

OECD in 'schoolification' warning ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Primary schools need to do more to be ready for children, rather than the other way round, says a new report from the OECD that examines the transition from early years to primary education.

The report, published alongside the wide-ranging 'Starting Strong 2017' study, aims to provide a state-of-the art summary of the latest research and thinking on transitions policies and practices in 30 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries and partner countries.

It says, 'To make children "ready", the approach often taken involves exposing children who are still in ECEC [early childhood education and care] to the culture of primary school. Known as "schoolification", this can drive ECEC settings to adopt practices that are usually more related to primary school, such as higher staff-pupil ratios, longer hours away from home, more teacher-directed pedagogies, greater attention to academic content and less playtime.'

It points out that research is increasingly highlighting that the more age- and child-appropriate the pedagogical practices, the greater the benefits for children's social and cognitive development.

'This is why some countries – especially the Nordic countries – take a child-centred perspective, adapting the cultures of both ECEC and school to the needs of the child. This implies that it is not just the responsibility of ECEC to prepare children for school; schools also need to be ready for children,' it says.

At the launch of the report in London last week, Andreas Schleicher, director for education and skills at the OECD, said, 'We need to do more on making schools ready for children, not children ready for school', and also look at 'what serves children best at what age. Probably the first years of primary should look more like ECEC.'

The report includes case studies from around the world and suggests that in recent years, countries have introduced a wide range of strategies, policies and practices to ensure continuity in transitions, and categorises these into four interdependent areas: organisation and governance; professional continuity; pedagogical continuity; and developmental continuity.

'The transition from early childhood education to primary school is a big step for all children,' it states. 'A supportive and stress-free experience at this stage is likely to influence whether or not they can develop to their full potential at school, academically and socially.'

'Investments in high-quality ECEC and smooth transitions between the various stages of early education are key for children's long-term learning and development. Quality transitions that are well-prepared and child-centred, managed by trained staff collaborating with one another, and guided by an appropriate and aligned curriculum, enhance the likelihood that the positive impacts of early learning and care will last through primary school and beyond.'

Challenges

Challenges for children in transitions include different types of activities, the ways in which adults engage, children's physical surroundings, number of peers, rules and routines.

There are particular challenges for disadvantaged children, as they are exposed to the interaction of multiple risk factors, including a low-quality home learning environment, low teacher expectations, and poor parent-teacher interactions.

Countries have also broadened their curriculum frameworks in pre-primary education, which was very different from 15 years ago, when very few countries had not thought about what children should learn at what age, Mr Schleicher said. These frameworks now include health and well-being, free playtime, technology and several languages.

Mr Schleicher said, 'Some people say actually the schoolification of early childhood education here is not helping children, some researchers support it, some say early literacy and numeracy provides very important foundations. What's the right balance between play, social and emotional development, cognitive abilities? This is [where] I think we still have many unanswered questions.'

He added that the OECD was currently embarking on a study that will measure cognitive, social and emotional development, and 'in three years' time we'll have the answers'.

The findings show the very different traditions across countries; for example, in Finland and Norway, ECEC is more geared towards social and emotional development, but overall, pre-primary curriculums include a wide range of areas.

[Graph available to view online showing staff:child ratio regulations in ECEC and primary school, by country]

Ratios

One way of measuring quality is staff. In ECEC, Mr Schleicher said some would argue that smaller child-staff ratios matter more.

'For schooling, if you have to make a choice between the better teacher and the smaller class, always go for the better teacher,' Mr Schleicher said. '[For] early childhood education, we don't have the answer. Some would argue that smaller child-staff ratios matter more. Class sizes matter a lot less for upper-secondary education than in primary education. To what extent that can be extrapolated here, we need more data.

'The one point I want to make here is that often we introduce to children very stark breaks when it comes to introducing them to primary education. We give them a staff ratio of five or ten in pre-primary education; the next day at school they sit behind desks and suddenly one teacher stands in front of a very large class. Does it make sense? Probably not, it's just tradition.'

[Graph indicating the hours per week and ages for entitlement to ECEC services by country, available to view online]

The OECD welcomes the UK's expansion to 30 hours of funded childcare but urges governments to do more to improve access to quality provision for disadvantaged children.

The international body's first dedicated report into early childhood education and care (ECEC) draws on comparative international evidence and data, highlighting the growth of early years services across the industrialised world in recent years.

The OECD's report argues the case for greater investment in early years, particularly to ensure that children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit.

The report says that while most countries have increased their investment in recent years, there are still gaps in quality and equitable access to early childhood education and care.

England and Scotland come lowest out of 21 countries in terms of the number of hours a week and ages at which children have free access to an entitlement to pre-primary education.

However, the expansion to 30 hours of free childcare from September will bring the UK nearer to the middle of the table for free provision.

-reprinted from Nursery World

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