

## New Policy Conclusions from Starting Strong II An Update on the OECD Early Childhood Policy Reviews

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### Part I - The OECD Thematic Reviews of Early Childhood Policy: The First Round

The *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy* was launched by the OECD Education Committee<sup>1</sup> in March 1998. The impetus for the early childhood project came from the 1996 Education Ministerial meeting on *Making Lifelong Learning a Reality for All* (OECD, 1996). In their communiqué, the education ministers assigned a high priority to the goal of improving access to and quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Not only was the provision of care and education for young children considered as necessary to ensure the access of women to the labour market but increasingly, early development was seen as the foundation stage of human life-long learning and development. When sustained by effective fiscal, social and employment measures in support of parents and communities, early childhood programming would help to provide a fair start in life for all children, and contribute to educational equity and social integration.

At the 1998 meeting, twelve countries - Australia, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States - volunteered to launch reviews of their ECEC policies and services. Between 1998 and 2000, OECD review teams conducted visits to the twelve participating countries (OECD, 1998). The reviews of these countries, combined with careful consultation of the national ECEC policy co-ordinators in the participating countries, formed the basis of a comparative report published by the OECD Secretariat, entitled *Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care* (OECD, 2001). In order to enlarge the scope of the review, the OECD Education Committee authorized a second round of reviews in November 2001. Eight more countries joined this round: Austria, Canada, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Korea and Mexico. The second round of reviewing began in Autumn 2002 and ended in Winter 2004. In parallel, a series of four thematic workshops was organised by the Secretariat for the national ECEC co-ordinators on topics important for national policy making, viz. financing, curriculum and pedagogy, data needs, and early education for minority and low-income children. To summarise, over the six-year period, 1998-2004, some twenty countries have participated in country reviews, and twenty-four countries in the workshops organised on ECEC policy issues. These countries provide a diverse range of social, economic and political contexts, as well as varied policy approaches toward the education and care of young children.

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**Note:**

1 The OECD Education Committee is a forum for the Education Ministries of the OECD countries. The Committee meets at OECD headquarters twice a year to discuss education policy and issues.

### **The First Comparative Report**

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

- *A systemic and integrated approach to policy development and implementation* calls for a clear policy vision for children, from birth to eight, and co-ordinated policy frameworks at centralised and decentralised levels.
- *A strong and equal partnership with the education system* supports a lifelong learning approach from birth, encourages smooth transitions for children, and recognises ECEC as an important part of the education process.
- *A universal approach to access*, with particular attention to children in need of special support: While access to ECEC is close to universal for children from age three in most European countries, more attention to policy (including parental leave) and provision for infants and toddlers is necessary. It is important to ensure equitable access to quality ECEC, regardless of family income, parental employment status, special educational needs or ethnic/language background.
- *Substantial public investment in services and the infrastructure*: While ECEC may be funded by a combination of sources, there is a need for substantial government investment to support a sustainable system of quality, accessible services.
- *A participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance*: Defining, ensuring, and monitoring quality should be a participatory and democratic process that engages staff, parents, and children. There is a need for regulatory standards for all forms of provision supported by co-ordinated investment. Pedagogical frameworks focusing on children's holistic development across the age group can support quality practice.
- *Appropriate training and working conditions for staff in all forms of provision*: Quality ECEC depends on strong staff training and fair working conditions across the sector. Initial and in-service training might be broadened to take into account the growing educational and social responsibilities of the profession.
- *Systematic attention to monitoring and data collection* requires coherent procedures to collect and analyse data on the status of young children, ECEC provision and the early childhood workforce.
- *A stable framework and long-term agenda for research and evaluation*: As part of a continuous improvement process, there needs to be sustained investment to support research on key policy goals. A range of strategies to disseminate research findings to diverse audiences should be explored.

### **Part II - The Second Round of Starting Strong Reviews**

The research from the second round of reviews strongly endorses the eight elements as a framework for policy and offers new examples of specific policy initiatives adopted by countries in these areas. Several policy areas were explored more deeply: the governance of ECEC systems; the impact of financing approaches on quality; contrasting pedagogical

approaches. As in the first report, *Starting Strong II* (OECD, 2006) outlines some of the contextual factors influencing ECEC policy, in particular, the growing need to safeguard equality of opportunity for women when organising ECEC services and to conceive of these services as instruments of social equity and cohesion. The new *Starting Strong II* study proposes ten policy areas for consideration by governments:

### **1. To attend to the social context of early childhood development**

- *An understanding of the health, social and economic contexts* is fundamental for policy-making in the early childhood field. ECEC programmes not only address the care, nurturing and education of young children but also contribute to the resolution of complex social issues. Social inclusion, family well-being, public health policies and gender equality can be served through intelligent, comprehensive policies;
- *Social equity*: The reduction of child and family poverty is a necessary precondition for successful early childhood and public education systems. Early childhood services do much to alleviate the negative effects of disadvantage by educating young children and facilitating the access of families to basic services and social participation. However, governments need to employ upstream fiscal, social and labour policies to reduce family poverty and give young children a fair start in life;
- *Family well-being and involvement*: In proposing policy, governments will attend to the actual needs of contemporary families, e.g. to provide and organise services to allow parents the opportunity for full- and part-time employment, according to their wishes. The provision of remunerated parental leave of about a year, followed by a child entitlement to a place in an early childhood service, allows parents to be with their child in the critical first year, while, at the same time, supporting the family budget and facilitating the return of mothers to employment (Chatterji and Markowitz, 2005; Tanaka, 2005). To link the end of parental leave to an entitled place in a publicly supported early childhood service seems to be a critical element in parental leave policy that adds considerably to the well-being and security of families and infants. Within early childhood services, family involvement should also be encouraged and valued, especially the involvement of low-income and immigrant parents;
- *Equality of opportunity for women*: The UN Convention against All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and other equity agreements at international and national levels require that women should have equal opportunities *to* work and *in* work, in particular, with regard to formal work contracts, equal pay, the right to full-time work and equal promotion opportunities. Flexible work hours and the provision of early childhood services facilitate the reconciliation of work schedules and child-rearing responsibilities.

## **2. To place well-being, early development and learning at the core of ECEC work, while respecting the child's agency and natural learning strategies**

- Children's learning is a core goal of early childhood services, but within a context that ensures the child's socio-emotional development and well-being. In the past, services for under-threes have been seen as an adjunct to labour market policies, with infants and toddlers assigned to services with weak developmental agendas. In parallel, traditional early education services have placed children from three to six years in pre-primary classes, characterised by high child-staff ratios, the employment of teachers without early childhood certification, poor learning environments, and the quasi-absence of care personnel;
- Two principles, selected from the country reviews, seem to offer support for the child's personal learning and well-being: Firstly, a focus on the agency of the child, including respect for the child's natural learning strategies (Norway, Sweden) and secondly, listening, project work and documentation as major means of working with young children (Reggio Emilia). These principles counter the tendency of seeing the school as the benchmark and of imposing external targets and skills on young children.

## **3. To create the governance structures necessary for system accountability and quality assurance**

- The experience of the OECD reviews suggests that active governance of the ECEC system leads consistently to improvements in access and quality. To achieve effective steering, central ECEC policy units with critical mass need to be created and supported by legislation and financing powers;
- Decentralisation is necessary for effective governance, in particular in a field so localised and diverse as early childhood services. In the decentralisation process, it is important to ensure that early childhood services are part of a well-conceptualised state policy, which on the one hand, devolves real management powers and funding to local authorities and on the other, ensures a unified approach to regulation, staffing criteria, and quality assurance;
- Support (sub)-systems and agencies are a necessary part of well-performing ECEC systems, for example, active policy units, a training and curriculum authority, independent monitoring and evaluation agencies, a research council, a corps of pedagogical advisors (coaches or inspectors), a monitoring and/or statistical unit, etc;
- There is a need in many countries to have a national research council or research association to organise early childhood research, and improve links between research, policy and practice;
- For system accountability and quality development, programme evaluations are necessary. A national pedagogical framework for early childhood services that includes both agreed goals and a regulatory framework for the different programme types (family day care, centre-based care, integrated services etc.), facilitates

programme evaluation. Programme evaluations focus on structures (the quality of funding, staffing, programme standards, etc.), processes (both relational and pedagogical) and the achievement of curriculum goals. The focus is on administrative accountability and on the (formative) assessment of the educators' work, rather than on testing young children.

#### **4. To develop with the stakeholders broad guidelines and curricular orientations for all ECEC services**

- National curricula and pedagogical frameworks help to promote a more even level of quality across age groups and provision; to guide and support professional staff in their practice; to facilitate communication between staff and parents; and to ensure pedagogical continuity between ECEC and school. Many pedagogical frameworks can be broader than a traditional curriculum, and may include a regulatory framework and an explicit values base. An important aim is to identify the holistic goals a country wishes to set for its young children. Frameworks, based on consultation, allow local interpretation, identify general quality goals and indicate how they may be attained;
- The consultative curriculum framework will normally name goals for all areas of development. Readiness for school is important, but so also are objectives such as the health and well-being of young children, socio-emotional development, physical intelligence, and shared values, such as democracy, knowledge of and respect for the environment, etc. For successful curriculum implementation, *contextual* (e.g. funding, regulation and support by the state, the morale of the centre and educators, etc.), *structural* (e.g. programme standards, stimulating learning environments, teacher certification, strong staff supports, professional development, etc.) and *process* variables (the relational and pedagogical skills of educators) are all important;
- Recent research from the US suggests that young children from disadvantaged backgrounds are prepared more effectively for school through intensive programmes (Barnett and Belfield, 2006). Some of the programmes cited have many of the characteristics associated with effective schools, viz. the centre sets itself clear and coherent goals; pedagogical work is effectively managed and led by the principal teacher; staff have high expectations about learning and give close attention to inculcating in young children positive attitudes toward learning; teachers try to involve *all* parents in the goals and work of the school and in particular, in the development and learning of their own children; the staff is well-paid, motivated and highly trained; they work in teams and document their own thinking as well as the progress of children; children receive regularly personalised guidance (Teaching and Learning In 2020 Review Group, 2006); significantly higher resources, both human and financial are provided to children and schools in disadvantaged areas ('equal' is not enough); teachers (at school level) focus on basic academic and social skills and create an orderly climate conducive to learning; and finally, a system for monitoring system

achievement of curriculum goals in place (not high-stakes testing of children). Learning should not be limited to or dominated by literacy and numeracy concerns but should give priority to the meaning making tasks important for young children at a given age or moment;

- At classroom level, comprehensive pedagogical skills are fundamental: well-trained educators will attend to the affective involvement of children and their cognitive engagement. They will also use a repertoire of modelling and instructional skills in handling issues of personal safety, health, social interaction and other knowledge, skills and attitudes considered important by a society for young children to acquire. Educators will recognise also that young children develop along varied paths and at different rates of maturation. Although it is important to have high expectations for children, including what they can know and do, too great an insistence on standards can undermine the quality of pedagogical work, that is, the relationships and pedagogical activities that support positive outcomes for children.

#### **5. To base public funding estimates for ECEC on achieving quality pedagogical goals**

- In well-functioning systems, governments develop clear and consistent strategies for efficiently allocating resources, including investment in an infrastructure for long-term planning and for ongoing quality initiatives. Without strong government investment and involvement, it is difficult to achieve quality pedagogical goals and broad system aims;
- In the area of funding, the results from the reviews are disappointing. As far as can be estimated, investments in services have increased only marginally in most OECD countries in the years from 1999 to 2004. Apart from the Nordic countries, Belgium, France and Hungary, few countries approach an ECEC investment level of 1% of GDP, as recommended by the former European Commission Network on Childcare (1996). Funding 'places' that cannot deliver pedagogical quality seems extraordinarily short-sighted. Other things being equal, investment per child in the pre-school years should be at least equivalent to investment per child in primary schooling;
- Various strategies are used in the OECD countries to bring new financing into ECEC systems. Essentially, the ratio of qualified educators employed sets the level of ECEC costs. In the child care sector, costs are contained through the employment of poorly qualified and poorly paid staff - a feature found often in privatised child care in the liberal economies. Neither approach is adequate if the aim is to have services that provide high quality education and care for young children;
- A more positive approach to keeping costs at a reasonable level is to build up team teaching. In some of the Nordic countries, university trained, kindergarten educators form approximately a third (Finland) or half (Sweden) or 60% (in Denmark) of the ECEC staff in centres. They work in teams with trained children's nurses or child assistants. In this way, these countries can provide appropriate child-staff ratios and quality programmes;

- Another possible solution is the 'social market' or public-private partnerships. This is the predominant approach, for example, in New Zealand;
- A more radical means of lowering costs is for governments to encourage an open, deregulated market in child care services. The crux of the matter is that when public funding of the child care system takes the form of subsidies paid directly to parents, the subsidies are generally too low to employ high quality staff or to finance system infrastructure. In addition, the steering capacity of governments vis-a-vis services becomes considerably weaker than in funding-to-services systems.

#### **6. To reduce child poverty and exclusion through upstream fiscal, social and labour policies, while increasing resources within universal programmes for children with diverse learning rights**

- A central aim in all countries is to improve the development and learning of young children, and not least, of children from disadvantaged and second language backgrounds. Early childhood programmes make an important contribution to this aim. They are particularly important for children with diverse learning rights, whether these stem from physical, mental or sensory disabilities or from socio-economic disadvantage;
- Although providing care and education to children from 'at-risk' backgrounds, early childhood programmes cannot substantially address issues of structural poverty and institutional discrimination (Zigler *et al.*, 1996, Dearing *et al.*, 2006). The challenge of reducing child poverty needs also to be tackled upstream by governments through energetic social, housing and labour policies, including income transfers to low-income groups, comprehensive social and family policies, and supportive employment schemes and work training. Preventive, anti-poverty measures can significantly reduce the numbers of children arriving to early childhood centres with additional learning needs;
- New thinking about diversity refuses to diagnose young children in terms of what they lack, or on the grounds of race, religion, second language, etc. Each child is talented and competent in his or her own way, and when born into adverse backgrounds can show extraordinary inner strength and resilience. The inclusion of these children in universal programmes seems the most acceptable and effective approach, as targeting can segregate and stigmatise, and generally fails to provide for many of the children eligible for special programmes (Barnett *et al.*, 2004). At the same time, centres in poor neighbourhoods need enhanced funding and supplementary staff.

#### **7. To encourage family and community involvement in early childhood services**

- The primary role of families in rearing children is protected in international law. Both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the UN Convention on the

Rights of the Child (1989) make explicit reference to their role, e.g. the Preamble to the Convention on the Rights of the Child states:

*"The family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community".*

- Families play a critical nurturing and educational role toward their children, particularly in the early childhood period when brain and personality continue to form (Gerhardt, 2004). Along with providing a stable and loving home environment, parents can greatly help their children's learning by monitoring their progress in early childhood settings, providing them with interesting learning experiences, and in particular, by daily conversation and out-loud reading of children's literature (Sylva *et al.*, 2004).
- The continuity of children's experience across environments is greatly enhanced when parents and staff-members exchange information regularly and adopt consistent approaches to socialisation, daily routines, child development and learning. Parental engagement within the setting promotes positive attitudes toward children's learning, provides parents from diverse backgrounds with information and referrals to other services, and includes parents in centre committees and management. Sensitivity to socio-cultural difference is also needed.
- Community involvement in the pre-school is growing in importance, not only for providing expanded services<sup>2</sup> and referrals where necessary, but also as a space for partnership and the democratic participation of parents. When opportune, communities and education authorities could also provide adult education, information, services and social activities for parents from the early childhood centre.

#### **8. To improve the working conditions and professional education of ECEC staff**

- A strong link exists between the training and support of staff (including appropriate pay and conditions) and the quality of ECEC services (Sylva *et al.*, 2004);
- Close attention needs to be paid to the level of recruitment and training of early childhood workers. Because of poor wages, lack of professional development and long hours, staff turnover can be high and the quality offered to young children inadequate. These shortcomings are exacerbated in childcare markets that operate without sufficient state support or regulation;
- In order to enhance the status and quality of early childhood work, governments may wish to consider introducing equal working conditions (salaries, benefits and

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#### **Note:**

- 2 *Expanded services* can be found in kindergarten, pre-school or public pre-primary programmes. Following the definition of NIEER (2004), an expanded service would include at least three of the following: 1) Snacks and at least one meal provided on site; 2) An extended day of seven hours minimum on the same site; 3) Health screening and medical referrals; 4) Regular liaison with social and/or family services for children considered to be at risk.

professional development opportunities) for equivalent qualifications across the early childhood and primary education fields. Care should be taken that in-service training is linked to career progression and to obtaining further qualification;

- A number of weaknesses in ECEC staff policies emerge from the OECD reviews: low recruitment and pay levels, particularly in child care services; a lack of certification in pre-primary education systems; the feminisation of the work force; and the failure of pedagogical teams to reflect the diversity of the neighbourhoods they serve. Professional development and the allocation of non-contact time can also be insufficient;
- Where diversity is concerned, *Starting Strong I* (OECD, 2001) commended the requirement of the Head Start programme to employ parents and volunteers from the local community. It also noted the recruitment policies in other countries that encourage the employment of ethnic minority staff;
- The realisation is growing that the work of early childhood professional staff is complex, and that sound training is required. Whatever the qualification provided, professional training should include knowledge of child development and learning processes and an awareness of the rights and potentialities of young children. Staff morale benefits greatly from consistent support and engagement in participatory approaches to quality development.

### **9. To provide autonomy, funding and support to early childhood services**

- Once the ground rules, goals and outcomes for young children have been decided in the national framework documents, and sufficient funding provided, educators and services should have the autonomy to plan, to choose or create curricula that they find appropriate for the children in their care. This increases staff motivation and can assist quality development;
- An important element of educator support is continuing professional development, in particular, when a new curriculum or other major change is introduced. The engagement of staff in team management and team planning is also important and can reinforce Programme Quality. Another strategy used successfully in some countries is to form and support local research networks that bring together centres, researchers, local administrators and educators;
- Among the many approaches to participatory quality development, the Reggio Emilia practice of documentation is highly influential. Through words, drawings, photos, videos, etc., documentation chronicles the ideas and significant learning experiences of children, and the observations made by teachers on the dynamics of children's enquiry and social interactions. In the practice of documentation, teachers are seen as 'reflecting practitioners', that is, professionals who continually review and reflect on their own practice and learning theory. The purpose of documentation is not to evaluate children against external norms, either developmental or academic, but to

lead to a common reflection by professionals, parents and children on pedagogical practice and the processes of learning;

- In their approach to children, early childhood educators will not require individual children to reach a standard at a given age, but will take an unhurried approach to human development, which is a long process reaching into adolescence and beyond. Educators will identify and respect the natural learning strategies of young children, encourage project work to match the children's interests and provide them with the experience of working in teams. The well-being and involvement of young children are important daily goals;
- As every child has a right to access formal education in the best possible conditions, educators will ensure preparedness and a smooth transition to school as children approach school age. The continuity of children's experience across environments is greatly enhanced when parents and staff-members exchange regularly and adopt consistent approaches to socialisation, daily routines, child development and learning. A second strategy is to ensure free access to a kindergarten or pre-school class for every child from at least one year before obligatory education begins. A third strategy is to prepare children for school life through appropriate social and cognitive development programmes, including exposure to literacy and numeracy environments. If these programmes can be linked to or framed within cross-over curricula that respect the learning strategies of young children, transition is further enhanced. A fourth important strategy is to prepare schools for young children. The holistic goals and active pedagogies of early childhood are carried into primary school, as well as appropriate outreach to parents.

#### **10. To aspire toward ECEC systems that support broad learning, participation and democracy**

The spirit and articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) offers a common values base to guide the development of early childhood services in most cultures. It is important also that ministries should become a powerful and influential voice for the rights of young children.

In addition to learning and the acquisition of knowledge, an abiding purpose of public education is to enhance understanding of society and encourage democratic reflexes in children. Today, in the early childhood field, an instrumental and narrow discourse about readiness for school is increasingly heard. Faced by this challenge, it seems particularly important that the early childhood centre should become a community of learners, where children are encouraged to participate and share with others, and where learning is seen as primarily interactive, experiential and social. *Learning to be, learning to do, learning to learn and learning to live together* are each important goals for young children;

The vision of early childhood services as a life space where educators and families work together to promote the well-being, participation and learning of young children is based on the principle of democratic participation. This principle can also work effectively in management. The decentralisation of management functions to local authorities is a gauge of participatory democracy. At the same time, the experience of the ECEC policy reviews suggests that governments have a pivotal role in creating strong and equitable early childhood systems, and in co-constructing and ensuring programme standards. These conclusions to the *Starting Strong* reviews are strongly influenced by a governance and children's rights perspective. They are proposed for consideration by governments and stakeholders, but are not intended to be normalising orientations. A major underlying lesson from the OECD reviews is that sound policy cannot be a quick fix from the outside, but more a matter of democratic consensus generated by carefully prepared discussion and analysis with the major stakeholders within each country. Official policy in the early childhood field can meet resistance or be ignored unless it provides a space for local initiative and experimentation.

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