

# Executive summary

High-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) holds tremendous potential for children, families and societies, laying the groundwork for the success of future generations. Specifically, children’s daily interactions through their ECEC settings – with other children, staff and teachers, space and materials, their families and the wider community – reflect the quality of ECEC they experience. Together, these interactions are known as “process quality” and are the most proximal drivers of children’s development, learning and well-being. This report explores how policies create constructive conditions that ensure all children benefit from rich interactions as part of their ECEC experience and investigates the full potential of these policies beyond their regulatory nature. It stresses that quality, as a multidimensional construct, requires multifaceted policy solutions.

Policy makers increasingly recognise the importance of safeguarding children’s access to equitable opportunities and experiences that favourably kick-start their educational careers. In this context, enrolment in ECEC is growing and is near-universal in several OECD countries for children aged 3 to 5. Yet, investments in the sector remain below public spending for later stages of education, a critical factor that could hinder access and updated service quality. In addition, although enrolment of children under age 3 in ECEC is increasing, it is still more variable compared to the participation of older children. The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic may further exacerbate inequitable enrolment, especially for the youngest children, signalling the potential risk that more children may miss out on the benefits of participating in ECEC.

International comparisons of ECEC systems, as seen in *Starting Strong VI*, provide evidence to inform policy developments and meet the aforementioned rising demand and expectations for ECEC services. The observations and policy implications set out in this report stem from data collected across 26 countries and 41 jurisdictions that provided information on 56 different curriculum frameworks and 120 different types of ECEC settings, highlighting the complexity of the sector and the variability in approaches across and within countries.

Five policy levers, or drivers, are identified as instrumental tools for building ECEC systems that can foster quality in children’s everyday interactions. The levers are: 1) quality standards, governance and funding; 2) curriculum and pedagogy; 3) workforce development; 4) monitoring and data; and 5) family and community engagement.

The present report conceptualises the linkages between these policy levers and process quality, with a particular focus on curriculum and pedagogy and workforce development, while noting the cross-cutting nature of the remaining levers, principally family and community engagement.

## Curriculum and pedagogy

Curriculum frameworks set the principles, standards, guidelines and approaches that staff could use to foster children’s development, learning and well-being. They are more likely to be mandatory for children aged 3 to 5 than those aged 0 to 2. In almost 25% of participating countries and jurisdictions, there is more than one curriculum in place per age group; yet in 14% of participating countries and jurisdictions, there is

no specific curriculum framework for the youngest age group, aged 0 to 2. A curriculum is a powerful tool to create alignment and encourage co-ordination across stages of education. Thus, an absence of concrete curricula or multiple curricula for the same age group can result in differences in the quality of ECEC across ages and settings and can make transitions within pre-primary and to primary education more challenging.

The implementation of curriculum frameworks is tightly linked with pedagogy, which denotes the foundation of a curricular approach. It also outlines the strategies and techniques implemented by staff to provide opportunities for young children's development within a particular social and material context. Most curricula across age groups in the study suggest the use of multiple pedagogical approaches and are accompanied by guidelines for implementation that provide staff with examples of practices and highlight the importance of co-operation with families, as a pillar of children's broader development outside the ECEC setting in the community context.

Monitoring of curriculum implementation is mandatory in most countries and jurisdictions, with inspections acting as the most common method of external monitoring, coupled with staff self-assessments. More than one-third of countries and jurisdictions conduct external monitoring of curriculum implementation at least once a year in all age groups, and 23% of them decide to monitor based on the previous year's results. Countries and jurisdictions monitor process quality, but they often focus on only some particular types of interactions. For example, less than 40% of participating countries and jurisdictions monitor interactions between ECEC staff and parents.

Both curriculum and pedagogy are important drivers of process quality and need to be embedded in staff's initial education and training, and professional development.

## Workforce development

ECEC staff require comprehensive initial education programmes, ongoing professional development during employment and supportive working conditions to effectively engage in high-quality interactions and have the confidence to innovate in their sector. ECEC leaders play an important role in shaping organisational conditions and strategies for ensuring quality, and themselves need access to appropriate training and support structures to be most effective.

Qualification requirements for teachers vary considerably across participating countries, though a bachelor's degree or equivalent (ISCED [International Standard Classification of Education] Level 6) is the most common requirement. On the other hand, qualification requirements for assistants are more homogeneous, generally insisting on an upper secondary education degree (ISCED Level 3). Work-based learning during initial education is required for teachers of most settings covering ages 3 to 5, but less so for settings covering ages 0 to 2 and for assistants. The breadth of content included in ECEC staff's initial education varies sharply across countries and jurisdictions, but most settings expect teachers to have knowledge of child development, playful learning aspects, and curriculum and pedagogy. Linking ECEC and home-learning activities is one of the least covered topics.

To enhance process quality, trainings must be of high quality and adapted to the needs and interests of staff, which vary based on their initial preparation, experience and role. While several countries have requirements or objectives for participation in professional development, most participating countries and jurisdictions do not regulate either the assessment of staff professional needs or barriers to participation, or the monitoring of the quality of professional development.

In addition to salary and career progression, hours worked and time allocation are important elements of staff's working conditions and well-being and affect the quality of their daily work with children. Countries and jurisdictions differ in their regulations of protected time for activities performed without children, such as professional development opportunities, but coincide because protected time tends to be more common for teachers than for assistants across settings and for all age groups.



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