

Early childhood education and care: Key lessons from research for policy makers ^[1]

An independent report submitted to the European Commission by the Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education and training (NESSE)

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Source: European Commission & Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education and training (NESSE)

Format: Report

Publication Date: 4 Jun 2009

AVAILABILITY

Report in pdf ^[2]

Summary:

This report is a review of the international evidence about the social benefits of early childhood education and care (ECEC). It provides an analytic overview of the various rationales that drive the development of ECEC services. It summarizes existing knowledge from research and highlights policy lessons and measures that are shown to contribute to successful ECEC policy development and implementation. The most important findings are:

1. There are many competing, intersecting and overlapping arguments that drive the development of ECEC policy; not all of them are compatible.
2. The EU is a world leader in providing ECEC services, but more work needs to be done, in particular revising the Barcelona targets which view ECEC as an aspect of women's labour force participation rather than as a service in its own right combining both education and care. There is a need to adopt a wider approach.
3. In economic terms, investment in early childhood brings greater returns than investing in any other stage of education, although the size of the effect and its continuity into later schooling may vary considerably.
4. ECEC services can contribute to long-term economic well-being, although these claims may be exaggerated and cannot be considered in isolation from other societal factors.
5. Quality ECEC provides a solid foundation for more effective future learning, achievements and children's social development, although theoretical conceptions of the processes involved may differ. Quality ECEC benefits all children and socialises them for starting school, especially children from poor or migrant families.
6. ECEC services can enhance children's subsequent school performance and development only if they are of a high quality. Poor quality ECEC may do more harm than good, especially to children from poorer backgrounds.
7. Targeting ECEC services to poor and vulnerable children is problematic; it poses problems of boundary maintenance and stigmatization and may be more ineffective than suggested by the three USA studies that dominate this field. Inclusive, generalised provision is likely to be a more suitable option.
8. Private for-profit ECEC services are very variable but tend to offer the lowest quality services in all countries where they have been investigated. Private for-profit provision may exacerbate social stratification.
9. There is no unambiguous relationship between birth rates and provision of ECEC and other measures to reconcile work and family life, but there is a relationship between mother and child well-being and the provision of such services and benefits. Moves towards more supportive family policies have had a positive impact on both birth rates and women's emancipation.
10. Mothers' labour force participation may be enhanced by the provision of good ECEC services, but a comprehensive package of support to reconcile work and family life – including good parental leave and flexible working arrangements- encourages higher participation, as well as contributing to mother and child well-being.

11. ECEC services can support mothers, those living in vulnerable circumstances, and also working mothers, by recognizing the hours women work inside and outside the home, and by acknowledging their rights within services; their right to be informed, to comment, and to participate in key decisions concerning their child, that is as an aspect of civic participation.
12. Rather than provide care for the very youngest children, it may be better in the interests of the child as well as in the interests of the mother to offer mothers and fathers maternity/paternity leave to cover up to the first year of life.
13. Recent work on young children's rights issues leads to major changes in the ways in which ECEC services are conceptualised and delivered. A child rights approach focuses on and organizes effort on the experiences of children in the here and now and solicits their participation. Early intervention is not something that is done to young children in the hope of (re)shaping their future, but a collaborative venture with them.
14. Child poverty and vulnerability are multi-causal and impact severely on children's well-being and educational performance. Redistributive measures to lessen child poverty have been cost-effective in many countries, and such measures could be extended to all countries. ECEC services, however good, can only marginally compensate for family poverty and socioeconomic disadvantage.
15. Definitions of quality and strategies for ensuring it vary considerably across countries. More work needs to be done on defining, measuring and comparing quality in ECEC.
16. The good training, good pay and good working conditions of staff and the support they are given are key factors for ensuring quality in ECEC provision. Other key elements for ECEC quality include: the content/curriculum, including issues of inclusiveness, respect for diversity and personalisation; the child/staff ratio, group size and premises; the involvement of parents and of the wider community; the governance structures necessary for regular programme monitoring and assessment, system accountability and quality assurance.
17. ECEC services are a complex issue and cross traditional administrative boundaries. Coordinated policy development is necessary and investments should be made on a whole spectrum of policies that affect young children's lives.
18. A systematic and integrated approach to early education and care is necessary to develop and improve services at a systemic level – a co-ordinated policy framework, the appointment of a lead ministry, the coordination of central and decentralized levels, a collaborative and participatory approach to reform, links across services and so on.
19. ECEC conceptualisations and practice need to be continuously revised and updated. A key challenge is to identify those mechanisms that can promote change.
20. Despite some robust findings from individual child development studies, there is no bedrock of unambiguous empirical data about young children which can inform ECEC policy development and implementation in Europe. Findings from the field of child development need to be carefully contextualized.

The review concludes that:

1. ECEC services, although already of a good standard in many countries, require more development, both in levels of provision and in quality of provision.
2. Any future EU-level measures to address the development of ECEC services should take a comprehensive approach which acknowledges that a range of inter-linked initiatives are needed.
3. The European Commission should revisit previous work on Quality Targets in ECEC services and consider how they may be updated and used.

Related link: RELATED REPORT: EU quality targets in services for young children ^[3]

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