

Early childhood policies and systems in eight countries: Findings from IEA's early childhood education study ^[1]

Author: Bertram, Tony & Pascal, Chris

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Full report PDF ^[2]

Summary of key findings

The IEA International Early Childhood Education Study (ECES) is a comparative research program of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). The purpose of the study is to explore, describe and critically analyze early childhood education (ECE) provision and its role in preparing children for the learning and social demands of school and wider society.

In the context of IEA's ECES, ECE has been defined as formal early education and care provision for young children from birth up to the age of primary education. This period is defined under the UNESCO International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) system as ISCED Level 0 (UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization] Institute for Statistics, 2012). ISCED Level 0 can be further divided into early childhood educational development programs (ECED) (ISCED Level 0.1) and programs in pre-primary education (PPE) (ISCED Level 0.2) (see Appendix A for more detail).

The data analyzed in this report were collected using a policy questionnaire addressed to and completed by the National Research Coordinator(s) (NRC) of eight participating countries. The participating countries were: Chile, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Italy, Poland, the Russian Federation and the United States. It should be noted that the eight participating countries opted into the study and so cannot be viewed as a representative or purposefully selected sample of country types. Nevertheless, they do provide interesting illustrations of ECE policy in action in a range of diverse contexts.

The questionnaire collected basic information about the wider policy context for ECE from birth to the age of primary schooling in each participating country. In particular, it aimed to provide an overview of policy strategies, as well as the systemic and structural results of ECE policy at national and, where necessary, subnational levels.

The analysis of the survey data enabled transnational comparisons in policy and systems, and documented key policy changes underway and planned. These data revealed a set of key findings in each of the five policy areas as covered in the questionnaire and this report: public policy; delivery models and providers; participation and enrollment; supporting quality in ECE; and expectations for child outcomes. These key findings are highlighted throughout the report with their supporting evidence, but are all summarized below for ease of access.

Public policy

All eight study countries have a wide range of policy aims for ECE, including aims to support a child's development and learning agenda, aims to support parental employment and training, aims that address wider social and civic issues, and aims that support early intervention for language needs or special needs. This suggests that ECE policy is being used to meet a spectrum of social, economic, educational, and political demands in all eight study countries.

Delivery models and providers

In all study countries, there are various setting types or forms of provision delivering ECE services to children under three years old (ECED) and from three years up to primary school age (PPE). These include home-based and center-based services, and may be called crèches, kindergartens, nursery schools, nursery or kindergarten classes in primary schools, kids clubs, preschools, day-care centers and integrated centers. Some countries have a greater variety of setting types than others, and the number of setting types also tends to reduce with the age of the child. The variety in types of provision within the study countries exemplifies the current complexity and diversity in the delivery of ECE services during ISCED Level 0.

Participation and enrollment

There is significant variation between the study countries as to the number of children in the population who are from low-income families, have special needs or disability, are from minority ethnic groups, and whose home language is different from the national language. In some countries, these subgroups can form a very sizable element of the population; this has implications for policy choices. Even given this variation, when comparing the study countries that submitted evidence, there are differences in the level of enrollment of children from these subgroups, with some countries achieving much higher levels of enrollment proportionally than others. In particular,

the study countries offering publicly-funded universal ECE have a significantly higher level of participation of these subgroups than countries where there is targeted funded entitlement.

Supporting quality in ECE

All study countries regulate their ECE services, with regulatory responsibilities being distributed between national and subnational bodies, indicating a desire to ensure all ECE services meet minimal standards. Some countries appear to regulate more than others, and some aspects of service delivery are more regulated than others, with the most frequently reported regulated aspects across countries overall being health and safety, and child protection. The system for monitoring regulatory compliance may also be very complex, with a wide range of national and subnational bodies with compliance responsibility for different aspects of regulation in many of the study countries.

Expectations for child outcomes

The study countries take a broad view of children's learning and the outcomes that early education settings might support, including a range of cognitive and noncognitive learning outcomes, and do not focus on a narrow range of children's learning outcomes in this phase of education.

Region: International [3]

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