ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

What Makes for Good ECEC Policy?

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Introduction

The effectiveness of early childhood education and care (ECEC) as a tool for equity depends on the extent to which it is viewed as a public responsibility instead of a private one. This perspective will reflect how ECEC is delivered and who it serves.[1]

Subject

Early childhood is the most effective and cost-efficient time to address inequalities and break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.[2] The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) for 2015–2030 include a call for countries to ensure that all children "have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education."[3] This is the first time early childhood has been included in the development agenda. It and other SDG targets provide a framework that will be used to guide national policies, inform international aid programs, and serve as a rallying point for activists to hold governments accountable.

Problems

There is a clear relationship between family income and children's participation in ECEC programs. In market-driven systems, poor children are less likely to participate than their more affluent peers, and when they do, the quality is often inferior.[4]

By contrast, universal entitlement to ECEC programs significantly reduces income-related disparities in attendance. True equity, however, requires deliberate outreach to poor and marginalized groups while ensuring programs reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of the population.[5]

Policymakers struggle between increasing access to ECEC and assuring quality standards, particularly during periods of rapid expansion. Funding constraints frequently compromise quality in early learning environments, undermining the programs' potential benefits.[6]

Research Context

At the primary level, schooling is firmly in the public sphere. It is seen as an entitlement, operated with government oversight, publicly financed and most often publicly delivered. Conversely, the education and care of children before school entry is decidedly private. With few exceptions, governments limit their involvement to regulating a private market of commercial and non-profit program providers. Financed at much lower levels than primary education, operators rely on parent fees and generally employ lower-qualified educators than are found in school programs.[7]

Key Research Question

Is public ECEC better positioned to promote access and favourable outcomes for all children?

Recent Research Results

ECEC serves dual functions, providing developmental support for children and child care for working parents. Indeed, well-designed programs do both. However, the dominant rationale for programming — whether the service is viewed primarily as a labour market support or a child development program — exerts significant influence on the service design.

When labour market needs are the motivator, accommodating parents takes precedence over benefits for children. While children's cognitive, social, and emotional development may be desired, they are not program drivers. Public policy tends towards a service model that is

private, custodial, and state-regulated to provide protection rather than development. Insufficient public funding leaves services to rely on parent fees. High fees discourage the use of group child care by disadvantaged families.[8] Under labour market models, ‘childcare’ may include measures like vouchers or tax subsidies for parents.[8]

When ECEC programs are understood as a service for mothers, public support is vulnerable. Even universal childcare may not be so universal. In Nordic countries, for example, a mother’s job loss or maternity leave may terminate her child’s participation in child care. In a labour market model, when parents do not work due to employment, health or social barriers, immigration status, or other hurdles, their children are excluded.

In contrast, ECEC services motivated by social or human capital goals are focused on educational outcomes and likely to rely on publicly sponsored centre-based programs as their delivery agents. Usually labelled pre-primary education (PPE) or preschool (as opposed to child care), they focus on older children rather than infants and toddlers.[9]

Parent fees are usually minimal or non-existent, but PPE often receives less public funding than compulsory education. In addition, PPE programs may focus on academic benchmarks at the expense of children’s broader development.

The privatization of public ECEC programs is a global trend. Justified as a cost-saving measure and a means of bypassing bureaucracies, privatization is characterized by the proliferation of charter schools and for-profit educational managers. Private centres and schools are valued for their entrepreneurial approaches but are inclined to serve less disadvantaged, and therefore less costly, children.[10]

This trend has equity implications. Public programs are left to assist the most underserved groups, including children with disabilities and families in crisis. Over time, as public services shrink, the remaining programs are reserved for increasingly marginalized populations. This reduces the number of people who benefit from or are even aware of public services, thus weakening the public’s perception of education — and, with it, early education as a universal right.

Research Gaps

Critical research gaps that could further inform policy and practice include:

Funding: There is a limited understanding of the funding thresholds required to ensure high-quality ECEC in public systems.

Workforce: While we know that educator quality matters, there is insufficient evidence on the impact of specific workforce policies (e.g., salaries, training requirements, etc) on child outcomes.

Equity: More research is needed to understand why some families do not take advantage of publicly delivered ECEC, even when accessible. Limited research exists on how public systems can be culturally tailored to serve Indigenous or marginalized communities better.

Quality: Research gaps persist in identifying the most effective ways to measure and monitor quality in large public ECEC programs.

Conclusions

Economic analyses of public spending on early childhood services largely agree that there is a high return on investment in young children. Rewards include improved health, socioemotional outcomes, school readiness, academic achievement, and benefits for families and societies regarding increased employment and income, particularly for women.[10] However, change is only achievable through considerable growth in planned, quality services to generate a universal structure that aligns with the demands for full-employment economies, goals for gender and income equity, and scientific advances in what we know about children's learning and development.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

Parents: Public models are typically universal, with mandates to serve diverse populations, including children with disabilities.

Service providers: Public providers are often regulated by stringent quality standards, including teacher qualifications, curriculum guidelines, and student-teacher ratios. Educators in public programs are often unionized, with better pay, benefits, and professional development opportunities, allowing providers to attract and retain qualified staff.

Policymaking: ECEC, when integrated into public education, provides a ready-made platform to expand and operate services. It allows for alignment with broader societal goals, such as

reducing inequity, fostering community cohesion, and supporting climate sustainability goals. Investment in public systems can contribute to long-term economic and social benefits by promoting optimal outcomes for all children.

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