

Why it's so hard to compare early childhood education and care across the world ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

There is a growing consensus across the world about the importance of quality early childhood education and care (ECEC). Evidence shows that participating in high-quality ECEC can have a positive effect on children's well-being, learning and development in the first years of their lives. But when we talk about ECEC at the international level, are we really talking about the same thing? The answer isn't as obvious as it may seem – primarily because ECEC can take very different forms in different countries.

If you live in France, for example, and your child is less than three years old, they would have a good chance of being enrolled in a centre-based ECEC facility, called a "crèche". Crèches are typically attached to the social affairs and health ministry, and are more commonly associated with care, rather than education. If you move to Norway, your young child will be enrolled in an age-integrated, centre-based ECEC program that runs from birth (or the age of 1) up to the beginning of primary school. This programme, called kindergarten, will provide your child with a holistic and pedagogical form of education and care, and is typically administered by the education ministry. If you travel to Denmark, meanwhile, you will see that the country's family daycare ECEC is both well developed and incorporated into the regular ECEC system.

The significant differences across these countries underscore the difficulty of comparing ECEC services across the world. How can we produce comparable education statistics on ECEC in light of major variations across several dimensions – not only at the place where ECEC services are delivered (centres/schools or at home), but in the age groups they cover, the funding they receive, and the nature of their delivery, to name a few. Developing comparable ECEC statistics is certainly not an easy task, as we describe in the latest Education Indicators in Focus brief, and despite significant progress over the past decade, many challenges still lie ahead.

We still have a long way to go to better measure the quality of ECEC services, and the characteristics that influence it.

Let's start with the progress. Less than a decade ago, most statistics on ECEC were limited to pre-primary education – i.e., programmes designed for children from the age of three to the beginning of primary school. This limitation was a hindrance to researchers, and not at all in line with the conclusions of some studies on the usefulness of quality ECEC available to very young children. Things began changing in 2011, when the international classification of level of education (ISCED) – the reference classification for organising education programmes by education levels – was revised for the first time in 14 years. After lively discussions among experts, several new criteria were incorporated into ISCED 2011 to better identify ECEC services that offer similar educational content: e.g., the duration and intensity of participation in ECEC, staff qualification, governance and curriculum content.

But this was not the only change. The classification also expanded to capture ECEC services designed for children under the age of three. As a result, ISCED 0 programmes – which cover all early childhood programmes – are now sub-classified into two categories depending on age and the level of complexity of the educational content: early childhood educational development for very young children (ISCED 01) and pre-primary education (ISCED 02). This classification is more robust, and provides the basis for most educational statistics on ECEC published since 2015.

We cannot rest on our laurels, however, because major challenges are still ahead.

Although this classification is an improvement, it is still imperfect. Some ECEC programmes are excluded from the scope of ISCED 0, for example, because they do not adhere to all ISCED criteria – even though they form an integral part of national ECEC systems and cover a significant share of children under the age of three. As the figure above makes clear, these programmes are now captured in education statistics, and are analysed apart from other ISCED 0 programmes. This distinction offers a better overview of ECEC provision, underscoring the fact that ECEC services are more education-oriented in some countries than others.

We also need a better understanding of the differences in ECEC provision across countries – especially with regard to the number of hours that children attend ECEC. Children in Mexico, for example, spend 15 hours each week in pre-primary education, compared with 50 hours per week for children in the Russian Federation. This variability is important to consider when interpreting enrolment and financing statistics.

Finally, we need international efforts to advance in areas where our knowledge is limited and comparable data is scarce. The OECD's ongoing work can help address this challenge by extending the scope of available data on ECEC. Forthcoming results from our Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), as well as the Starting Strong survey, will help deepen our understanding of the quality of learning and well-being among young children. And in 2018, our International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study assessed non-cognitive and cognitive learning outcomes of children for the first time.

ECEC statistics altogether have become more robust and comparable with each year. But we still have a long way to go to better measure the quality of ECEC services, and the characteristics that influence it. Once we do, we'll finally be able to strengthen the link between policy needs and the best available internationally comparable data on ECEC.

Related link: OECD: Providing quality early childhood education and care: Results from the TALIS Starting Strong Survey 2018 ^[3]

Region: International ^[4]

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