

Policy paper 46: Right from the start: Build inclusive societies through inclusive early childhood education ^[1]

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Excerpt from Conclusion

It is well established that an early start in education can narrow the divide in future opportunities for marginalized children. However, not any type of education will close the gap. In many cases, early childhood education opportunities do not sufficiently make up for disadvantage on account of young children's abilities, backgrounds and identities. By committing to achieve SDG 4 and the pledge to inclusive education, governments need to overcome a range of barriers in order for a culture of inclusion to permeate early childhood education.

- Equitable access is a precondition for inclusion. One in four children are not in education during the year before the official entry to primary school. Four in ten are not in education by the time countries expect them to be in school. Just 3 in 10 countries have set at least one year of preprimary education as compulsory. There are vast disparities in access between the poorest and the richest, as well as between majority and minority groups. Countries need to fulfil their commitment to at least one year of compulsory pre-primary education – and where necessary accompany such general legislative approaches with specific policies that target groups that need extra support, whether in the form of proximity, service flexibility or financial support.
- Inclusion in early childhood education is but a subset of social inclusion. Marginalized children and their families do not just lack access to education. Their disadvantages intersect and require support in different aspects of their lives. Therefore, government services in health care and social protection, but also in other sectors, must be inter-operable, sharing information, designing programmes jointly, integrating services, developing the capacities of local governments, setting equity and quality standards that are monitored, and embedding effective and sustainable initiatives of non-government organizations into government systems.
- Early identification of needs is a necessary investment. Many countries rely on parents to inform educators and other school staff on their children's learning difficulties. Setting up early identification systems is costly in terms of technical and coordination inputs but is a necessary investment to save future costs. Governments need to set up the civil registries, diagnostic services, professional capacity development programmes, multidisciplinary teams and parent education initiatives to help parents, especially those more disadvantaged, improve their knowledge and access the services they need for their children.
- Curricula need to respond to all children's needs. The content of education needs to make all children feel they are valued and instil in them a clear sense of belonging to help them form and develop their identity. Play is a key element in that direction. It also needs to be relevant and meaningful, responding to not only children's cognitive but also their socio-emotional development needs. Depending on their context, countries and communities need to increase their responsiveness to diverse cultures and languages. Ultimately, flexibility, embedded in the concept of universal design for learning, will be the linchpin of an inclusive curriculum.
- Educators' competences, knowledge and attitudes need to respond to all children's needs. It may sound trivial to say that early childhood educators need to be selected and prepared appropriately. In fact, this is often not the case, especially in lowresource settings, where early childhood educators without specialized knowledge are often left to their own devices. Particular attention is needed to help educators manage their relationships with parents and guardians, to ensure their maximum engagement. They also need advice to seek out expert support but also to improve their capacity to arrange their classroom environments, adapt their pedagogical strategies and implement individualized education plans.

Region: International ^[4]

Tags: inclusion ^[5]

universal child care ^[6]

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