. This may seem a truism but the reviews show that children from diversity and low-income

backgrounds generally have the lowest access and often receive the poorest services, even in state-regulated systems.

Substantial public investment in services and the infrastructure: First and foremost, public investment best ensures equity of access and treatment for all children. While ECEC can be funded by a combination of sources, substantial government investment is needed to support a sustainable system of quality, accessible services, including investment in an infrastructure for long-term planning and quality enhancement efforts.

A participatory approach to quality improvement: For all forms of provision, including provision by private providers, there is a need for structural and regulatory standards, supported by co-ordinated investment. In parallel, defining, ensuring, and monitoring quality should be a participatory and democratic process that engages staff, parents, and children. Early childhood curricula should result from broad consultations with the early childhood stakeholders: parents, municipalities, and educators.

Appropriate training and working conditions for staff in all forms of provision is central to quality in ECEC: Quality ECEC depends on strong staff training and fair working conditions across the sector. Initial and in-service training needs to 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. Research agendas need to 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.

The second round of Starting Strong reviews

The new *Starting Strong II* (OECD, 2006) report confirms the findings of the first round of reviews. For reasons of space, these aspects are omitted in the following summary, which, while not neglecting pedagogical quality, focuses attention on contextual factors influencing ECEC policy and on the need

for greater social inclusion and democracy in early childhood services:

There is a critical need to support the early childhood stage of development, particularly in situations of child poverty, ill-health or special need. Services integrating pre- and post-natal care, nutrition, health screening for young children, and parenting information are of critical importance. The perverse effects of child poverty cannot be under-estimated and need to be addressed from the earliest age. At the same time, governments need to put into place effective social inclusion and poverty reduction strategies. The challenge of child poverty cannot be addressed by early childhood education alone. It needs to be tackled upstream by governments through comprehensive social, housing and labour policies, including income transfers to low-income groups and supportive employment schemes and work training.

In all programmes, the primary role of parents and families in rearing children should be protected and encouraged. Statutory parental leave to care for infants and toddlers is a cornerstone of family policy in many European economies where most parents are at work outside the home. A year-long parental leave allows parents (including fathers on a use-or-lose basis) to nurture and rear their children during the first critical year of life. Home care in the first year reduces demand for infant services and brings lower infant mortality, more breast-feeding, less maternal depression, more use of preventive health care. When properly remunerated, the parental leave serves well gender equality, family well-being and the best interests of the child. Attention to parents should continue when young children enter services. The continuity of children's experience from home to centre is enhanced when parents and staff members exchange information and adopt consistent approaches to socialisation, daily routines, child development and learning. Parent engagement can promote positive attitudes toward children's learning, while children's services can provide parents with support, information and referrals to other services.

Without strong government investment, regulation and supervision, children's services tend to remain disorganised and of low quality. The reviews show that a purely market approach to early childhood services is unsatisfactory. Disengagement by government leads to under-funding, weak regulation and great inequalities of access. Yet, government support alone does not guarantee quality. Many state programmes are not evaluated and investment can be far too low to ensure quality. Ministries need to work continuously on improving regulation, structural inputs, in-service training and the quality of the educational process (goal-setting, planning and evaluation, pedagogical practice, teamwork, adult child interactions, etc.).

Successful ECEC systems and programmes can be designed to support broad learning, participation and democracy: In addition to the acquisition of knowledge and skills, an abiding purpose of public education is to enhance understanding of society and encourage democratic reflexes in children. The first chapter of the Swedish curriculum begins as follows:

An important task of the preschool is to establish and help children acquire the values on which our society is based. The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people,

equality between the genders as well as solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are all values that the preschool should actively promote in its work with children.

Globalization raises important questions about education and early childhood services. In particular, there are issues of direction and focus: whether countries should opt only for training and pursuit of technical skills in their education systems; or whether to support in young children creativity and openness to others in preparation for a world marked by diversity and access to knowledge. Faced by this challenge, an instrumental and narrow discourse about readiness for school is increasingly heard in the early childhood field. It is important that the early childhood centre should become a community of learners, where children are encouraged to participate and share with others, and where learning is seen as primarily interactive, experiential and social. The Delors principles (UNESCO, 1996): *Learning to be, learning to do, learning to learn and learning to live together* are each important goal for young children.

Conclusion

Although the OECD policy reviews deal with a different socio-economic context, policy lessons emerge also for developing countries. The reviews show, for example, that the quality and effectiveness of programmes do not depend entirely on wealth – some rich countries have poor systems and services – but on the vision that a country has for its children, backed by sound government planning, financing and policy-making. In addition, the reviews underline that the choice of services and their quality should be judged in relation to the social and economic features of a particular environment. Policy flexibility is necessary to give due attention to the needs of families and children in particular contexts. *Starting Strong II* also calls attention to the temptation to turn early childhood services into junior schools. Preparation for school is necessary, but research shows that didactic classrooms do not support effectively the holistic development of young children, in particular, their creative capacities, and their socio-emotional and physical development. The reviews also underline the importance of the participation of families in services and in their children's learning – a persistent challenge in the OECD countries. The more community-based services of the developing world may well have important lessons for the richer nations in this area.

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