

Chapter 1

Early Childhood Education and Care

Early childhood provision – pre-primary and childcare – has been a growing priority in many countries. Such priority is manifest by demanding parents, and it is also a phase of education and services increasingly recognised as important in its contribution to a wide range of social, economic and educational goals. At the same time, it is a sector with a complex diversity of players and partners and one with a significant lack of investment in many countries. A major OECD review in the field of early childhood published by OECD in 2006 – Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care – was a follow-up to an earlier international review published in 2001. Its policy orientations are broadly focused on overcoming the under-developed status of the sector that remains typical of many countries.

1.1. Key findings and conclusions

In the majority of countries – but not all – education now begins for most well before 5 years old: Already over two-thirds of the age group of young children aged 3 and 4 years (69.4%) are enrolled in education across OECD countries as a whole. Enrolment rates for early childhood education at this age range from over 90% in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, New Zealand, Spain, and the United Kingdom, at one end of the spectrum, to less than a quarter in Ireland, Korea and Turkey.


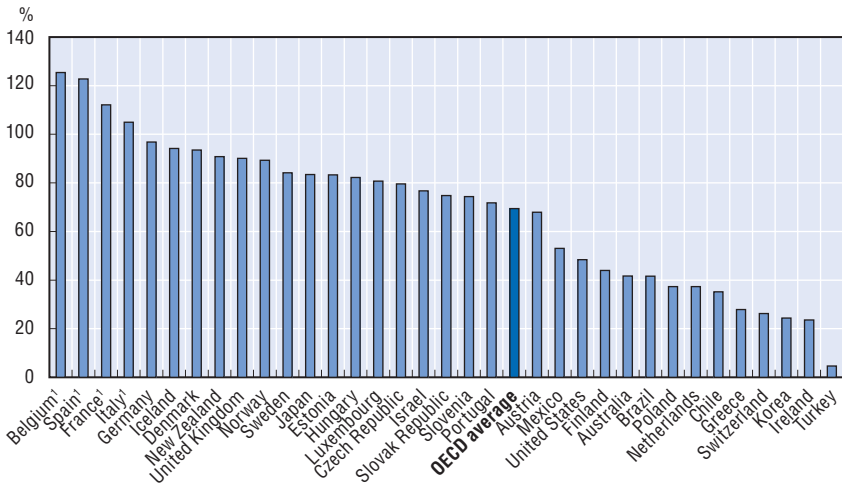
 *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators – 2008 Edition, Chapter C.*


Figure 1.1. **Most children come into education well before the age of 5 years (2006)**

Children 4 years and younger in education as a percentage of 3- and 4-year-olds



1. In some countries, there is a significant number of children younger than 3 years old in education; this accounts for percentages in excess of 100%.

Source: OECD (2008), *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators – 2008 Edition*, OECD Publishing, Paris.


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Demand for early childhood provision for those aged under 3 years far outstrips supply in all but the Nordic region: The highest levels of enrolment of infants under 3 years of age in early childhood education and care in publicly subsidised provision are in Denmark and Sweden. Apart from these two


countries and Finland, the evidence of OECD reviews shows that the demand for services for young children is significantly higher than the places available, even in countries with provision for long parental leave. In countries where public funding for such provision is limited, most working parents must either seek solutions in the private market, where ability to pay significantly influences accessibility to quality services, or else rely on informal arrangements with family, friends and neighbours. The publicly-subsidised services for these young children take several forms: family day care, centre-based crèche services and integrated services.

 *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, 2006, Chapter 4.

Publicly-funded pre-primary provision tends to be more strongly developed in the European than in the non-European countries of the OECD: In Europe, the concept of universal access of 3- to 6-year-olds is generally accepted. Most countries in this region provide all children with at least two years of free, publicly-funded provision before they begin primary provision. With the exception of Ireland and the Netherlands, such access is generally a statutory right from the age of 3 years and in some even before that. Early education programmes in Europe are often free and attached to schools. In OECD countries outside Europe, free early education tends to be only available from age 5, though many children are enrolled from age 4 in Australia, Korea and some US states.

 *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, 2006, Chapter 4.

Two broad emphases in early education characterise different countries – preparing for school and social pedagogy: OECD countries approach the partnership between early childhood services and the primary school in different ways – all trying to improve the co-ordination between the sectors but starting from different premises. Broadly, there are two different approaches across countries. France and the English-speaking countries tend to see the question of partnership from the point of view of the school: early education should serve the objectives of public education and provide children with “readiness for school” skills. In contrast, countries inheriting the social pedagogy tradition (the Nordic and Central European countries) see kindergarten as a specific institution turned more to supporting families and the broad development needs of young children.

 *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, 2006, Chapter 3.

A positive consequence of decentralisation has been the integration of early childhood education and care services at the local level, leading to a more efficient allocation of resources to children ... These new services tend to be less

Table 1.1. Main forms of funding for early childhood education and care services (0 to 6 years) in selected countries


	Supply funding to services	Subsidies to parents	Employer contributions
Australia	Limited to public kindergarten	Main form	Yes, tax
Belgium	Main form	Mixed in child care	Yes, employer levy
Canada	In public kindergarten and community services mainly (Provinces and Territories, to varying degrees, use also supply-side grants, operational funding, wage supplements, etc., in support of other services) Main form in Quebec	Mixed. Supply-side funding to community services is usual.	No
Denmark	Main form	No	No
Finland	Main form	Mixed	No
France	Main form	Mixed for early childhood education and care outside the <i>école maternelle</i>	Yes, employer levy
Germany	Main form	Mixed in child care	No
Hungary	Main form in child care and kindergarten	No	No
Ireland	Limited to social nurseries and public early education	Limited, mostly parental contributions	No
Italy	Main form	No	Yes, employer levy
Korea	Limited to public kindergarten, and to public targeted programme in child care centres	Main form of government support, but parental contributions are high	In some cases
Netherlands	Main form in pre-primary and targeted	Main form in child care but high parental contributions	Yes, tax to nearly 30% of costs
Norway	Main form	Mixed	Yes, tax
Portugal	Main form	Yes	Yes
Sweden	Main form	No	No
United Kingdom	Limited to public early education, social nurseries and targeted programmes	Main form for child care, but mostly parental contributions	Yes, tax
United States	Limited to public kindergarten, targeted programmes and Head Start	Main form but mostly parental contributions	Yes, tax

Source: OECD, background reports for OECD programme on early childhood education and care.


bound by traditional competency boundaries than government departments. Many local authorities in Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Hungary, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States have brought together children's services and education portfolios to plan more effectively and provide coherence of services for young children and their

families. Some local authorities have integrated administration and policy development across age groups and sectors: in Denmark, Italy, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom, for example, an increasing number of local authorities have reorganised responsibility for early childhood education and care and for schools (and sometimes other children's services) under one administrative department and political committee.

... but devolution of powers and responsibilities can also widen differences of access and quality between states, regions or districts: This has occurred in Sweden but is even more evident in federal countries such as Australia, Canada, Germany and the United States, where unified national policies have been difficult to achieve. Unless strong equalising mechanisms are in place, decentralised early childhood administrations in poor urban areas can also face difficulties because of low taxation revenues. Decentralisation and well-intentioned policies in some countries (e.g. Canada and Hungary) have led to the creation of independent rural areas which are too small or too poor to support quality early childhood education and care services without strong state assistance. Even in situations where funding is available (such as in Australia), effective co-ordination can be inhibited by a highly dispersed population, separate state auspices for pre-school education, and a market-oriented approach to childcare.

 *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, 2006, Chapter 2.

Disabled children and those with learning and behavioural difficulties receive less additional support at the pre-primary than at the primary level: The median percentage of the children at pre-primary level receiving additional financial resources for *disabilities* was 1.1% in 2003 – significantly lower than for children at the primary level (3.6%), though there are examples (e.g. the United States) of free early childhood education for disabled children. The median percentage of children in pre-primary education receiving additional resources for *learning and behavioural difficulties* is even lower at 0.3% for the countries reporting data in 2003, again with some notable exceptions (e.g. England [9.6%] and Chile [11.5%]). The percentage of children receiving additional resources because of *social disadvantages* was negligible in many countries with in this case the exceptions being Belgium (French Community) and Mexico, with 12.9% and 16.0% respectively.


 *Students with Disabilities, Learning Difficulties and Disadvantages: Policies, Statistics and Indicators – 2007 Edition*, Chapter 4.

1.2. Orientations for policy

Early childhood education and care policy needs to be systemic and integrate the different forms of early childhood provision, allow universal access, and enjoy a strong and equal partnership with the rest of the education system. The recent OECD review of this sector proposes ten policy areas for consideration:

- **Place well-being, early development and learning at the core of early childhood approaches, while respecting the child’s agency and natural learning strategies:** Rather than being an adjunct to labour market policies with weak development agendas or an under-resourced “Cinderella” education service, early childhood education and care needs to have the child and its well-being and learning at the core.
- **Aspire towards early childhood education and care systems that support broad learning, participation and democracy:** The touchstones of a democratic approach are to extend the agency of the child and right of parents to be involved in the education of their children. Learning to be, learning to do, learning to learn, and learning to live together are the critical elements to be promoted in each child.
- **Provide autonomy, funding and support to early childhood services:** Within the parameters of system-wide goals and guidelines, educators and services should have the autonomy to plan and to choose curricula for the children in their care; policy should provide the means for staff to exercise such autonomy and participatory approaches.
- **Develop broad guidelines and curricular standards with the stakeholders for all early childhood education and care services:** Guiding frameworks – especially when they have been developed together by the key stakeholders – help to promote a more even quality across early childhood provision, to guide and support professional staff, and to facilitate communication between staff and families.
- **Base public funding on achieving quality pedagogical goals:** Most countries need to double their annual investment per child to ensure child-staff ratios and qualified staff be on some parity with the primary sector; the investment should be directed to achieving quality pedagogical goals rather than simply aiming to create sufficient places.
- **Improve the working conditions and professional education of early childhood education and care staff:** The OECD reviews found a number of common weaknesses that need attention: low recruitment and pay levels, particularly in child care services; lack of certification in specialist early childhood pedagogy; excessive feminisation of staff; lack of diversity of staff to reflect neighbourhood diversity.

- **Create the governance structures necessary for system accountability and quality assurance:** These include such elements as strong expert policy units, data collection and monitoring capacity, an evaluation agency, and a pedagogical advisory or inspection corps.
- **Attend to the social context of early childhood development:** Well organised services should work towards a broad but realistic vision to which the other stakeholders can subscribe, serving at the same time to support parents in child-rearing, facilitate women working, and help social inclusion for low-income and immigrant families.
- **Encourage family and community involvement in early childhood services:** The continuity of children's experience across the different early childhood education and care environments is greatly enhanced when parents and staff members share information and adopt consistent approaches to socialisation, daily routines, child development and learning; communities are important both as providers and as offering space for partnerships.
- **Reduce child poverty and exclusion through upstream fiscal, social and labour policies and increase resources within universal programmes for children with diverse learning rights:** Research indicates the effectiveness of universal programmes for children with different disabilities and disadvantages, combined with enhanced funding and investment in quality services, rather than targeted programmes which serve to segregate and stigmatise.

 *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, 2006, Chapter 10.

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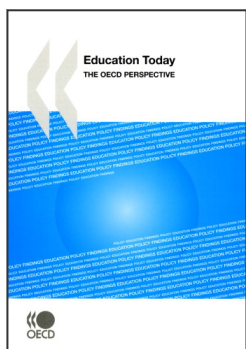


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