Chapter 2

Early childhood education and care in Colombia

Colombia has made important strides in developing and expanding early childhood education and care (ECEC) in recent years, in particular for vulnerable and disadvantaged families. However, participation rates and quality in ECEC, particularly in rural areas, remain below OECD standards. This chapter examines challenges and solutions for developing a high quality and equitable ECEC system in Colombia. It analyses the importance of upgrading ECEC provision to improve the educational benefits gained at this level. It explores how Colombia can continue to expand access and reinforce the transition to school. The chapter also identifies the need for better co-ordination between different ECEC providers, in particular the National Ministry of Education (MEN) and the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF), and looks at ways Colombia can strengthen the whole ECEC system through greater and more effective investment in the early years and improved accountability.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is essential for a strong start in life and in learning. Both national and international evidence highlight the benefits of ECEC on a child's well-being as well as for families and society (Bernal, 2014; ICFES, 2014; OECD, 2012a). International studies have shown that investment in high-quality early years learning yields high rates of return in terms of student performance in school and across a range of outcomes in adulthood (OECD, 2012a). In Colombia, a cost benefit analysis shows that participation in a community-based childcare programme (*hogares comunitarios de bienestar familiar,* HCB*)* brought higher salary benefits later in life than an additional year in tertiary education (Bernal, 2014). Expanding the provision of high-quality ECEC is one of the most important steps that Colombia could take to improve overall education performance and enhance social equity.

Colombia has made significant, positive progress in developing its ECEC provision. It has moved towards a more formalised system, invested in professionalising ECEC staff through widespread training and focused on reaching the most disadvantaged children who stand to gain the most. It has done so while emphasising a rights-based, holistic approach to children's development from birth. As a result of these efforts, participation rates in ECEC have surged. Between 2007 and 2013, enrolment in ECEC services among 0-5 year-olds in Colombia more than doubled, from 16% to 41%. Colombia can build on this progress in the years to come.

Considerable steps are still needed to ensure equitable access to high-quality ECEC in Colombia. Participation rates are low by OECD standards: only 48% of 3-year-olds and 75% of 4-year-olds are enrolled in early childhood education compared with the OECD average of 70% and 82%, respectively (OECD, 2014). Just two-thirds of 5-year-olds are enrolled in the transition year before the start of primary school, even though it is meant to be mandatory. Weak provision and lack of awareness of the importance of ECEC are major factors behind low enrolment (Álvarez et al., forthcoming; Bernal, 2014).

While Colombia promotes an integrated approach to ECEC, the educational component is underdeveloped. Public ECEC services can be divided into pre-primary school provision, which is educational in focus but only reaches a minority of children, and the community, family and institutional modalities (as they are known in Colombia), which are primarily focused on care and account for the majority of ECEC services. The lack of emphasis on learning is particularly problematic in a context where many children experience weak home learning environments. The institutions and systems that support ECEC also need to be strengthened if Colombia is to steer the expansion of the sector effectively. This chapter analyses the main features of ECEC in Colombia, the policies that have supported progress and the actions Colombia needs to take to ensure all children have a strong start in learning.

Context and main features

Policy objectives

The past 20 years have seen several major reforms in ECEC policy in Colombia and a marked increase in the importance accorded to the sector (Annex 2.A1). The General Education Law of 1994 defined pre-primary education for 3-5 year-olds as the first phase of a child's schooling and made enrolment in the transition grade (Grade 0, for 5-year-olds) compulsory for all Colombian children. In 1991 the government adhered to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and in 2006 reaffirmed in national law its commitment to ECEC as a fundamental right for all children in Colombia from birth to six years of age. Legislation in 2009 (Law 1295) mandated that ECEC policies should pay special attention to the most disadvantaged children.[1]

In 2011, ECEC was made a presidential priority with the adoption of the Early Childhood Comprehensive Care Strategy – From Zero to Forever (*Estrategia para la Atención Integral de la Primera Infancia - De Cero a Siempre*). The strategy provides a framework to harmonise ECEC governance and provision and defines the actions required to guarantee comprehensive care for all children, in particular the poorest and most vulnerable (Box 2.1). The goal is to ensure that by 2018, 2 million 3-5 year-olds are enrolled in ECEC and all children in extreme poverty participate in early childcare programmes. While the Zero to Forever strategy refers to all services targeting children under six, it does not directly address pre-primary education (pre-kindergarten to the transition year) which is governed by the same legislation as primary and secondary schooling.

The National Development Plan 2014-2018 (*Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2014-2018*, PND) reaffirms the priority given to ECEC, and introduces several important measures to further expand access and improve quality. Notably, the PND pledges to transform the From Zero to Forever strategy into national legislation to ensure its long-term sustainability and regulate key aspects of provision. The proposed legislation would establish ECEC (0-5 years-olds) as the first cycle of the education system; define standards for the different ECEC stakeholders; introduce mechanisms to provide and finance inspection, quality assurance, control and technical support; and define the process of transition to basic education (DNP, 2015). Other important ECEC policy initiatives included in the PND aim to: 1) improve staff qualifications; 2) develop an information system and quality index to collect information on children and their progress in ECEC; 3) continue developing and implementing the technical guidelines for ECEC provision; 4) introduce a quality management system to support ECEC institutions in delivering ECEC services; and 5) incentivise enrolment in ECEC through the expansion of the conditional cash transfer programme More Families in Action (*Más Familias en Acción)* (DNP, 2015). The PND recognises that improving ECEC is not just

the first essential step towards improving education in the country, but is also central to bridging equity gaps and eliminating extreme poverty.

Box 2.1. **Supporting children From Zero to Forever**

In 2011, the Early Childhood Comprehensive Care Strategy – From Zero to Forever (*Estrategia para la Atención Integral de la Primera Infancia – De Cero a Siempre*) was introduced as a high-priority policy for the Colombian government to transform and improve ECEC for children from birth until five years of age. The strategy has set ambitious targets to guarantee children's constitutional right to free healthcare and education in their early childhood years through high-quality, socially inclusive, comprehensive ECEC. Thus, it has aimed to achieve universal coverage of ECEC with a particular focus on the country's poorest and most vulnerable children. The strategy also aims to: 1) improve the quality and coverage of ECEC provision; 2) ensure the implementation of ECEC in departments and municipalities across Colombia; 3) implement an evaluation and monitoring system for ECEC; 4) develop a knowledge management system for ECEC; and 5) mobilise Colombian society to support the development of ECEC.

To accomplish these goals a number of key actions have been implemented to harmonise the provision and objectives of ECEC and co-ordinate the various entities and organisations involved in ECEC:

- The creation of the Inter-sectoral Commission for the Comprehensive Care of Early Childhood (*Comisión Intersectorial de Primera Infancia*, CIPI) which has provided a co-ordinated approach to ECEC by defining the roles and responsibilities of key national actors.
- The introduction of a comprehensive ECEC framework defining the various types of ECEC provision that have emerged outside of pre-primary education in Colombia. There are three main modalities: family, community and institutional. Each modality has five key components: 1) care and upbringing; 2) health, diet and nutrition; 3) early childhood education; 4) recreation; and 5) civic education and participation.
- The development of technical benchmarks for family and institutional modalities, which set ECEC guidelines in six key areas: 1) family, community and networks; 2) health and nutrition; 3) pedagogy; 4) human talent; 5) educational environment; and 6) administration and management. As part of this, the profiles of ECEC staff have been defined and their qualifications have been raised to guarantee a minimum level of compliance with the competencies needed for the meaningful development of a child.

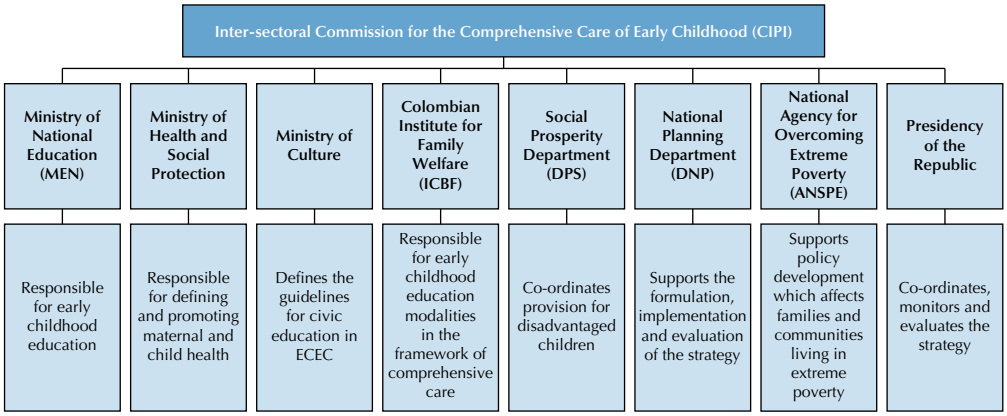
The From Zero to Forever strategy has spurred increasing participation in ECEC. In 2010 only 566 429 children under the age of five were enrolled in comprehensive ECEC; by 2014 the number reached by the strategy had risen to 1 040 351. The goal is to increase enrolment in ECEC to 2.4 million under fives (subsequently revised to 2 million children aged up to five years) and to ensure that 100% of children in extreme poverty are participating in ECEC by 2018.

Sources: Government of Colombia (2014), *Estrategia de Atención Integral a la Primera Infancia: De Cero a Siempre: Informe de Balance y Prospectiva,* Government of Colombia, Bogotá; Government of Colombia (2015), De Cero a Siempre website, Consejería Presidencial para la Primera Infancia (Presidential Advisory Council on Early Childhood), www.deceroasiempre.gov.co/Paginas/deCeroaSiempre.aspx; MEN (2015a), "OECD-Colombia education and skills accession policy review: Country background report", Ministerio de Educación Nacional (Ministry of National Education), Bogotá.

Governance

The creation in 2011 of the President's Inter-sectoral Commission for the Comprehensive Care of Early Childhood (*Comisión Intersectorial de Primera Infancia*, CIPI) has improved the governance of ECEC in Colombia in several respects. The CIPI has strengthened co-ordination across the multiple actors involved in ECEC management and provision, including the Ministry of National Education (*Ministerio de Educación Nacional*, MEN), the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, and the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (*Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar*, ICBF) (Figure 2.1). The CIPI was pivotal in forging the whole-of-government approach to ECEC that is one of the strengths of the From Zero to Forever strategy. Biannual reports to Congress ensure accountability over implementation of the strategy (World Bank, 2013). The creation of the CIPI under the President's office has also raised the importance of ECEC within the government and helped draw increased public and political attention to the issue. However, there are indications that stronger leadership and greater co-ordination at all governance levels is needed if government targets are to be met (see Policy Issue 3 below).

Figure 2.1. **National actors in the governance of ECEC**



Source: MEN (2015a), "OECD-Colombia education and skills accession policy review: Country background report", Ministerio de Educación Nacional (Ministry of National Education), Bogotá.

The MEN and the ICBF share principal responsibility for ECEC services. The From Zero to Forever strategy charges the MEN with the role of defining ECEC policies and guidelines, implementing the quality management system and monitoring ECEC provision at the national level, while the ICBF is responsible for implementing ECEC public services and

managing providers at the regional level (World Bank, 2013). However, the absence of a regulatory framework which clearly defines their roles means that the current distribution of responsibilities between the two is blurred. Although the MEN has developed some ECEC guidelines, it plays a much more limited role in setting standards and monitoring the community, family and institutional modalities run by the ICBF. While a number of OECD countries also have split systems of ECEC governance, such as France, the Netherlands and Portugal, this is usually based on having different policy objectives for different ages (e.g. care in the earliest years and education from the age of three or four). In Colombia, the provider determines policy, with the result that children of the same age can receive very different services depending on the institution they attend. This goes against the clear trend across OECD countries towards greater integration of ECEC systems as a means of providing comprehensive care for children and better supporting their transition from the home into the school system. In addition, most OECD countries concentrate key responsibilities (except quality assurance and monitoring) within a lead ministry, usually the ministry of education, given its focus on children's education and learning (OECD, 2012a).

Although not specifically defined in a legislation, in practice the central governance arrangements are mirrored at the departmental and municipal level. The Certified Territorial Entities (*Entidades Territoriales Certificadas,* ETCs; see Chapter 1) are responsible for the overall design and implementation of ECEC policies in the areas under their jurisdiction, while ICBF regional co-ordinators manage the delivery of most ECEC services, except for pre-primary education in schools, which is managed by local secretaries of education. In some ETCs, such as Medellín, the mayor's office has taken on a stronger co-ordinating role and sought to achieve greater synergies across providers (Alcaldía de Medellín, 2014). The From Zero to Forever strategy calls for the creation of local inter-sectoral technical committees for ECEC to perform roles similar to the CIPI nationally in terms of co-ordination and policy alignment although there is little evidence of the impact this has on governance. Within the framework of the CIPI the MEN and the regional ICBF offices have programmes to develop the capacity of local actors to manage and deliver ECEC services. These programmes are usually implemented through public-private alliances. To date, some 274 departments, municipalities and ethnic communities have received guidance in developing implementation plans for ECEC service delivery in their jurisdictions (Government of Colombia, 2014).

At the institutional level, governance varies widely. The ICBF contracts the majority of services through third-party entities, such as community organisations, foundations or employers. These third-party entities, along with ECEC centre administrators and lead community mothers (see below), are responsible for managing the care and education within each institution

and for ensuring five-year-olds transition to the formal education system. ECEC provision in schools, which in most cases is just the transition year, falls under the responsibility of the schools (see Chapter 3). In 2014, the MEN published ECEC guidelines for the family and institutional modalities which include key standards for the management of ECEC services, such as meeting legal requirements, maintaining a budget, assessing results and evaluating the quality of ECEC services, and gathering and updating data on users (see MEN, 2014a). However, there are limited mechanisms at national or local government level to ensure institutional standards are followed.

A strong and positive relationship between families, communities and ECEC services is crucial to good-quality ECEC (OECD, 2012a). This is particularly important among marginalised groups, where additional efforts are often required to connect services with different socio-cultural traditions and to educate parents on how to support their child's diverse care, educational, health and nutritional needs (OECD, 2012a). Colombia has invested considerable efforts in ensuring multi-stakeholder engagement in ECEC policy, both in terms of encouraging cross-sectoral involvement (health, education, protection, culture) and in terms of promoting public and community outreach. Major public policies, including the From Zero to Forever strategy, have been developed through significant national consultation and social mobilisation processes (CIPI, 2013b; Vizcaino Pulido, Ramirez Suarez and Cuellar Garcia, 2010). The From Zero to Forever strategy itself gives high priority to promoting public awareness of the rights of the child and strengthening the role of the family unit as the primary provider of early childhood care and development. The ECEC guidelines defined by the MEN also set several standards for family and community engagement, including understanding the family, informing families about ECEC services and how to register children, and encouraging families to engage in child development activities in the home (MEN, 2014a).

Funding

Despite Colombia's increased prioritisation of ECEC, overall funding for early childhood services and the share of investment per child is lower than most in OECD countries. In 2011, Colombia spent 0.5% of gross domestic product (GDP) on pre-primary education, which was slightly below Mexico and the OECD average (0.6%) and considerably less than Chile (0.8%) (OECD, 2014). The amount of resources devoted to each Colombian child in pre-primary education (USD 3 491) is very low when compared to the OECD average (USD 7 428) and Chile (USD 5 083) (OECD, 2014). Across education levels, Colombia spends four times more on tertiary education than pre-primary education. Across OECD countries, the ratio is less than 3:1 (OECD, 2014).

Over half of spending on ECEC in Colombia comes from private sources (54%) compared to the OECD average of 19%. About 22% of Colombian children attend private ECEC institutions, primarily catering for 3-5 year-olds, which is twice the OECD average of 11% (OECD, 2014). As at other educational levels, private provision is almost exclusively for children from high-income families. Unlike some OECD countries, the government does not provide parents with subsidies to pay for private ECEC provision. Public ECEC services are free at the point of delivery, but in some cases, parents contribute small amounts according to their income (MEN, 2015a). The majority of public investment in ECEC goes to infrastructure and staff salaries; very limited resources are available for quality improvement such as staff development and learning materials.

Disadvantaged children and their families receive financial incentives and additional support to attend public ECEC services. Since 2012, public education has been free for all children and free lunches have encouraged vulnerable families to access the transition year in schools. Social welfare programmes such as More Families in Action (*Más Familias en Acción*) and United Network (*Red Unidos,* previously *Juntos*) provide comprehensive support to disadvantaged families. More Families in Action is a conditional cash transfer programme which aims to reduce poverty and inequities by providing payments on the condition that families access health and education services, such as vaccination, medical check-ups, and primary and secondary education (see Box 1.3 in Chapter 1). In 2014, 2.68 million families benefited from the second phase of the programme and the government aims to increase this to 2.71 million families by 2018 (DNP, 2015). Under the PND, the government has begun extending the conditionality of this programme to include pre-primary education, with the aim of achieving universal coverage in the transition year (grade 0). The United Network aims to combat extreme poverty in Colombia by targeting the most disadvantaged families (displaced families and those in SISBEN level 1) through health interventions and support for the development of children under the age of 10. Evaluations of these programmes have shown them to have had positive effects on ECEC, in particular on improving child nutrition (Arango 2004 in Vargas-Barón, 2009). These efforts notwithstanding, high tuition costs in private institutions and the limited supply of public ECEC services create significant barriers to access for the majority of Colombia's children, some 60% of whom are classed as living in poverty.

Funding for MEN and ICBF provision is sourced and allocated differently. In 2011, the CIPI sought to rationalise the various existing sources and channels for ECEC funding, with the result that the majority of funding for non pre-primary ECEC services are now channelled through the ICBF as the main agency responsible for provision (World Bank, 2013). Most of the funds managed by the ICBF come from the Income Tax for Equality

(CREE), which is a national levy on employer profits and gains.[2] Funding for pre-primary education, including the transition year, is allocated through the national budget and the General Participatory System (*Sistema General de Participaciones*, SGP) (see Chapter 3). Certified regional bodies are also encouraged to provide funding for ECEC, but evidence and field visits indicate that only those with strong financial capacity and political commitment to ECEC allocate significant resources to the sector (see Chapter 1). Despite these efforts, the limited public funding available for ECEC remains fragmented across a range of sources and institutions, compounding governance challenges and making efficiency gains more difficult to achieve.

Organisation of pre-primary and ECEC services

Public ECEC services can be divided into pre-primary school provision and the three ICBF modalities (as they are known in Colombia), community, family and institutional. Table 2.1 lays out the 10 different types of ECEC service available to children under 6 in Colombia, which have developed according to different community contexts.

Most ECEC provision is offered through the community modality which provides care for children up to five or until the child enters the education system, generally for families in paid work who need day care. It covers various types of services (Table 2.1), including the community home, which was introduced in 1987 by the ICBF for disadvantaged families and children. On average 13 children attend a community home and they receive comprehensive care on a full-day basis, 5 days a week, including meals, nutritional controls and food supplements. This type of care involves strong community engagement as it is provided in a community space or in the home of a local mother. The educational component of the community modality has been considered weak, and one of the aims of the From Zero to Forever strategy is to transform some community-based centres to meet the institutional modality standards to improve the quality of learning support they provide (World Bank, 2013; MEN, 2015a).

The family modality reaches more children and expectant and breastfeeding mothers than the other modalities and is particularly important for families in rural areas who have limited access to other modalities. The family modality is run from either a community space or from the home of a local mother. There is usually a teacher and pedagogical auxiliary for every 40 children (MEN, 2014a). On average about 12 to 15 families are reached through one provider and they receive comprehensive care, from support in pregnancy and breastfeeding to child health, nutrition and education. Families are visited in their homes on a monthly basis and participate in educational meetings. While the programme covers all children from before birth until age five, it primarily caters to children up to two years old (MEN, 2015a).

Table 2.1. **Types of ECEC provision in Colombia**

Modality	ECEC service	Share of provision and beneficiaries (2013/14)	Key characteristics
Community modality	Traditional Community Family Home Community Welfare Homes (FAMI) Grouped Community Welfare Homes	• 69% of all ECEC provision (about 47 158 centres) • 635 208 children	It targets children up to five or until they enter the education system. In most cases these services operate in the homes of local or community mothers. The care component predominates in these services. Under the new strategy some community modalities will become part of the institutional modality while the majority will remain in the homes of community mothers.
Family modality	Family-based community centres	• 25% of all ECEC provision (about 16 779 centres) • 789 610 children and expectant and breastfeeding mothers	The care component predominates in this modality and it targets mainly children from before birth up to two, but may include children until the age of five. Provision is prioritised for children and families living in rural areas or with difficulty accessing institutional care settings. The programme includes educational home visits and group meetings.
Institutional modality	Child Development Centres Multi-purpose community centres Company-based centres Other types (social nurseries, child centres, and infant and pre-schooler care centres)	• 7% of all ECEC provision (about 4 468 centres) • 445 489 children	The government has focused on developing Child Development Centres (*Centros de Desarrollo Infantil,* CDIs), particularly in urban areas. They have a comprehensive model which aims to provide both a care and educational component. Staff include ECEC teachers, psychologists, social workers, nutritionists, and nurses.
Pre-primary school modality	Pre-kindergarten and kindergarten	• 197 264 children in public schools	These grades are part of formal education and are intended for 3-4 year-olds as initial education.
	Transition year	• 800 052 children in public schools	Compulsory and intended for 5-year-olds under the Law 115 of 1994.

Sources: World Bank (2013), *Colombia: Early Childhood Development*: *SABER Country Report 2013,* The World Bank, http://wbgfiles.worldbank.org/documents/hdn/ed/saber/supporting_doc/CountryReports/ECD/SABER_ECD_Colombia_CR_Final_2013.pdf; MEN (2015a), "OECD-Colombia education and skills accession policy review: Country background report", Ministerio de Educación Nacional (Ministry of National Education), Bogotá.

The institutional modality currently represents the smallest share of ECEC services and is mostly offered in urban areas, although it is expected to take up most of the projected increase in participation for children of pre-primary age (MEN, 2015a). This modality is usually referred to in OECD countries as a centre-based ECEC service, and it caters to children between the ages of two and six or until they enter the transition year, although children younger than two can participate if there is space available. It can be provided through employer-based centres to care for the children of workers or through purpose-built child development centres (CDIs) which offer care five days a week, on either a part-time or full-day basis. They offer meals and child development programmes and are staffed by individuals with specialist qualifications in pedagogy, health and nutrition, psychosocial work and administration. Groups in this modality are organised by age, with 1 teacher for every 20 children over 2 (MEN, 2014a).

Pre-primary in the formal education system includes the pre-kindergarten (*pre-jardín*) and kindergarten (*jardín*) grades and the compulsory transitional year (*transición*). Pre-primary education, especially the transition year, has a sharper educational focus than other ECEC modalities as it aims to prepare children for school, although each school is free to determine its own curriculum. The amount of time young children spend in pre-primary and the number of meals they receive vary depending on school and local resources, and are usually more limited than what is provided by community and institutional modalities.

Monitoring and quality assurance

In accordance with the From Zero to Forever strategy, the MEN introduced ECEC guidelines in 2014 to provide basic standards for the family and institutional modalities (see MEN, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d). Guidelines for the community modality are being developed which are expected to bring this service more into line with the institutional modality. Following the comprehensive vision of the From Zero to Forever strategy, these standards cover all aspects of child well-being: care and upbringing, health and nutrition, initial education, civic engagement, and recreation (MEN, 2014a). The guidelines address basic inputs and processes (number of carers per child, administrative actions, infrastructure needs for a comprehensive environment). They provide clearer orientation regarding the skills and training expected of staff than existed in the past. They also offer direction on the type of learning activities that should take place in the different modalities, focusing on experiences related to play, exploration, art and literature (see MEN, 2014a). The guidelines do not, however, set expectations of children's educational and developmental outcomes. Almost all OECD countries have a curriculum or learning standards from

the age of three until compulsory schooling, which focus on cognitive and socio-emotional development in addition to a strong focus on play (OECD, 2012a). Colombia does not have a national curriculum or learning standards for children of pre-primary age, and the decision on what basic competencies should be nurtured, how and to what level is taken by service providers and staff (OECD, 2012a).

The system for monitoring and ensuring that institutions meet basic ECEC standards appears somewhat fragmented. The ICBF is responsible for monitoring standards across its ECEC services through its Office of Quality Assurance, including auditing, certification and oversight of service providers (ICBF, 2014a). While the MEN sets the standards, it does not regulate the mechanisms the ICBF uses to evaluate and assess quality in its services (World Bank, 2013). The ICBF has a number of information systems which collect information on children and services it manages directly, including Tell Me (*Cuéntame*) and the Unique System of Children's Information (*Sistema Único de Información de la Niñez,* SUIN) (ICBF, 2014b, 2014c). However, most services are provided by third parties, which ICBF has limited means of monitoring. The MEN's Early Childhood Information System (*Sistema de Información para la Primera Infancia*, SIPI) and quality assurance mechanisms focus only on services offered through the school system and are not integrated with the ICBF's systems. The MEN has begun piloting the Child to Child Monitoring System (*Sistema de Seguimiento y Monitoreo Niño a Niño,* SSNN), an information system which aims to join up the sector's different information systems to improve the information about each child and their placement (ICBF, 2014d).

The monitoring and quality assurance of ECEC institutions has not been centrally regulated yet, although the ICBF has introduced a performance self-assessment procedure in its institutions. There are four main quality assurance tools that ICBF's institutions can use: 1) an annual register of enrolled children; 2) a user satisfaction survey of parents, which is formulated and implemented by the ECEC provider; 3) data analysis, which depends on the data collected by each provider; and 4) an assessment of policy implementation by each provider. From site visits by the review team it was not clear that the various ECEC services used these tools. It was also evident from the review visit that ECEC institutions get limited feedback on how they could improve the quality of their services.

The government recognises the need to strengthen quality assurance. The PND for 2014-2018 aims to introduce additional monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms, which will provide more information about the quality of ECEC services including those operated by the ICBF and private providers (see Policy Issue 3).

Childcare providers and pre-primary teachers

Colombia has invested significant effort and resources into improving the quality of ECEC staff, in particular the childcare providers known as community mothers. Until recently, qualification requirements were extremely low. Community mothers, who constitute the largest proportion of ECEC staff (approximately 62 000 in 2014), were not required even to have a secondary education (MEN, 2015a). The 2014 ECEC guidelines for community and institutional modalities require both new and existing community mothers, and any provider of ICBF childcare provision, to obtain a professional technical degree (a short tertiary qualification equivalent to ISCED level 5; see Chapter 5) in pedagogy or child development in addition to having five years' experience (see MEN, 2014a). All childcare providers in ICBF modalities – community, family and institutional – are also required to participate in a 60-hour introductory workshop on the guidelines and standards for comprehensive care, although there are indications that the professional activities are quite basic, and more focused on management issues than pedagogy. Opportunities for in-service training and professional development likewise appear limited. While the new ECEC guidelines foresee stronger evaluations, at present there is no formal appraisal system for childcare providers, nor any clear mechanism to address quality concerns regarding staff practices should these arise (see MEN, 2014a).

In terms of employment benefits, staff in ICBF childcare modalities are hired by individual providers who are free to define the type of contract they receive. They receive at least a minimum wage or its equivalent for the number of days worked during the month. There is evidence that pay varies considerably depending on the service provider and region. For example, ECEC teachers in Medellín's Good Start Programme (*Buen Comienzo*) receive a monthly salary of USD 653, while ECEC teachers in Bogotá earn USD 759 per month and community mothers in the national community modality programme receive a monthly stipend of USD 146 (Araujo, Lopez-Boo and Puyana, 2013). Overall, staff in ICBF modalities earn less than pre-primary school teachers, although they are responsible for the comprehensive care of children of the same age. Nor do they receive recognition as civil servants, which pre-primary teachers have (Londoño and Romero, 2005 in Vegas and Santibáñez, 2010). Evidence suggests that pay and other working conditions have an indirect impact on the quality of ECEC, staff turnover and the overall status of the ECEC workforce (OECD, 2012a).

Transition year pre-primary teachers in public ECEC services are subject to similar requirements as primary teachers (see Chapter 3). They must graduate with a minimum of a bachelor's degree (*licenciatura*) or a *normalista*

certificate from a Higher Teaching School (*Escuela Normal Superior*, ENS) in childhood education, special education, psychology, pedagogy, educational psychology or pre-primary education. In addition, pre-primary teachers, like teachers in basic education, are subject to a competitive entrance exam and enrolment in a registry (*Escalafón Docente*) which classifies teachers' professional level and calculates their salary (see Chapter 3). The difference in qualification levels suggest that pre-primary teachers will have better pedagogical capacity and knowledge than community mothers, meaning significant variations in the quality of educational support that children of pre-primary age can expect to receive.

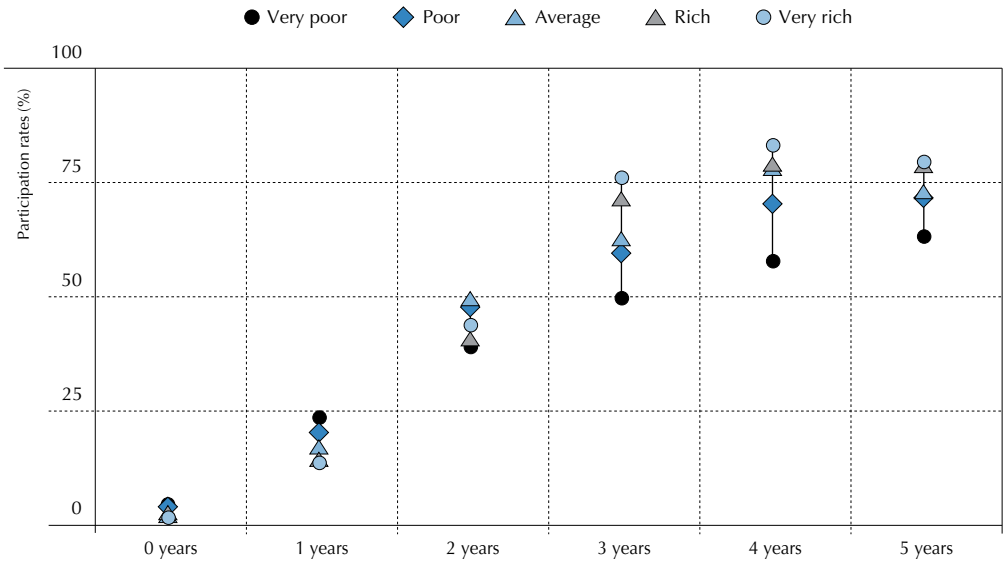
Leadership also varies according to modality. ICBF services are led by ICBF co-ordinators and pre-primary provision in schools is managed by the school principal (see Chapter 3). Like pre-primary teachers, ICBF co-ordinators must have a graduate degree in social or human science, education or administration, in addition to one year of professional experience. They need a number of key skills, such as leadership, teamwork, decision making, conflict resolution and administrative skills (MEN, 2015a). Information on institutional leadership in ECEC services is limited.

Major trends in access, equity and quality

The government's long-term goal is to make comprehensive ECEC accessible for all children. There are some 5.1 million children currently under 6 years of age in Colombia, 11% of the total population, so this will be a significant undertaking. The number of children and pregnant or breastfeeding women using ECEC services (excluding pre-primary) rose from 1.3 million to 1.9 million between 2010 and 2014 (MEN, 2015a). There were also approximately 197 264 children enrolled in pre-primary education and 800 052 in the transition year in 2014, though these numbers are likely to include children over 5 years old (MEN, 2015a). While participation in ECEC services is increasing, rates remain well below most OECD countries and many countries in Latin America. In 2013, only 48% of 3-year-olds and 75% of 4-year-olds were enrolled in early childhood education (ISCED 0) compared to the OECD average of 70% and 82%, respectively. Participation in the transition year has been compulsory for children aged 5 in Colombia since 1994. Although 79% of 5-year-olds were enrolled in early childhood education or primary education in 2013, only 63% were in the transition grade in 2012 and their number has shown little increase in the past decade (MEN, 2015b). In addition, 3.1% of children in the transition grade left the education system in 2013 which is similar to the annual dropout rate in primary (3.2%) and upper secondary education (3.1%) (MEN, 2015a).

With high rates of child poverty, government policy has prioritised the expansion of ECEC services for vulnerable and disadvantaged families. Yet access still remains out of reach for many poor children, especially in rural areas (Álvarez et al., forthcoming). Comprehensive ECEC reaches only two out of every five disadvantaged children in Colombia (Bernal, 2014; CIPI, 2013b). Overall participation rates for 3-5 year-olds are much higher for children from wealthier families than for children from disadvantaged groups. Children from more advantaged backgrounds (the first and second richest quintiles) had higher participation rates in ECEC from ages 0 to 5, 46% and 40% (2012), respectively. However, among the youngest children (0-1 year-olds), those from the bottom quintile were more likely to benefit from ECEC services – primarily the family modality – than children from higher income levels (Bernal, 2014) (Figure 2.2).

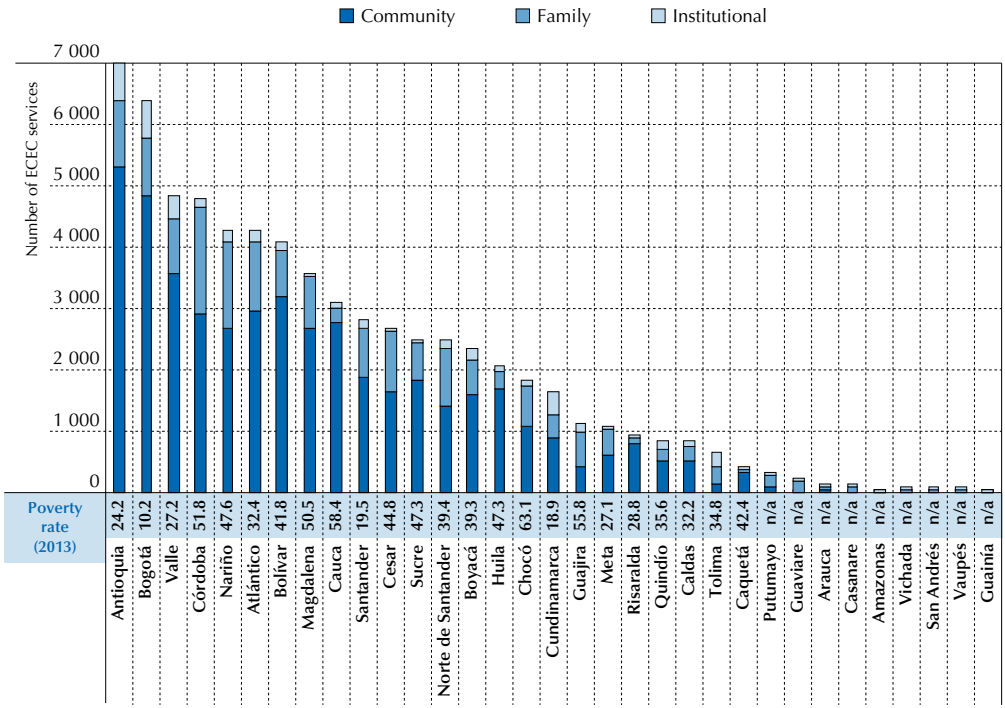
Figure 2.2. **Participation rates in ECEC, by socio-economic level (2012)**



Source: Bernal, R. (2014), "Diagnóstico y recomendaciones para la atención de calidad a la primera infancia en Colombia", *Cuadernos Fedesarrollo,* No. 51, Fedesarrollo, Bogotá, Colombia, www.fedesarrollo.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/debate_pres_2014_cuad51.pdf.

Child poverty rates are highest in rural areas, where around 89% of children aged up to six live in vulnerable socio-economic conditions (Bernal, 2014). Institutional and pre-primary school modalities are more limited in poor rural areas, leaving most families dependent on the family and community modalities for ECEC services. While providing valuable care, the latter offer less educational support for children who are likely to need particular help to successfully transition to school (Figure 2.3).

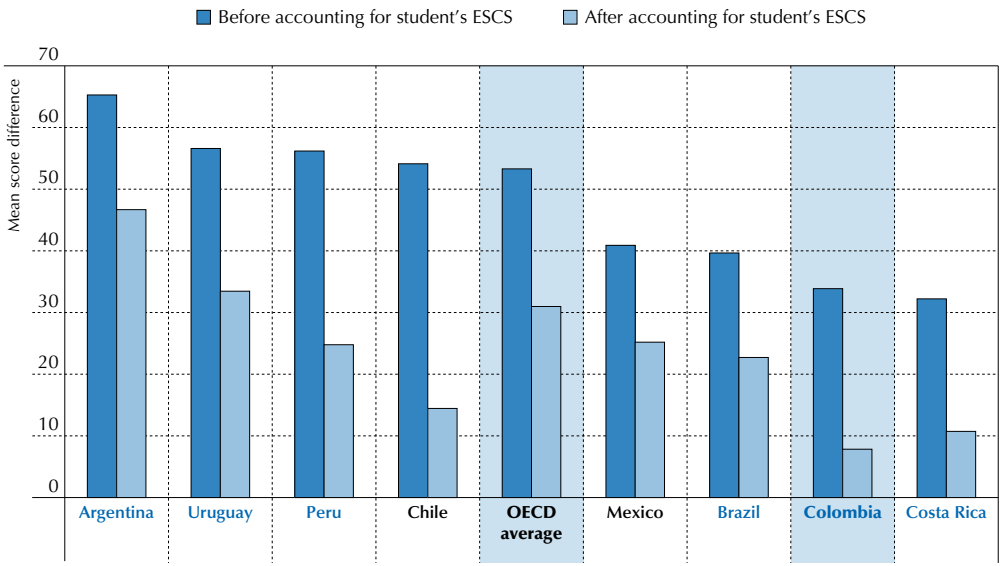
Figure 2.3. **ECEC services and poverty rates, by department (2013)**



Source: DANE (2015), "Pobreza y desigualdad", Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadistica (National Department of Statistics) website, www.dane.gov.co/index.php/estadisticas-sociales/pobreza; MEN (2015a), "OECD-Colombia education and skills accession policy review: Country background report", Ministerio de Educación Nacional (Ministry of National Education), Bogotá.

Participation in ECEC services in Colombia offers positive benefits for learning throughout life. Colombian children who attended ECEC for at least one year performed better than those who had not across all three domains measured by PISA in 2012 (literacy, mathematics and science). However, the correlation is less strong than in most OECD countries, suggesting that quality standards may be low in many ECEC institutions. The benefits of ECEC in Colombia also appear to be low compared to other Latin American countries and declining against selected countries (Figure 2.4). These findings from PISA are consistent with a study of ECEC across 15 Latin American countries, which found that ECEC participation in Colombia had the lowest impact on language and mathematics abilities in Grades 3 and 6 of all the countries sampled (UNESCO, 2010).

Figure 2.4. **Difference in mathematics performance, by attendance at pre-primary school (2012)**



Note: ESCS refers to the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status. Non-OECD countries are shown in blue.

Source: OECD (2013), *PISA 2012 Results: Excellence through Equity (Volume II): Giving Every Student the Chance to Succeed*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264201132-en.

Key policy issues

Colombia has made important strides in developing and expanding ECEC provision but the ECEC system remains in its infancy, and Colombia has a long way to go to reach the levels of coverage and quality seen in most OECD countries. In this journey, Colombia can draw on lessons learned from international experience to improve access and better support children's early development and learning. The potential benefits of such progress are significant, for children and families, for the performance of the education system, and for Colombia's wider social and economic development (OECD, 2012a). This chapter identifies three policy issues that Colombia will need focus on to achieve these rewards: 1) improving the educational benefits of ECEC; 2) ensuring universal access and successful transition to schooling; and 3) strengthening the whole system architecture for ECEC.

Policy issue 1: Improving the educational benefits of ECEC

Colombia's Zero to Forever strategy promotes a comprehensive approach to ECEC that addresses all aspects of child well-being from care, health and nutrition to education, play and socialisation. This is a positive feature of Colombia's ECEC system. Addressing the child as a whole person is central to their development and learning, and most OECD countries seek to ensure that ECEC services meet the full range of a child's physical, social, emotional and cognitive needs (OECD, 2012a). In practice, however, not all aspects of this comprehensive vision have received equal attention in Colombia. In particular, the educational dimension of ECEC appears significantly underdeveloped for children under six, with limited attention paid to developing the foundational cognitive, social and emotional skills that all children need to progress successfully in school and in life. A recent assessment of the Colombian institutional modality recorded practices of almost exclusively free play, with virtually no structured activities (Bernal et al., 2012). Site visits and interviews conducted by the review team confirmed the prevalence of such practices and the lack of a strong focus on child learning. The limited impact of ECEC on Colombia's PISA's scores compared with OECD and Latin American countries, suggests that the educational aspect of early childhood services could be enhanced. This section will look at three policy levers through which Colombia could improve the education benefits of early childhood education: 1) setting expectations for learning; 2) strengthening the skills of ECEC staff; and 3) supporting children's home learning environments. It pays special attention to ways of supporting the most disadvantaged children in Colombia, who stand to gain the most from an ECEC system that is more focused on learning.

Setting expectations for learning

Setting clear expectations for children's learning and development is important for several reasons. First, it provides an explicit expectation that children will develop a variety of skills during their pre-primary years. Second, it sets out the range and level of learning expected, which can form the basis of other policies, such as a curriculum that describes how children's learning can be developed to specified standards, staff training programmes, child monitoring tools and other resource materials. Third, clear learning expectations can offer valuable guidance to staff on the skills children should develop. This can be particularly valuable in guiding staff who have received little formal training. Fourth, as ECEC provision expands, quality and impact can sometimes decline (Duncan and Magnuson, 2013). Having clear expectations of children's learning outcomes promotes a more even level of quality across different providers and provides a basis for national ministries, as well as providers and ECEC staff, to monitor progress and ensure quality standards are not compromised as access increases.

Colombia is unusual compared to OECD countries in not having an early years' curriculum or learning standards. While the 2014 MEN guidelines for the family and institutional modalities provide general orientations for learning in these institutions, they focus primarily on minimum operational standards – such as requirements for premises and space, staff certification and child-staff ratios, and the pedagogical requirements of ECEC staff. They do not define the learning expectations for a child's social, emotional and cognitive development at different ages, or set out the subject areas ECEC settings are expected to teach. Nor do they provide direction on how these outcomes might be enabled and monitored by staff. The OECD review team saw no evidence of guidance being available for providers or staff on what children should be expected to know or do to transition successfully to school.

Most OECD countries, as well as most Latin American countries, have a framework in place that specifies what children should be learning and doing during ECEC and what the development goals should be for particular ages or for the end of pre-primary. In almost all OECD countries, a curriculum exists for the pre-primary years (usually from age three or four) which defines the subject areas that should be taught and usually provides pedagogical guidance for staff. An increasing number of countries are also formulating curricula for the earlier years (children under three), as awareness grows of the importance of these years in determining learning outcomes later in life (OECD, 2015). In Latin America, Chile, Brazil and Uruguay have a two-cycle ECEC curriculum for 0-3 year-olds and 3-6 year-olds (UNESCO, 2010).

Studies of international experience show that there is a wide range of approaches to early learning standards and ECEC curricula (OECD, 2012a, 2015). Some countries, notably many Nordic and central European ones, maintain a broad and holistic developmental focus from the earliest years through until school age. They place equal emphasis on a range of domains, including physical and motor development, socio-emotional development, personal and social skills, artistic and cultural development, and authentic (i.e. through lived situations) approaches to literacy, number and science thinking. Other countries, including France and many Anglophone countries, have adopted a more prescriptive approach, which focuses more closely on school-like learning areas, such as mathematical development, language and literacy skills, with children's learning in the centre and the range of experiences offered to them playing a more secondary role (OECD, 2006). Rather than making too sharp a contrast between the two approaches, it would be more accurate to see them as a continuum, where different learning areas and aspects of child development receive different levels of emphasis.

The approach that a country chooses should be based on the context and stage of ECEC development and the distinct needs of the young children that

ECEC is intended to serve. Factors to consider are the extent to which ECEC professionals are trained in pedagogy, the availability and use of resources, and children's existing development levels. When children face learning challenges, for example because of deprivation and weak home learning environments, and when staff are not highly skilled and experienced, a more prescriptive curriculum can provide better guidance and support to early learning than a more general approach (OECD, 2012a).

England (United Kingdom) offers an example of a well-defined curriculum for the early years with specifically defined subject areas and development goals, and learning expectations at the end of ECEC. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) covers children between birth and compulsory schooling age, and focuses on seven learning domains aimed at improving school readiness: communication and language; physical development; personal, social and emotional development; literacy; mathematics; understanding the world, and expressive arts and design (DfE, 2014; Anders, forthcoming). Specific goals are defined for each of the areas and children are assessed on progress at age two and before transitioning to compulsory schooling, resulting in an EYFS Profile for each child, which is passed on to the child's parents and primary school teachers (DfE, 2014).

There are also initiatives within Colombia that could help inform the development of national early learning standards and an ECEC curriculum. Some ETCs, such as Bogotá, have already developed a pre-primary curriculum which provides learning expectations for each stage of a child's development and dovetails with the school curriculum (Box 2.2). One valuable aspect of Bogotá's approach is the investment in teacher training to ensure staff are supported in implementing learning guidelines.

Building a skilled ECEC workforce

The quality of an ECEC system depends largely on the quality of its workforce. Initial education and training, as well as professional development, affect staff's knowledge and pedagogical skills, which in turn shape teaching practices and influence child outcomes (Sylva et al., 2004; OECD, 2006). Colombia has made significant efforts to increase the skills of its non pre-primary ECEC workforce, in particular the qualifications of local community mothers. Through the National Training Service (*Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje,* SENA), almost 43 000 community mothers have been trained and certified as Professional Technicians in Comprehensive Care of Early Childhood (a short tertiary degree; see Chapter 5) while a select few (1 600) have benefited from subsidies to attain a bachelor's degree in early childhood education (MEN, 2015).

An additional 38 000 community mothers have benefited from short training courses. An evaluation of community mothers certified through SENA has shown an increase in the quality of care in community modalities and greater interaction with children and parents (MEN, 2015; Bernal, 2014). The introduction of ECEC staff qualification guidelines, as part of the technical guidelines produced by the MEN in 2014, is another positive step. The profiles provide greater clarity on the types of skills and professional standards that people working with children are required to meet (see MEN, 2014a). These are important steps. However, there is evidence that despite these efforts, the qualifications, training and working conditions of most ECEC staff in Colombia are below those of the ECEC workforce in OECD countries.

Box 2.2. **Introducing learning guidelines in Bogotá**

Bogotá has developed learning guidelines for initial education as part of its four-year development strategy, *Bogotá Humana* 2012-2016, and complete school day (*jornada completa*) improvement initiative. Bogotá aims to ensure that all public schools provide quality education and provide access to children from pre-kindergarten (*pre-jardín*) or the age of three, until Grade 12. Similar to the national full-day (*jornada única*) policy, the complete school day aims to increase the number of school hours all students attend to 40 hours per week including children attending ECEC provision in schools.

In an effort to improve education quality, Bogota has also introduced key objectives for 3-5 year-olds along with objectives for other educational levels (up to Grade 12). The curriculum guidelines for initial education are based on four key pillars: play, art, literature and exploration. This forms part of a child's learning cycle and is linked to the curriculum in basic education. Teacher development also forms part of the strategy.

Bogotá has also implemented ambitious goals to expand access to ECEC. Bogota's government aims to increase access and participation in ECEC to 90% of all 0-5 year-olds between 2012 and 2016, and to create an additional 270 000 new places for 0-5 year-olds. Bogotá has already expanded ECEC services to 225 430 children aged 0-5 years, up from 121 294 children in 2011 (Alcaldía de Bogotá, 2014).

Source: Educación Bogotá (2015), "Educación inicial", Educación Bogotá website, www.educacionbogota.edu.co/temas-estrategicos/curriculo-40-40/educacion-inicial (accessed 7 August 2015).

Improving the pedagogical skills of pre-primary and ECEC staff

System-wide information on the quality of ECEC and pre-primary staff is limited. However, a recent meta-review of the qualitative evaluations that have been done, suggests low levels of pedagogical skills across ECEC provision (Bernal, 2014). Based on a range of indicators used internationally, including indicators of process quality, the average rating of providers was 3,

out of a maximum of 7.[3] The institutional modality performed slightly better overall, but not significantly so, and was viewed as less effective than the community modality on indicators such as adult-child interactions, the use of language and the use of education-oriented activities. This evidence of relatively weak pedagogical skills was supported by observations during the review visit. During interviews, staff in ECEC modalities described predominantly child-initiated models of pedagogy, without reference to competency development, scaffolding or school readiness. While focused on child well-being, staff seemed to lack preparation on how to help children draw meaning from their experiences and facilitate the development of concepts and skills. Interviews with pre-primary staff in schools suggested that they had better education and training than ECEC staff, yet faced many of the same challenges as teachers, such as limited pedagogical knowledge and lack of access to professional development and feedback.

International evidence points to the characteristics staff need to have in order to foster a high-quality pedagogic environment that enables meaningful interactions with children and improves child outcomes. These include a good understanding of child development and learning, the ability to develop a child's perspectives and be responsive to their needs and development, leadership and problem-solving skills, the ability to develop lesson plans, and a very good vocabulary and the ability to elicit children's ideas (OECD, 2012b). Whatever the curriculum approach chosen, and the extent to which the child or the teacher is encouraged to lead activities, pedagogical policies in OECD countries agree in recognising the need for highly qualified staff who are capable of guiding, facilitating and structuring interactions so that children develop key concepts and abilities (Anders, forthcoming).

In Colombia, where a range of institutions provide training to ECEC staff, a pedagogical framework and common basic training curriculum, aligned with an early years' curriculum and learning expectations set out for children, could help to improve the pedagogical skills of ECEC staff and ensure more equal standards across institutions. The guidelines introduced by the MEN in 2014 are a valuable starting point, but they do not go far enough in defining the content and goals of early learning and the type of activities and practices by which they can be achieved. Without such guidance, staff, especially if they are inexperienced and untrained, may revert to a *laissez-faire* pedagogical approach which fails to develop the cognitive and non-cognitive competencies children need to have a strong start in schooling and life.

Strengthening the pedagogical skills of pre-primary and ECEC staff, especially those in the ICBF modalities, will also require more professional development opportunities, an effective appraisal system and the right incentives. Childcare staff has limited access to professional development programmes, even though international evidence points to the importance of continuous development and training in enhancing the quality of ECEC

services and outcomes (OECD, 2012a). In addition, there is no formal appraisal system, meaning that feedback on staff performance depends on the capacity of individual institutional co-ordinators. Well-designed systems for assessing staff performance can contribute to identifying training needs and in turn strengthen staff quality (OECD, 2015). A recent survey of OECD countries highlights self-evaluation as an important tool for improving the skills of ECEC staff and encouraging greater reflection and awareness of practice and pedagogical processes (OECD, 2015). Both the ICBF and the MEN have plans to improve staff evaluation, but such policies at the school level have tended to serve management rather than improvement purposes (MEN, 2014a).

Raising the status of the ECEC workforce and strengthening leadership

The significant difference in wages, entitlements and status between childcare providers and pre-primary teachers runs counter to the general trend across OECD countries of bringing the ECEC workforce into the mainstream teaching profession. This usually means ensuring that all ECEC staff with lead responsibility for children in their pre-primary years have at least a post-secondary degree and training on par with primary school teachers (OECD, 2012b). Such a move is seen not only as a way to raise the quality and status of the ECEC workforce, but also to support the transition of children from ECEC into school (see Policy Issue 2). Colombia has raised the training requirements of ECEC teachers in the institutional modality to a *normalista* degree from a Higher Teaching School (*Escuela Normal Superior*, ENS), a technological degree in education or an undergraduate degree in visual arts, music, linguistics or language, in addition to 1-2 years of on-the-job experience in the ECEC sector. This is different from staff in ICBF modalities who need a professional technical degree (the lowest level of tertiary qualification in Colombia, see Chapter 5) and 5 years of on-the-job ECEC experience (MEN, 2014a, 2015). Working conditions remain very different, with considerable variations in pay, career progression, incentives and benefits across providers, modalities and regions. Achieving greater equivalence in working conditions has high cost implications, and it will be important to avoid creating barriers to the expansion of ECEC services. However, it should be a medium-term objective for Colombia to move towards more equal working conditions if it is to raise the status and quality of the ECEC workforce and ensure children of the same age receive the same standard of service.

Building a skilled workforce also requires strong leadership capacity on the part of ECEC co-ordinators. The latter are key to enhancing staff quality as well as motivating and encouraging ECEC staff (OECD, 2012a). Colombia has taken positive steps to strengthen ECEC leadership. As stated in the technical guidelines introduced in 2014, co-ordinators of ECEC services must have a graduate degree in social or human sciences,

education or administration in addition to one year of professional experience. The expansion of the institutional modality also appears to have brought better co-ordination and supervision of staff. Ensuring leaders and managers of ECEC services have the necessary qualifications and professional development opportunities to not only manage their institutions but also be pedagogical leaders and support their staff will be an important factor in raising the quality of ECEC services (OECD, 2012a).

Lifting standards while expanding the workforce

With ambitious coverage targets, Colombia will need to find new ways to improve staff quality while increasing the number of ECEC workers and teachers. Colombia's strategy of training community mothers has worked effectively to expand care up to now, but is unlikely to meet the needs of a system that should prepare children for learning and school. One untapped opportunity to attract additional staff into ECEC is the current oversupply of qualified primary teachers, some of whom might be suitable to work in ECEC. There seem to be no deliberate efforts to channel this unused resource into the ECEC sector. Not only could primary school teachers contribute to the supply of ECEC staff, but, with the right training, they could also enhance staff quality. England (United Kingdom) is currently placing more school teachers in ECEC settings as a strategy to increase the number of pedagogical staff with high formal qualifications (Anders, forthcoming). Other options to increase skills and attract additional staff include scholarships or other forms of financial assistance for prospective staff; providing more flexible training models, in particular in rural areas, such as the ability to combine study and work and participate in intensive block courses or distance programmes; and retraining for those with relevant experience (OECD, 2012a).

Supporting children's home learning environment

Parents are essential partners in providing children a strong start in learning; they have more impact on a child's early education than any other single influence. They can significantly enhance their children's development of both socio-emotional and cognitive skills by providing a stimulating home learning environment. Parents also influence children's early development through their decisions on whether and at what age to enrol their children in ECEC and, where more than one service is available, the type of service their child attends.

In Colombia, many parents are likely to require additional support to stimulate learning in the home and make the right choices about their child's care and education. Research indicates that parents with limited education and from low socio-economic levels tend to engage their children

less frequently in learning activities (OECD, 2012a). A significant number of mothers in Colombian households have low literacy and poor education levels. In 2013, a survey of households across the country found that 36% of mothers with children under the age of five in both rural and urban areas only had primary school education (Bernal, 2014). While the educational qualifications of a child's mother is the best predictor of a child's later educational outcomes, there is still much that parents can do, even with limited education themselves, to stimulate their children's early learning and development (Sylva et al., 2004). Parents with poor literacy and education levels can be helped to provide positive home learning environments for their children, for example through the provision of books and other resources. Such interventions have been found to be highly effective in terms of boosting learning outcomes and social progress (Lazzari and Vandenbroeck, 2012). Enabling poor families to give their children a fair chance in education is one of the most powerful tools for breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

Colombia's family modality of ECEC has shown itself to be an effective means of reaching families, particularly disadvantaged families, and helping them understand the importance of their child's early learning and what they can do to support it. Research indicates that home visits, which form an important part of the family modality, are key to empowering parents (OECD, 2012a). The family modality also focuses on children at an early age, which enhances the likely positive impact this intervention can have as this is the most important time for brain development. Evidence shows that working with parents is particularly effective when children are very young. For example, an analysis of experimental, longitudinal programmes in the United States found that projects that worked with infants from six weeks had more positive impacts on outcomes for those children during schooling and later in adulthood than programmes targeting children at three and four years of age (Bartik, 2014). Research in Colombia has found that children who received support through the family modality for 18 months have better cognitive and language development than children who did not. A key reason for these gains is the improvements made to their home learning environments (Attanasio et al., 2012). Improving school readiness by expanding the family modality to reach all disadvantaged areas, with well-trained and qualified staff who can effectively engage families and children in learning up to the transition year, should be a policy priority in Colombia.

The effectiveness of other modalities in improving the home learning environment and parental support for children's education is less clear. Parents' engagement in the institutional modality of ECEC appears to be variable and, in some cases, limited to feedback via an annual satisfaction survey. While some centres involve parents in activities, this is not

systematic, and there is no guidance or information for ECEC staff or parents on the types, range and frequency of home-based activities that support children's learning development. The ECEC guidelines introduced in 2014 provide some information on this but they remain very general, and are unlikely to lead to changes in parental engagement and improved home learning environments unless accompanied by additional staff training. OECD countries have taken a number of steps to strengthen ties between parents and ECEC services. In Spain, for example, pre-schools organise meetings for parents to inform them about general pre-school issues and learn about early child development and the pre-school curriculum. Spain has also launched a campaign which educates parents on how they can be involved in ECEC and more actively contribute to their child's education and development (OECD, 2012a).

To encourage ECEC staff to engage more with parents, ECEC practitioners' training programmes should include information on the benefits of parental and community involvement. Such programmes can also include examples of techniques for reaching different types of families, and of ways to improve the quality of communication between families and ECEC staff (Litjens and Taguma, 2010). For instance, initial education programmes in Portugal train ECEC staff on how to encourage and improve communication with parents. Further training through continuing professional development once staff are employed within a centre enhances parental engagement and communication skills (OECD, 2012a).

Policy issue 2: Ensuring universal access and successful transition to school

Colombia has made significant progress in expanding access to early childhood services. Since 2010, half a million more young children have benefited from formal care and support. However, the country has a long way to go before its ECEC participation rates match those of OECD countries. Enrolment among disadvantaged children is particularly low. Children with development arrears at six years-old face enormous challenges progressing well at school. This section considers policy options to increase participation of children in early education so that all children can be given an equal chance to succeed. It addresses the importance of meeting the government's coverage targets, in particular of expanding access for disadvantaged children. It highlights the need to ensure that all Colombian children transition to school at the age of five and the importance of strengthening continuities between early childhood services and schooling to ensure that the transition year functions as an effective bridge.

Ensuring universal access to ECEC services for disadvantaged children

Most OECD countries promote universal access to early childhood services for children from the age of three or four. Universal access does not necessarily entail achieving full coverage, as need and demand vary according to family circumstances. However, as governments have improved access, and parental awareness of the importance ECEC has increased, enrolment rates have risen considerably. In most OECD countries with a well-established tradition of ECEC and either free or low-cost access to ECEC, such as France, Germany, Norway and Sweden, over 90% of 3-year-olds are enrolled in early childhood programmes (OECD, 2014).

Choosing the right modality to expand access to those who need it most

In Colombia, despite considerable progress in expanding access, only about half of 3-year-olds and three-quarters of 4-year-olds benefit from ECEC services. Children from disadvantaged families and in rural areas have far lower participation rates and face greater challenges to access ECEC services (Bernal, 2014; MEN, 2015a). The government target is to have 2 million 3-5 year-olds and 100% of children living in extreme poverty[4] enrolled in an ECEC service by 2018. In a country where 60% of children live in poverty and malnutrition rates are high, a targeted approach, focusing on children from the poorest families, appears an equitable and cost-effective strategy for moving towards universal access.

A central pillar of the government's expansion strategy is to roll out the institutional modality and raising community-based care to institutional standards. An additional option that Colombia might consider would be to further expand the family modality, in particular in rural parts of the country where the majority of the most disadvantaged children live. Geographical and socio-cultural factors mean that some form of community or family-based care will be important for reaching children in rural areas and from minority groups and displaced families. The institutional modality might be well adapted to urban areas, but has shown itself to be less successful than the family modality in engaging with parents and communities and building the understanding and trust that is important to increase participation among marginalised groups. The institutional modality also costs four times more than community-based centres, while only offering minimal improvements in the quality of care, making family and community-based care a more cost-effective solution, especially for rural departments with limited resources (Bernal, 2014). The family modality in Colombia currently focuses on mothers and children from birth to two, but could be further strengthened to give more support to children's learning (see Policy Issue 1) and expanded to provide support to

children until they enter the transition grade. An important strength of the family modality is that it enables positive parental engagement in ECEC, which contributes to ensuring young children receive consistent support across ECEC settings and the home and can facilitate a smooth transition to school.

Experience from OECD countries shows how family-based support can be an effective means to support child development, and might provide insights on how Colombia can improve further the family modality. The Parent-Child Home Programme in the United States, for example, is an early childhood literacy, parenting and school readiness programme, which supports disadvantaged families with children between the ages of 16 months to 4 years (OECD, 2012a). The programme uses early literacy specialists who are hired from the community they serve, thus sharing both the language and culture of the families. The early literacy specialist visits a family twice weekly for two years during which time the specialist models reading, conversation and play activities designed to stimulate parent-child interaction and develop the child's early language. The specialist also connects the families to other community resources, such as health and medical facilities and other education programmes, and at the end assists families in enrolling their child in a centre-based, pre-school programme.

Using outreach and incentives to encourage participation

Additional financial and social outreach measures could be considered to encourage participation among marginalised groups. The More Families in Action programme, for example, could be used to encourage parents to access early education services (see Chapters 1 and 3). In those regions where there is enough capacity, attendance at an ECEC service from a specific age could be made a condition for the cash transfer, as is currently the case in primary and secondary education. Under the PND, a pilot is currently under discussion. Evidence from Chile's conditional cash transfer programme, Solidarity in Chile (*Chile Solidario*), which combines cash assistance with psycho-social support for families, indicated an increase in the proportion of children attending pre-school (Vegas and Santibáñez, 2010). Box 2.3 describes strategies Ireland has used to encourage harder-to-reach families to participate in ECEC.

To increase access for 3 and 4 year-olds, Colombia could also explore ways to make better use of its school premises. As the country expands school construction in conjunction with the full school day (*jornada única*), there is an opportunity to ensure provision of pre-primary spaces for 3-5 year-olds, as Bogotá is currently doing with its complete school day programme (*jornada completa*). Expanding access to services on school property could be a cost-efficient option and would also help to ensure timely

entry into the transition year. This review has already recommended targeting the roll-out of the full school day programme in disadvantaged communities (see Chapter 3).

Box 2.3. **Explaining the importance of ECEC to families**

Parents are partners in the efforts to improve access to and quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Countries have used different strategies to explain the benefits of ECEC and urge families to enrol their children in ECEC, by such means as universal and targeted media campaigns and enlisting the support of community leaders. In Ireland, for example, partnerships between ECEC programmes and community services have been found to be effective in approaching and supporting harder-to-reach families, such as Roma and travelling families. Specialists offer those families tailored services designed with respect to their cultural context, which improve children's skills as well as those of parents. The development of distance learning materials in collaboration with community members and consultants specialised in travelling education has enhanced children's learning experiences in literacy and maths.

Source: OECD (2012a), *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care*, OECD Publishing, Paris, http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264123564-en.

Achieving a successful transition to schooling

Starting school at the right age, with appropriate support and adequate preparation, is important for a strong, positive start in education. Colombia, like many OECD countries, has established a transition year, compulsory for all 5-year-olds, to help make a smooth entry into school life. However, about one in three 5-year-olds were not enrolled in the transition year (Grade 0) in 2012 (MEN, 2015b). A large number of 5 and 6 year-olds are instead in community or institutional modalities, which are less well equipped to prepare them to start school. Moreover, there are few mechanisms to facilitate transition from early childhood services into the transition year and through into schooling. Colombia will need to address these gaps if it is to provide its children with a successful transition into school and break the pattern of late enrolment and poor preparedness that is both detrimental to learning and inefficient for the system.

Raising awareness of the importance of the transition year

A range of overlapping factors influence low enrolment in the transition year in school. One is lack of parental awareness. Pre-primary education has been mandatory for 5-year-olds since 1994 so the expectation of formal education starting at this age should be well established. However, there is evidence that there are low levels of parental understanding of the requirement, and importance, of enrolling children in the transition year,

particularly in rural areas (OAS, 2010; Álvarez et al., forthcoming). There will need to be deliberate, co-ordinated efforts at the central, local and school level to communicate that this is mandatory and to improve parents' understanding of the importance of timely entry to school.

There is also need to raise awareness of the importance of the transition year among local secretaries of education and education administrators, who seem to lack appreciation of the importance of enrolment at age five and where policy support for ECEC is weak (see Policy Issue 3). If education officials do not see the value of improving participation rates in the transition grade, they are unlikely to take steps to expand provision and make services more attractive to families with young children. National and local mobilisation around the full school day offers an opportunity to reaffirm the message that the transition year is the starting point for compulsory education and a successful school career.

Meeting families' needs for care and education

Another factor in low transition year enrolment rates is that ECEC provision in schools does not meet families' needs for out-of-school care and school meals, especially in the majority of schools that still provide a multi-shift day (Álvarez et al., forthcoming). This seems to be an important factor in the decision many parents make to keep their children in services provided by the ICBF. On-site visits indicated that while many ECEC providers encourage children to attend school once the child reaches five, many parents prefer to keep their children in ECEC settings because schools offer restricted hours and fewer meals.

Addressing the parallel provision of public services for 5 and 6 year-olds will be essential if all children in Colombia are to receive equal and effective preparation for school. The decision of parents to place children in non-school facilities creates several challenges for a child's future learning and progress in school. Staff in ECEC modalities appear, on average, to be less well qualified than transition year teachers, with different training, and being further removed from the school environment, less well prepared to support a child's transition to school. Steps to discourage and eventually prevent children over five from staying in facilities outside school should be taken gradually to avoid unfairly affecting children from families who have no real choice in terms of provision for their 5 and 6 year-olds. It will be important not only to ensure adequate places in schools, but also to address parental concerns over school meals and out-of-school provision. Governments in all OECD countries have sought to address these widespread concerns in an attempt to both increase child enrolment in early education and encourage female participation in the labour market. In France, for example, pre-schools (*écoles maternelles*) meet demand

for out-of-school time provision through a network of accredited support services around the school run by non-profit associations, municipalities and parents' associations. French children can also go to the homes of accredited or informal family day carers for after-school care (OECD, 2006).

Improving co-ordination between different modalities

The existence of split provision also creates challenges for supporting children as they make the transition from early childhood services into schooling. Transitions for young children are critical occasions: they can be a stimulus to growth and development, but if too abrupt and handled without care, they carry – particularly for very young children – the risk of regression and failure (OECD, 2006). This is a particular concern in Colombia, since providers' practices and expectations differ widely. There will need to be much better co-operation between ICBF services and the school system at every level, in particular locally, to ensure not only that all children enrol in the transition year in schools but that this is a positive experience. Children in ICBF-run institutions need better preparation for entry into the transition year and Grade 1. Schools, for their part, need guidance on how to provide a supportive setting for children coming from other facilities. Some ECEC staff we spoke with in CDIs detailed how they connected with schools by having children visit their future school, but there are no mechanisms to ensure that this happens systematically across all schools and ICBF facilities.

The experience of OECD countries points to several measures that can help to strengthen institutional co-ordination and improve the transition to school (OECD, 2012a). Effective tools for ensuring coherence across providers include the existence of a unified curriculum across the ECEC age range and continuity in training and pedagogical methods across ECEC staff and early school teachers. In Denmark, for example, children under the age of three attend family day care and transition to centre-based care, as they get older. The potential for transition difficulties is diminished by the close training links between the two facilities. Municipal family day carers will often attend weekly or monthly training sessions at the early childhood centre, with the children in their care (OECD, 2006). Other countries have strengthened institutional co-operation and improved transition by having providers share the same building or be placed in close proximity. Transition could be improved in Colombia by building new ECEC services within or near to schools, as proposed above, and including them within school clusters under the co-ordination of the school principal. Such proximity would help staff to work together and share training opportunities so they can jointly support child transition.

A shared information system would facilitate the transfer of knowledge between ECEC staff and school teachers and enable them to better understand and support the needs of children as they prepare for, start and progress through the transition year into school. Colombia does not currently have any systematic means for schools to assess the relative needs of children when they start school. Nor does the MEN have a way to monitor school readiness over time. This means that the needs of individual children may be overlooked and the common needs across cohorts of children and across different services are unknown. The recent Child to Child Monitoring introduced by the MEN might be a tool which can be exploited to ensure the right data are being collected. It seeks to consolidate information about each child from all care providers to create a monitoring process that could enable picking up early warning signs of any problems. Some countries have developed useful tools to provide information on how young children are progressing, such as Australia (Box 2.4). The existence of such tools can help in creating a common understanding and language across different providers on children's development, to understand how transition affects children, and to identify areas where additional support is needed.

Box 2.4. **Supporting transition to school through better child information**

Australia uses a national adaptation of the Early Development Instrument (EDI) which is a checklist of children's development completed by teachers. The EDI was originally developed in Ontario, Canada and is a population measure of children's development as they enter school. The results are aggregated to the group level (school, neighbourhood, city) to provide a population-based measure of children's development. The data are not reported at the child or class level, however, which means they are not used as a diagnostic tool for individual children. The results of the EDI allow local authorities, communities and providers to assess how local children are doing relative to other children in their community and/or across the country. The checklist measures five key domains of early childhood development: physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge (OECD, 2015).

Policy issue 3: Strengthening the whole system architecture for ECEC

Colombia has made important progress in establishing a national framework to steer ECEC policy and implementation. As the From Zero to Forever strategy becomes law, Colombia has the opportunity to further strengthen this governance architecture to support greater improvement

in early childhood services. ECEC in Colombia is likely to improve more quickly and in a more coherent manner if there is clarity over agencies' responsibilities. Ensuring a stronger, clearer role for the MEN in directing ECEC provision will be important to establish greater consistency across services, enhance the educational component of early childhood care and help children in their transition into schooling. Driving quantitative and qualitative improvements in ECEC requires adequate resources and capacity. Strong quality assurance mechanisms will also be important to guarantee standards and effective implementation the whole ECEC system, including across the large number of private providers. This section addresses these system-level issues and looks at two sets of policy levers Colombia can use to improve ECEC: ensuring adequate governance and funding, and improving the monitoring and accountability system.

Ensuring effective governance and funding for improvement

An effective governance structure and funding system is important to steer ECEC policies towards improvement. In most countries, early childhood services tend to suffer from fragmentation across different agencies and departments, and mobilising sufficient public investment is often a challenge for a sector that is outside the compulsory school system and lacks strong political support (OECD, 2012a). In Colombia, these challenges are compounded by the ways in which responsibilities are split, not just between childcare for younger children and pre-primary education for older ones, but between two systems offering very different services in the pre-school years. Implementing reform in ECEC is further complicated by the dynamics of a decentralised system, where local capacity is often weak, political commitment to ECEC uneven, and financial resources frequently lacking. Clear national stewardship, stronger local engagement, and more substantial and equitable financing will be essential to drive change in ECEC in Colombia.

Co-ordination and leadership

As ECEC policy becomes established in law, it will be important for Colombia to clarify the roles of different actors and establish a strong co-ordinating body. The creation of the CIPI was a significant step towards creating a more integrated approach to ECEC. It has also helped to elevate the political importance attached to the issue. However, there is a lack of clarity over which agency is responsible for the overall performance of the sector, in terms of coverage, quality and impact. In practice, while the MEN is in charge of ECEC policies and guidelines, the ICBF is responsible for implementation and does not report to the MEN for this delivery. This creates

a fragmented system which leads to inequities in provision and quality and varying goals.

OECD countries address governance in different ways, but most have appointed one lead ministry to ensure consistency and continuity in services, even if other actors continue to play an important role. In the majority of cases, this responsibility is located within the education ministry. Education ministries have a strong claim to this role as their main focus is children and learning, and they already have many of the subsystems necessary for a quality system – a training authority, an evaluation body, statistical and monitoring units etc. Various analyses show that bringing policy making under one agency can have several advantages: more coherent policy, more effective investment, improved public management of services, and, ultimately, better and more consistent support for young children (OECD, 2006). Although structural arrangements are not fundamental drivers of participation rates or the educational or other benefits of ECEC, Colombia is likely to make better progress if there is greater clarity on which agency is responsible for ensuring national ECEC objectives are met (Bernal, 2014).

Colombia needs ECEC to be a priority of every regional department and municipality in Colombia. Delegating responsibilities to local stakeholders can be useful if they have the capacity to make decisions based on the needs of their communities and families and to allocate their resources efficiently to support children (OECD, 2006). In those departments that have taken on responsibility for ECEC, such as Bogotá and Medellín, the positive impact on provision is evident (Box 2.5). However, local governments in Colombia often lack the human and financial capacity to provide access to ECEC services (UNICEF, 2014). The CIPI offers departments and municipalities tools to organise ECEC services within their jurisdictions, and can thus support local authorities to manage ECEC better in their regions. The Comprehensive Care Plan (*Ruta Integral de Atención*) is one such instrument that helps local governments structure services according to the needs of children at each developmental stage, and to map service delivery and identify gaps (MEN, 2015a). In addition, local governments also need to better understand the benefits of high-quality ECEC. Some local secretaries of education and staff that the review team met were absorbed with operational issues such as physical capacity and staffing, and did not appear to be focused on child development outcomes and how to improve them. The MEN can start this process by ensuring the secretaries of education are well-informed about the impacts of early learning and the gains that could be achieved across schooling if coverage rates and quality improve in the early years. The workshops held with secretaries of education on the Synthetic

Education Quality Index (*Índice Sintético de la Calidad Educativa*, ISCE), a multidimensional index of school quality (see Chapter 3), are good examples of how national bodies can engage with local governments. Collaboration across local governments to share good practices can also be a good way to catalyse action.

Box 2.5. **Getting a good start in Medellín**

The government of Medellín has played a key role in the development of the national ECEC policy, including the From Zero to Forever strategy. In part its participation in national policy has been due to the 2004 Good Start (*Buen Comienzo*), which was driven by the Mayor's Office who aimed to provide nutritional services to children not served by the ICBF services. In 2008, the programme expanded to support children from before birth until they started primary school. The Good Start programme has a number of positive characteristics, such as operating 5 to 8 hours a day, providing lunch and two snacks a day, engaging parents from pregnancy to early childhood through monthly meetings, one of the lowest child- to-staff ratio among ECEC programmes (3.7 children per adult for ages 0 to 2 and 6.2 for ages 2 to 6), and specialised childcare facilities that meet all basic equipment and safety needs. The programme reports that it serves 100% of its target population, which are disadvantaged children from vulnerable and low-income families. In 2014, almost 80 000 children and pregnant women were covered by the programme.

Sources: Araujo, M.C., F. López-Boo and J. M. Puyana (2013), *Overview of Early Childhood Development Services in Latin America and the Caribbean,* Social Protection and Health Division, Inter-American Development Bank, https://publications.iadb.org/bitstream/handle/11319/3617/BID_Panorama_ENG%20(Web).pdf?sequence=2; Cardona- Sosa, L. and L. Morales (2015), "Efectos laborales de los servicios de cuidado infantil: Evidencia del programa Buen Comienzo", *Borradores de Economia,* No. 882, Banco de la Republica.

Investing effectively in the early years

Steering the ECEC system towards higher performance also requires adequate and efficient funding. It will be difficult for Colombia to reach its coverage targets without both a significant increase in public investment in ECEC and an improvement in how public funds are allocated and managed. Colombia spends a lower proportion of its GDP on ECEC than the OECD average, despite having a much larger share of children under the age of five and much higher rates of child poverty and adult illiteracy. Over half of these resources come from private sources; public investment is just 0.3% of GDP, compared to 0.6% among OECD countries. For the majority of Colombian families who cannot afford private care, increased public investment will be decisive in expanding their access to early childhood services. Evidence suggests that direct public funding of ECEC services can also bring more

effective governance, better training for education staff and higher quality of provision (OECD, 2006).

At present, most public funding for ECEC comes from the Income Tax for Equality (CREE) and is channelled through the ICBF. The CREE system has helped to mobilise additional resources for public services and created a more sustainable source of funding for ECEC. However, the funds available through the CREE remain inadequate to meet the high costs of additional infrastructure and staff needed to expand access with quality (Bernal, 2014). If Colombia is to strengthen the education benefits of ECEC, ensure universal enrolment in the transition year, and improve the quality of training ECEC staff receive, then the proportion of the education budget allocated to early years' provision should be increased.

There is also scope for more proactive efforts to tap new sources of funding. Local government spending on education is low. The MEN could do more to incentivise secretaries of education to invest in ECEC, for example by tying access to funds to the full school day programme to a commitment to increasing pre-kindergarten and kindergarten provision in schools. Many OECD countries have responded to the need for more public funding through government partnerships with the private sector and philanthropic organisations (OECD, 2012a). Colombia has some experience with promoting public-private partnerships for ECEC, although these are not widespread. One positive example is the aeioTU model, which was developed by the Carulla Foundation and is contracted by the ICBF as a service provider to improve coverage and raise the quality of ECEC services in Colombia. AeioTU subsidises ECEC services for disadvantaged Colombian children (SISBEN 1 and 2) although children from wealthier families also enrol in these services. The model has helped not only to expand access to services for more than 6 000 children but also drive improvements in the quality of education and care (Bernal, 2014). Local governments in Colombia should be given more support, and encouragement, to expand such partnerships for ECEC.

There is also scope for greater efficiency in the use of resources. The existence of multiple funding sources and providers can create additional administrative costs and prevent economies of scale. In Medellín, the mayor's office has assumed overall management of ECEC resources, pooling ICBF funds and local resources in an attempt to create efficiencies and improve provision. Improving efficiency also requires close examination of the chosen modality for provision. As discussed above, the considerably higher costs of the institutional modality currently being promoted do not seem to deliver proportionate quality returns over the other modalities, such as the community and family modalities (Bernal, 2014). More attention should be given to building on the strengths of the latter in the planned expansion.

Improving the monitoring and accountability system

Monitoring and evaluation are important pillars of a quality ECEC system. Assessing performance at the system-wide and institutional level is important for both improvement and accountability. Reliable data and monitoring provide policy makers with evidence for sound policy design and implementation, and parents with information on the quality of care their children receive and how they are progressing (Levitt, Janta and Wegrich, 2008). Without effective monitoring, poor provision can continue unnoticed and there is less incentive to increase quality. The lack of effective monitoring and evaluation also limits the means of spreading information on best practice or effectiveness across the sector. OECD countries are increasingly developing a range of quality monitoring and evaluation tools for ECEC systems (OECD, 2015). Evidence shows that strong quality assurance systems tend to have most or all of the following components: common standards across different types of provision, independent monitoring; transparency, consequences for poor delivery, a focus on the children and their development, capacity-building across the system, and input from parents (OECD, 2015*)*.

Colombia has some practices and tools that support monitoring and accountability, but no robust quality assurance system. Under the From Zero to Forever strategy, Colombia gave the MEN responsibility for monitoring and quality assurance. The latter has set quality guidelines that have been widely promulgated and these provide a strong basis for a common framework. However, they only cover the family and institutional modalities; there are, as yet, no clear guidelines for the community modalities, which constitute the majority of public provision, nor for private providers, which cater for the majority of children enrolled in ECEC services. Moreover, while the MEN provides guidelines to ICBF facilities, in practice the ICBF maintains responsibility for the quality of its services, which it has limited capacity to monitor. Pre-primary schools are subject to their own guidelines and are monitored through the school system, where capacity for quality assurance is also weak (see Chapter 3). This fragmentation and lack of clear guidelines in many areas contributes to considerable differences in the quality of services children receive.

Comprehensive and well-aligned standards and regulations will be important for ensuring more consistent quality in ECEC provision in Colombia, as will a strong, independent authority with the capacity to monitor adherence to these standards across all ECEC settings. Among OECD countries, monitoring of service quality is most frequently carried out by an inspection agency associated with the (usually national) government. In some countries with more decentralised systems, and where local government capacity is strong, local authorities may be responsible for monitoring.

Monitoring ranges across factors such as compliance with safety regulations, child-staff ratios, staff qualifications and training, the quality of the learning environments, and parental involvement. While in Colombia, as in many Latin American countries, private providers are currently not subject to any form of monitoring, there is a trend across OECD countries towards integrated approaches, holding all private and public providers to the same standards (Araujo, López-Boo and Puyana, 2013; OECD, 2015).

Monitoring is most effective when support is provided to make the required improvements, and there are consequences if delivery remains poor, such as a repeated inspections or temporary or permanent closure. Many countries make inspection reports available to the public as well as to ECEC managers and staff (OECD, 2015). In the Czech Republic, for example, evaluation reports are made public that highlight both positive and negative aspects within a setting, and include proposed strategies for improvement. In New Zealand, the Education Review Office draws on the results of individual reports to produce national evaluation reports, which are also made public. As well as raising quality, independent and transparent monitoring can help increase social and parental trust in ECEC services and encourage wider participation.

Effective monitoring and accountability demand systematic data collection and strong information systems. Colombia monitors the overall number of children attending ECEC by region, and is able to identify participation trends over time. However, it cannot easily disaggregate participation rates by children's age, gender or socio-economic status. As participation rates rise, more specific information will be needed to target policies and resources effectively. In order to efficiently plan for the expansion of ECEC infrastructure, Colombia will need more reliable data on supply and demand. This is a challenge for many countries, as existing information systems, such as household surveys, were not set up to deliver the kind of data needed. Colombia does have existing information in its system which it could make better use of for planning purposes. For example, the waiting lists held by centres are not currently collated, either nationally or regionally. While waiting lists are an imperfect measure of the exact amount of unmet demand, they do provide evidence that such demand exists and could help to indicate where extra supply is needed, and conversely where parents may need more information on the benefits of ECEC. The fragmentation of providers and split governance between pre-primary and ICBF systems makes the aggregation of data a challenge at all levels. Colombia has introduced a number of databases in recent years to support system-wide monitoring, such as the ICBF's *Cuéntame,* the MEN's SIPI and most recently the CIPI's Unique System of Children Information (*Sistema Único de Información de la Niñez,* SUIN). However, evidence suggests they

are incomplete, poorly linked and difficult to navigate, especially for the general public (Piñeros at al., 2013; Bernal, 2014).

Information on development and learning outcomes is important to ensure every child is progressing well and that any special needs are identified in a timely fashion. Monitoring children's progress regularly against expected outcomes is common in many OECD countries. Young children at a high risk of educational disadvantage seem to benefit the most from individualised monitoring of their progress in different learning areas, as this enables more differentiated support from staff (Gettinger and Stoiber, 2012). To provide information on how well services are meeting children's needs, OECD countries use a range of mechanisms. In Mexico, for example, children's development and progress is monitored using the Ages and Stages Questionnaire. This is a screening tool for children aged from one to five, measuring their communication skills, gross and fine motor skills, problem solving, and social skills. While this tool is used in other countries, it has been translated and adapted specifically for use in Mexico (OECD, 2015). Such a tool could be particularly helpful to Colombia as the country seeks to improve the educational component of ECEC. As in other cases, the capacity of institutional actors, such as ICBF co-ordinators and ECEC staff, will be key in implementing this type of strategy.

Parental involvement is an essential component of an effective monitoring and accountability system. Parental feedback on ECEC services is important not only for quality assurance, but also to identify the factors that influence parental decisions on whether to use ECEC services and address the obstacles to participation. Many OECD countries collect information from parents on a range of variables, such as ease of access, convenience of opening hours, efficient administration and distribution of places, sensitivity to family background (socio-economic, cultural, religious, linguistic, etc.), parents' perception of the happiness and well-being of children, the provision of meals and normal healthcare to children, and relationships with teachers (OECD, 2012a). In Colombia, ECEC providers are required to run user satisfaction surveys each year, but the results are not collated or analysed regionally or nationally (MEN, 2015a). This is a missed opportunity to better understand parents' views, preferences and concerns, and thus insights on how to positively influence family decision making.

Recommendations

Colombia needs to improve both the quantity and quality of its provision if it is to increase the benefits it could gain from ECEC. While Colombia has made solid progress in increasing participation, it must now pay greater attention to quality and the educational value of ECEC. If children reach the

age of six or seven with poor verbal or other critical learning skills, they will struggle to benefit from schooling. Ensuring all children enter the transition year in school on time will be a key first step. Achieving these reforms will require greater leadership, co-ordination and funding, in particular at the local government level. ECEC must become a first priority for all stakeholders in the effort to raise national learning outcomes.

Improving the educational benefits of ECEC

Recommendation 1.1: Develop clear expectations for teaching and learning in ECEC

Developing learning expectations that set out the goals, learning areas and skills all Colombian children should achieve from birth until they start school is a first step in improving the educational benefits of ECEC. Clear learning expectations can be set out in a curriculum which explains their rationale, application methods and adaptation to different child needs. These expectations can and should include social and emotional skills as well as cognitive skills in critical learning areas that have been shown to have an impact on children's development and later success in education, such as verbal skills, numeracy, fine motor skills and self regulation. Guidance, including resource materials and examples of activities, should be developed to assist ECEC staff on how to work with children to achieve the desired learning goals and skills. Given the diversity of actors and provision in ECEC, building ownership of and commitment to these expectations will be needed to bring change and will require consultation between the MEN, the ICBF, the CIPI, secretaries of education, ECEC staff and parents, among others. These learning expectations and any curriculum will need to be aligned with other policies, such as monitoring, ECEC staff training and development and the development of a basic education curriculum.

Recommendation 1.2: Continue improving the initial education and professional development of the ECEC workforce

The quality of ECEC is largely dependent on the skills and practices of ECEC staff. This is especially important in Colombia, where high child poverty rates and weak home learning environments create challenging ECEC settings. Initial teacher education should foster effective pedagogical practices that ensure all ECEC staff are able to address the needs of young children and ensure school readiness. This training should be aligned to the learning expectations and curriculum in Recommendation 1.1, be practical and include supervised practicums. Existing pedagogical staff should also get

training to support the type of interaction that can best enable child learning and development, and initiatives should move towards ensuring that all those with lead responsibilities for children of pre-school age (3-5 year-olds) have pedagogical skills regardless of provider or modality. To achieve this, Colombia will need to adopt a variety of strategies to increase the skills of the workforce, such as introducing tailored, practical pedagogical professional training, ensuring at least a post-secondary level qualification at the same level as primary school teachers (i.e. the current level of *normalista*) and actively recruiting and retraining excess staff from the primary sector. This could be piloted in a region of the country with high levels of ECEC staff shortages.

Recommendation 1.3: Inform and support parents in providing an effective home environment

Informing and supporting parents on how they can provide effective early home learning environment is highly beneficial to child development. Colombia's family modality is one means of assisting families in this and should be strengthened and extended. Other types of ECEC provision can look to the family modality for examples of how to assist families to support their children's learning, such as with resource materials parents can use at home. ECEC staff also play a key role in engaging parents. As part of their training, ECEC staff should be given practical tools and materials to help them work effectively with families. This should include how to build parents' confidence and engagement, how to give advice on practical everyday activities that parents can undertake with their children to stimulate their development and how to achieve strong two-way communication about how the child is progressing.

Ensuring universal access to ECEC and successful transition to school

Recommendation 2.1: Address the inequities in ECEC participation

Colombia will need to further address inequities in ECEC participation levels, particularly among the most disadvantaged children who stand to reap the greatest benefits. The family modality has proven to be an effective means to reach households in rural and remote areas. This provision should be expanded to reach a greater number of families and areas, including those with high indigenous populations, and extended and given the right resources to support children until they reach school age. The More Families in Action programme should also be used to encourage participation in ECEC as well as basic and upper secondary education for children from low-income households.

Recommendation 2.2: Prioritise the transition year

It is essential for Colombia to proactively ensure that all 5-year-olds begin the transition year on time and ready for schooling. Colombia could put in place a number of measures to increase enrolment, such as providing a full school day for children in the transition year, even if it is not available for older age groups in the same school. This could alleviate the concerns parents have that their young child would be unsupervised and not receive adequate nutrition throughout the day. Linking the More Families in Action programme to children's attendance at school in the transition year, would provide a financial incentive for parents to enrol their children, and at the same time signal the importance of early schooling for a child's education. Efforts should be made to improve co-ordination between schools and ECEC services to facilitate transition, such as through joint training efforts between pre-primary and ECEC staff, which could also help to integrate ECEC and basic education curricula. Another option would be to build new ECEC centres in or close to schools and include them within school clusters (where these exist) under the school principal. Given the benefits at stake, these policies will and should require the support of secretaries of education, the ICBF and other stakeholders at the local level (i.e. local authorities, ECEC staff and school leaders). Media campaigns or the engagement of local community leaders could be used to raise awareness of the importance of children entering the transition year in a timely fashion among key stakeholders, particularly in low enrolment areas.

Strengthening the whole-system architecture of ECEC

Recommendation 3.1: Build clear leadership and funding mechanisms for improvement

As the Zero to Forever strategy approaches its 10th anniversary, this may be an opportunity to reflect on the strengths of the past and update the approach to ECEC. Colombia needs to shift its focus from inputs and provision to quality and outcomes to achieve effective system-wide improvement. This will require clarity over which agency is responsible for achieving positive outcomes from ECEC. In consultation with national ECEC stakeholders, the government should consider giving this overall role to the MEN. Assigning this responsibility to the MEN would emphasise the educational benefits of ECEC and link ECEC initiatives such as learning expectations, curriculum, teacher training and transition policies to the school sector. At the same time, departments and municipalities need to play a stronger and more proactive role in co-ordinating and supporting the delivery of ECEC services. Local authorities need to prioritise ECEC as part of the education system, but they could also be given incentives to invest

more in ECEC, for example by extending infrastructure projects within the full school day programme to include pre-primary provision. Options for further support from the private sector and philanthropic organisations should be explored not just to expand funding but to build a constituency for change and to diversify approaches.

Recommendation 3.2: Ensure accountability and quality assurance

In the long term, Colombia should aim to improve its monitoring system which will be essential to encourage ongoing improvements and to safeguard against poor practice. An independent agency, with the resources to undertake robust evaluations of services, is needed. This requires sound evaluation methodologies and skilled staff. Evaluation frameworks should be developed with the ECEC sector and key stakeholders such as parents wherever possible. These frameworks should have a focus on child well-being, development and outcomes. The process and results should also be transparent, so services can learn from each other, and there should be consequences for poor performance. Greater use could be made of available information, such as waiting lists and parent surveys, to inform policy. Given the focus on reaching more disadvantaged groups, disaggregated data on enrolment and quality need to be tracked closely and made more visible to strengthen and sustain the momentum for change. A greater focus on tracking the learning outcomes of all students from an early age could also help to increase awareness of the importance of early learning.

Annex 2.A1

Key ECEC initiatives (1970-2014)

Table 2.A1.1. **Key legislative ECEC initiatives (1970-2014)**

Policies	Key objectives
Law 75 of 1968	Created and defined the purpose of the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF) to "protect minors and, in general, improve the stability and welfare of Colombian families" (Article 53). It also established pilot Family Welfare Centres and recommended links between community groups, family and child protection.
Law 27 of 1974	Created the Preschool Care Centres (*Centros de Atención Integral al Preescolar,* CAIP) and established their funding by using 2% of the value of the monthly payrolls of public and private organisations.
Law 07 of 1979	Amended Law 27 to extend access to a larger portion of the population beyond the children of working mothers.
Law 89 of 1988	Introduced the Community Welfare Homes Project (*Hogares Comunitarios de Bienestar,* HCB) to address poverty and provide care services for the poorest children. In 1991 the ICBF introduced the Family, Woman and Child Programme (*Familia, Mujer e Infancia,* FAMI) to target children under two and expectant and breastfeeding mothers in extreme poverty.
General Education Act (Law 115 of 1994)	Established pre-primary education to promote children's "integrated biological, cognitive, psychomotor, socio-emotional and spiritual development, through experiences of socialization in teaching and recreation". It also made the transition grade (Grade 0) compulsory (Articles 15, Law 115/94).
Decree No 2247 of 1997	Sets out specific norms for the MEN in regards to pre-primary education.
The Infant and Adolescent Code (Law 1098 of 2006)	Established the obligation of designing, executing and evaluating the policies for children and adolescents, and stated that all children of ECEC age have a right to comprehensive development.

Policies	Key objectives
Conpes 109 of 2007	Instituted the National Public Policy for ECEC as the way to promote the comprehensive development of children from birth until six, to meet their needs and contribute to addressing inequity in Colombia. It also created an alliance between the MEN, the ICBF and the Ministry of Social Protection to implement the Programme for Comprehensive ECEC (*Programa de Atención Integral a la Primera Infancia,* PAIPI).
Law 1295 of 2009	Regulated ECEC as the comprehensive attention to children, in particular those in SISBEN 1, 2 and 3.
National Development Plan 2010-2014 (Law 1450 of 2011)	Set the reforms in place for the current strategy of ECEC. It also stipulated funding for comprehensive ECEC would be prioritised by the ICBF while other national bodies would provide the necessary funds for their component of the ECEC policy. Early Childhood Comprehensive Care Strategy – From Zero to Forever introduced as the strategy for ECEC in Colombia (see Box 2.1), and introduced the institutional, including the community development centres (CDIs), and family modalities (provisions).
Decree 4875 of 2011	Established the Inter-sectoral Commission for the Comprehensive Attention to ECEC (*Comisión Intersectorial de Primera Infancia*, CIPI) to coordinate the policies, plans, programmes and actions of the different national actors (see Figure 2.1) under the coordination of the Presidential High Counsellor's Office for Special Programme of the Presidency of the Republic to ensure the necessary to carry out the comprehensive ECEC.
National Development Plan 2014-2018 (Law 1753 of 2015)	Introduced various reforms to strengthen ECEC by ensuring the legal sustainability of the current From Zero to Forever strategy, improving the quality of staff and the monitoring system, and extending the conditional cash transfer programme, More Families in Action (*Más Familias en Accion*).

Sources: UNESCO (2006), "Colombia: Early childhood care and education (ECEC) programmes", Country profile prepared for the *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2007: Strong Foundations: Early Childhood Care and Education,* United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; ICBF (2015), "Transparencia y acceso a la informacion publica", Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (Colombian Institute for Family Welfare) website, www.icbf.gov.co/portal/page/portal/PortalICBF/LeyTransparencia (accessed 15 October 2015); MEN (2015a), "OECD-Colombia education and skills accession policy review: Country background report", Ministerio de Educación Nacional (Ministry of National Education), Bogotá.

Notes

1. Poor and vulnerable children are those who are in status 1, 2 and 3 of the Selection System of Beneficiaries of Social Programmes (*Sistema de Identificación de Potenciales Beneficiarios de Programas Sociales*, SISBEN). SISBEN is a proxy means-based test tool used by the government to identify the most disadvantaged families so that they may access social programmes, such as ECEC services.

2. The Income Tax for Equality (*Impuesto sobre la Renta para la Equidad*, CREE) is a national tax, which works similarly to an income tax on the profits and gains of companies. It is meant to be a company's contribution to the benefit of their employees, employment generation and social investments. There is also a CREE temporary surcharge which was introduced in December 2014 and is levied at an absolute rate (5% in 2015) over a certain threshold of taxable income (COP 800 million).

3. Bernal used the Family Day Care Ratings Scale (FDCRS) on the family environment in *Hogares Comunitarios*, the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) for institutional modality classrooms for children older than two, and the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale for institutional modality classrooms for children under two. These ratings scales are used in international standards.

4. An individual is considered "poor" or living in poverty, if he/she lacks the income required to cover a basic family food basket and other basic needs (e.g. health care expenses, education and clothing), and as "extremely poor" if he/she lacks the income to consume a minimum number of calories.

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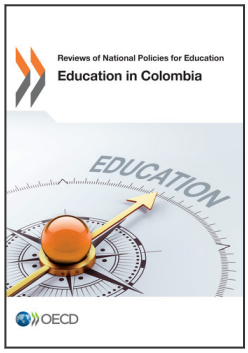

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