



OECD REPORT IDENTIFIES POLICY LESSONS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The Report of the OECD's thematic review of early childhood education and care has recently been released. It reviews recent trends and points towards policy likely to promote equitable access to quality early childhood education and care. An integrated and coordinated approach, and a strong and equal partnership with education are key elements, as is the need for substantial public investment. The report reflects many of the issues raised by the AEU National Plan for Preschool Education.

THE OECD Thematic review

The OECD Education Committee launched the review in 1998. Twelve countries, including Australia, participated, each preparing a Background Report and hosting visits from teams of OECD experts. The AEU submission to the OECD is at: www.aeufederal.org.au

The focus of the report is on early childhood education and care (ECEC) for children under compulsory school age, i.e. 0 to 6 years. It reflects a view that 'education' and 'care' are inseparable concepts and quality services provide both.

Some key OECD findings

C Expanding provision towards universal access
'The trend in all countries is toward full coverage of the 3- to 6- year- old age group, aiming to give all children at least two years of free publicly-funded provision before beginning compulsory schooling...often within the education system.'
(OECD 2001 p.48,53)

- C Services for under 3 seem to be broadening from 'childcare' to include educational, gender equality, social integration and family support objectives.
- C The relationship between out-of-school provision, schools and other services needs to be explored.
- C Improving access to low-income and rural areas is a common challenge.

i Raising the quality of provision

- C National quality guidelines are necessary but should be broad enough to allow individual settings to respond to the developmental and learning capacities of children.
- C Most countries focus on similar structural aspects of quality e.g. staff-child ratios, group size, facility conditions, staff training.
- C Major quality concerns include: lack of coherence and co-ordination of ECEC policy and provision; the low status and training of staff in the social

welfare sector; the lower standard of provision for children under 3; and the tendency for children from low-income families to receive inferior services.

- C Systemic inputs which contribute to quality include: adequate levels of investment; coordinated policy and regulatory frameworks; efficient and coordinated management structures; adequate staff training and working conditions; pedagogical frameworks and other guidelines; system monitoring based on reliable data collection.
- C Many countries lack a coherent vision and national strategy for ECEC that embraces children from 0 to 6.

In cooperation with stakeholders, governments can guide the system through frameworks and goals; voluntary standards and guidelines; dissemination of research and information; judicious use of special funding; raising the educational levels and status of early childhood personnel; establishing a system of democratic checks and balances.

i Promoting coherence and coordination of policy and services

- C Placing the responsibility for ECEC under one department allows for common policies, social and pedagogical objectives and budgets.
- C There is a trend toward closer cooperation between ECEC and compulsory schooling.

'Consolidating administration under education auspices provides an opportunity to strengthen the articulation between ECEC and school and to develop a coherent policy framework for regulation, funding, training and service delivery across the different phases of the education system.' (OECD 2001 p.79)

'The challenge is for central government to foster decentralisation and promote local discussion and negotiation, while retaining the authority and

capacity to monitor fair access to ECEC and maintain quality across regions and forms of provision'. (OECD 2001 p. 83)

i Exploring strategies to ensure adequate investment in the system

- C Governments generally have recognized the importance of investment in ECEC.
- C Most countries spend between 0.4% and 0.6% of GDP on preschool education. Australia, at 0.03% is 26th of 28 countries, with only Ireland and Turkey spending less.
- C Early childhood provision needs to be supported by a quality infrastructure for planning, monitoring, support, training, research and development.

i Improved staff training and work conditions

- C When all early childhood services are under one Ministry there is usually a unified training system with a high level of qualifications for staff working with children aged 0-6.
- C Increasingly, preschool staff are working with primary teachers in the early years of schooling.
- C Access to inservice training is important but a practical challenge for many workers.
- C The need to improve work conditions, including remuneration, is an issue in most countries.
- C In most countries there are separate training systems for care and education, representing different areas of expertise and training. Various approaches have been developed to creating a more flexible career structure, e.g. credit for experience when accessing university courses.

i Developing appropriate pedagogical frameworks for young children

- C There is a trend towards national pedagogical frameworks which cover a broad age span and diverse forms of settings to support continuity in children's learning.
- C Particular attention is being paid to promote continuity in learning when children make the transition to primary school. Many countries are also broadening the focus to include children under 3 years old.

i Engaging parents, families and communities

- C The arguments for involving parents and families in early childhood education and care are strong. Supporting children's early development and learning requires staff to develop a partnership with parents.

Policy lessons from the thematic review

1. A systemic and integrated approach to policy development and implementation calls for a clear vision for children from birth to 8, underlying ECEC policy, and co-ordinated policy frameworks at a centralised level. A lead ministry that works in cooperation with other departments can foster coherent and participatory policy development.
2. A strong and equal partnership with the education system supports lifelong learning, encourages smooth transition and recognises ECEC as an important part of education.
3. A universal approach to access, with particular attention to children in need of special support and to equity; access is close to universal for children from age 3.
4. Substantial public investment in services and infrastructure is needed to support a sustainable system of quality, accessible services.
5. A participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance should engage staff, parents and children and be based on regulatory standards supported by coordinated investment.
6. Appropriate training and working conditions for staff in all forms of provision: quality ECEC depends on strong staff training and fair working conditions across the sector.
7. Systematic attention to monitoring and data collection is needed on the status of young children, ECEC provision, and the early childhood workforce.
8. A stable framework and long-term agenda for research and evaluation is part of a continuous improvement process. (OECD 2001, p. 11)

A national plan for preschool education

The AEU National Plan calls for the development of national goals and frameworks, a commitment to universal access to preschool education, development of a national infrastructure and a commitment from the Commonwealth Government, in partnership with the states and territories, to increase investment in preschool education.

Major Source:

OECD 2001, *Starting Strong, Early Childhood Education and Care*

Further reading: www.aeufederal.org.au

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