

The global search for education: A new look at early childhood education around the world ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

“When children are born, they don’t know any concept of race, ethnicity or citizenship. These are social constructs,” says Andreas Schleicher, Director, Directorate for Education and Skills for the OECD in Paris. Early childhood education and care is the first opportunity to introduce children to the diversity of society, and their experience there “can have a profound influence on their attitudes and behavior in life, and their trust in social institutions.” According to the new OECD report, “Starting Strong 2017: Key OECD indicators on early childhood education and care”, some countries are managing this process well and as a result see a “very modest impact of the social and immigrant background of children on their learning and social outcomes.” In other countries, the gap is huge and Schleicher believes the study clearly illustrates the difference educators and parents can make.

Does early childhood education and care prompt or deter learning? What are the best practices? How are global communities doing in terms of transitioning children from early childhood education to primary school? To find out more about the new research on early childhood education around the world, The Global Search for Education is pleased to welcome Andreas Schleicher.

“Why do we pay the teachers of our youngest children so much less than we pay the teachers of our oldest children?” — Andreas Schleicher

Andreas, many parents would prefer to spend time with their kids, therefore opting to home school.

Indeed, many children attend home-based settings and some of these are of excellent quality. But it is much harder to provide such high quality settings at scale. Over the last years, we have learned so much about how children learn and what they learn best at what stage of their development, and this has made the work of those teaching our youngest so much more demanding.

The report calls for enhanced transitions from early childhood education and care to school. How can we make this work in practice?

Why do children in the last year of pre-primary education spend a significant share of their time in free play and the year after sit in large classes listening to their teacher? Why do we pay the teachers of our youngest children so much less than we pay the teachers of our oldest children? Why do first-year primary teachers know so little about the children about which their pre-primary teachers have learned so much? The simple answer is that’s the way we have always done this. We can do a lot better and this is important. The first years of life lay the foundations for future skills development and learning, and investments in high-quality early childhood education and care pay huge dividends in terms of children’s long-term learning and development, particularly the most marginalized ones. Most countries recognize this, and this is reflected in the steeply rising enrollment and spending figures which our indicators portray. However, the benefits of early learning can fade during the first years of primary school if the transitions between early childhood education and care and primary schooling are not well-prepared, or if continuity in quality is not ensured in primary education. For many children, the transition from the last period of early childhood education to the start of primary school is their first experience of a big culture change –

in the people surrounding them, the ways in which they interact, their number of peers, the types of activities they are engaged in, and their physical surroundings. This often gets compounded by a fragmentation in services, difficulties in engaging all relevant actors, weak collaboration among stakeholders, and simply poor knowledge management across institutional boundaries.

Quality transitions that are well-prepared and child centered, managed by highly educated staff who are collaborating professionally, guided by appropriate and aligned curricula, can go a long way to raise the chances that the positive impacts of early learning and care will last through primary school and beyond.

“It is troubling that those who know the youngest children best because they work with them every day have often no voice in formulating policies and practices for early childhood education and care.” — Andreas Schleicher

The report points to the importance of continuity on many fronts. Can you comment further on that?

In most, but not all countries we surveyed, preschool and primary teachers already have access to training on transitions, and qualification levels required for preschool and primary teachers are increasingly brought into line. And pre-primary teachers have often still less working time than their primary school peers for tasks outside the classroom. There are also discrepancies between the status and perspectives of early childhood and primary school teachers, lack of relevant training and support on transitions at both levels, and structural hurdles to co-operation and co-ordination.

Curriculum and pedagogical continuity is equally important. On the one hand, many countries have made efforts to better align or integrate their curricula, ensuring that instructional techniques and strategies do not vary too much across transitions. However, in the majority of jurisdictions, children have a less favorable staff-child ratio during their first year of primary school than during their final year of pre-primary education. Add to this differences and inconsistencies in curricula, a lack of a shared pedagogical understanding of staff in early childhood education and schools, and inconsistent delivery of pedagogy during transitions.

Developmental continuity is also important. We saw many efforts of preparing children, parents and teachers for the transition to primary school. But there remain important differences among jurisdictions in their recognition of the importance of children’s participation in transition preparations, in their capacity to raise awareness among parents on the importance of the transition process, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, in promoting closer collaboration between early childhood and primary school staff, and in increasing co-operation with other child development services.

More can also be done to align working conditions of preschool and primary school teachers; increase flexibility and responsiveness to individual communities, families and children while at the same time strengthening coherence of services; overcome structural and informational roadblocks to co-operation and continuity; and to better facilitate collaboration among staff, managers, parents and the community based on reciprocal communication, inclusivity, mutual trust and respect.

The report calls for improved cooperation across countries in order to find the best education system for students in ECEC settings. Where do we draw the line between coordinating policies and competing with each other to come up with the best education system for future generations?

In early childhood education, we lack effective means for peer-learning, collaboration and knowledge mobilization that will help our systems to advance. It is troubling that those who know the youngest children best because they work with them every day have often no voice in formulating policies and practices for early childhood education and care.

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Which countries in the report surprised you most, that is, in terms of their strategies on early learning and what can the rest of the world learn from their examples?

The report provides so many interesting examples for how countries make educational transitions work. Austria usually provides training on transitions for both pre-primary and primary school teachers. There are also increasingly offers of early childhood pedagogy in some pre-service and in-service training programs for primary school teachers. Transitions are also addressed in the curriculum, and legal provisions were made in 2016 to oblige children's guardians to share the observations and results of support measures they received from the pre-school management with the primary school at the time of enrollment to inform and target support.

In Spain, much has been achieved with regard to alignment: statutory salaries, working time, the duration of pre-service training are (almost) the same at both levels. In Spain, training on transitions is also offered at both levels in pre- and in-service training and curricula are aligned.

Slovenia stands out in having a counselling service that operates directly in kindergartens or schools to support children, parents and staff with regard to the transition to school, but also in play and teaching; routine activities; the kindergarten climate; children's physical, social, emotional and cognitive development; enrollment of children in kindergarten; and in instances of socio-economic distress.

In Sweden, training on transitions is offered in pre-primary and primary teachers pre- and in-service training, and all teachers of children from ages 1 to 16 and teachers in after-school programs follow a common core curriculum and then specialize in an education level or area which interests them.

Wales (United Kingdom) uses its school building and refurbishment program to incentivize hosting ECEC and primary school provision on the same site at the local level to foster collaboration. Wales has started to implement a national approach to supporting staff in providing equal delivery of pedagogy along the Foundation Phase Curriculum across the whole jurisdiction. A Foundation Phase Action Plan aims to put in place a number of supportive approaches to improve consistency of delivery, including updating initial teacher training, increasing parental engagement, more support materials, as well as school-to-school support. To ensure sharing of information, the Early Years Development and Assessment Framework aims to align the various development assessments done on children from ages zero to seven and ensure that these are shared across all relevant services.

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