

RESEARCH DIGEST

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: OECD STARTING STRONG REPORT

This digest is prepared by Research Department
of
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DEAR COLLEAGUES!

In this issue of our digest, we would like to present the results of the Starting Strong VI research.

Many countries realize the significance of early childhood education and its development. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development released a report on early childhood education and care and highlighted the main trends and recommendations for the development of the ECEC policy. The report also touches upon the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on pre-school education. The most interesting part of the report is a policy tree that incorporated the most important areas for the ECEC development.

We hope that everyone will find this issue informative.

Sincerely,

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TRENDS SHAPING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN THE OECD AND KAZAKHSTAN: KEY MESSAGES FROM STARTING STRONG VI REPORT

In 2020, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) released the next Starting Strong VI report dedicated to early childhood education and care. This report reviews the findings from the Quality beyond Regulations and the first Teaching and Learning International Survey in preschool education TALIS Starting Strong that was conducted in 2018 in 14 OECD countries (the results have been published stage by stage since 2020). The OECD gave recommendations on how to improve the policy in early childhood education and care. The findings and analysis of data on pre-school education in Kazakhstan are provided below.

Recognition of the value of early childhood education and care. Research in education including the large-scale OECD project "Quality beyond Regulations" highlighted the significance of early childhood education and care. It has positive short-term effects (contributes to the development of social skills and interests in children) and long-term impact on the holistic development of children in the future. A longitudinal study in the United Kingdom found out that attendance of ECEC settings for longer was associated with better academic performance and highly developed social and emotional skills. Those children who attended ECEC settings are more likely to pursue a higher academic education than a vocational training pathway. Meta-analysis of studies in Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Spain and USA also revealed the benefits of attending ECEC, especially, public institutions with appropriate funding.

High-quality ECEC available to everyone allows to detect possible physical or mental issues at an early stage and take immediate measures. An average share of inclusive ECEC in Kazakhstan has recently shown positive dynamics but remains quite low (29% in 2019).

A higher share of private institutions. Although OECD member countries are increasingly aware of the significance of early childhood education and care, funding still remains low. On average, OECD countries

spent 0.86% of gross domestic product (GDP) on ECEC compared with 1.46% and 1.95% of GDP on primary and secondary education respectively. As a result, there is a shortage of personnel as evidenced by TALIS Starting Strong data. The questionnaire participants reported stress associated with a large number of children in groups and the need to substitute for absent colleagues. An educator, in turn, lacks time and resources to involve in professional development programmes and courses. The analysis of the state programme for the development of education and science for 2020–2025 shows that about 54% of educators do not have a qualification category.

The deficit of state funding for early childhood education and care is compensated with private investments. The size of private investments in ECEC is relatively higher than in primary and secondary education. For example, every third child in OECD countries goes to a private early childhood institution while every tenth child goes to a private primary school. Two-thirds or more of children aged between 3 and 6 years old attend private institutions in Australia, Ireland, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand.

Low level of state funding for early childhood education increases the demand for private investment, in particular, in the southern regions of Kazakhstan (the cities of Almaty and Shymkent, Turkestan, Almaty and Kyzylorda oblasts) where more than half of children go to private ECEC settings while in Pavlodar and North Kazakhstan oblasts the share is less than 10%. In this regard, it is important to monitor private institutions in terms of services and access to education.

Coverage of all social and age groups. Numerous studies reveal that children should be widely covered with early childhood education. The Strategic Development Plan of Kazakhstan 2025 aims to reach 80% and in 2019, Kazakhstan was close to the mark reaching 78.3%. It is important for Kazakhstan as well as for the OECD countries to reach children aged between 1 and 3 years old since a significant proportion of Kazakhstani children (57%) in this age group is still not involved in early childhood education and care. This issue requires a comprehensive approach since

neither in the OECD nor in other countries there is a single curriculum for the education and care of the youngest children. Moreover, with limited funding and early childhood education focused on preschool children, providing high-quality services for children aged between 1 and 3 years old can become a serious challenge for the government taking into account large investments in ECEC.

As with primary and secondary education, it is important to consider the socioeconomic status of families who need ECEC services. Early childhood education and care that takes into account characteristics of disadvantaged children can provide them with an opportunity to develop critical skills such as communication and thinking.

OECD countries make great steps to eliminate disparities in access to preschool education. Thus, the share of advantaged families who attended preschool institutions is at least 10%. In Kazakhstan, children from 3 to 6 years old across many regions reach 100%, however, it does not reflect the possible difference in the quality of services provided for children from different socioeconomic strata. Meanwhile, the number of children in groups per teacher should be considered, since it affects the quality of education.

Curriculum and transition from ECEC to school. As compared with other levels of education, ECEC lacks a consistent approach to the development of a curriculum, especially, as mentioned earlier, for teaching children aged between 1 and 3 years old. In some countries, education and care are not provided for children of early age. For older children, there can be a few competing curricula at once.

One of the most important criteria in the curriculum development is a smooth and painless transition from a preschool institution to a primary school. It is especially highlighted in the state programme for the development of education and science for 2020-2025. The aim is to determine cross-cutting key competencies that will be accumulated throughout the entire educational pathway of a student. However, the only key competence defined in this programme is trilingual education. Ensuring

effective continuity of curricula requires a comprehensive approach on the part of the government and stakeholders.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. First of all, it is worth noting that in contrast to primary and secondary education where the countries' responses to the pandemic were systematized, there are significant differences in the measures taken in early childhood education. Some countries have completely suspended ECEC and others proceeded to provide it just for children of critical workers and only 42% considered it essential to continue the learning process in a distance format. The closure of ECEC settings has deprived children of the opportunity to contact each other and develop basic socialization skills that distance learning is not able to compensate. The low level of funding and shortage of personnel are also critical since educators may leave this area and it may lead to further issues associated with personnel.

The measures taken by countries also differ in terms of support given to ECEC institutions and their employees, and directly to parents. The pandemic helped people realize that the important component of high-quality early childhood education and care was interaction built between ECEC settings and parents. It is especially important to support disadvantaged parents as research shows the correlation between the status of mothers and attendance of ECEC institutions. The rise in unemployment among the most vulnerable population will cause the outflow of children and deprive them of an opportunity to take advantage of pre-school education.

Sources:

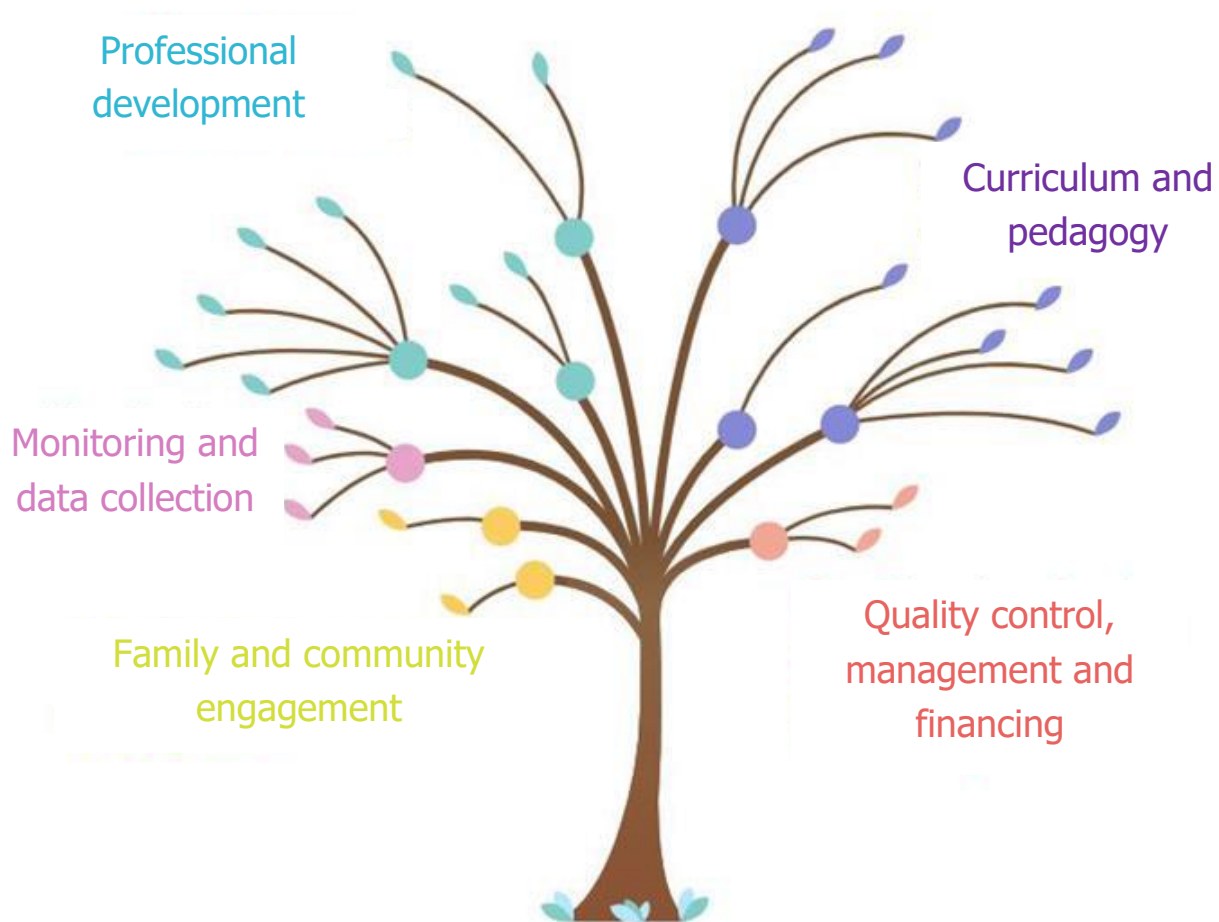
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SUCCESSFUL EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE POLICY: 5 MAJOR AREAS OF FOCUS

In *Starting Strong VI*, the OECD presented the results of the *Quality Beyond Regulations* policy questionnaire. One of the most remarkable results of this study is an educational policy tree. It presents the main policy directions in ECEC to support and develop it comprehensively.



The tree and comprehensive approach to ECEC consider five major areas: curriculum and pedagogy; professional development; quality standards, management and financing; monitoring and data; family and community engagement. Although the primary and secondary education policy reaches most of these areas and their components, some aspects are unique and typical just for early childhood education.

The five "branches" represent the most significant tools for creating a quality ECEC system that would contribute to a favorable environment and development of children.

Curriculum and pedagogy are the most important aspects in the effective organization of early childhood education along with professional development. Therefore, they should be included in the basic programme for primary school teachers and the content of training and professional development courses.

One of the objectives in the curriculum development was to maintain a balance and ensure continuity between different age groups taking into account their needs. For this reason, different countries (including Kazakhstan) divide children into the following age categories: 1-3 and 3-6 years old.

The curriculum should incorporate learning objectives for the development of children including fundamental skills (communication and curiosity), values and principles (for example, respect and equality), and traditional subjects (Art and Science). It should also be aimed at the development of cognitive and socio-emotional skills. Moreover, curriculum developers should consider the needs of all stakeholders ranging from educators to parents.

Educators should have autonomy so they could use different learning methods and teaching approaches. Meanwhile, they should follow the guidelines and recommendations.

Professional development. The organization of professional development in ECEC is comparable with other levels of education. Both the training at university and continuous professional development of teaching staff matter. The training courses should be designed to develop a wide range of knowledge and skills and provide educators with an opportunity to move from theory to practice. In addition, the OECD suggests that quality accreditation mechanisms should be introduced to determine teachers' qualifications to provide quality education.

Professional development of ECEC managers is also required to create proper working conditions and a favorable environment for both employees and children. ECEC managers should effectively perform two functions: administrative and pedagogical and build effective communication with employees, parents and local community.

Quality control, management and financing. One of the strategic financing objectives in ECEC should be to ensure a stable influx of personnel and competitive wage. Financing should be organized within clearly defined standards that take into account the physical needs of children.

Countries should determine the level of autonomy that ECEC managers can have. It will help adjust the early childhood education to the immediate needs of students.

Monitoring and data. ECEC settings should be monitored from three perspectives: quality of education, implementation of the curriculum and personnel training. They should use an integrated approach to monitoring and its frequency depends on the issues and risks affecting the quality of services provided. The monitoring tools include inspection, assessment and peer assessment of educators, surveys, portfolios, and evaluation of students.

Family and community engagement is a more important component in ECEC than at other levels of education. Parents should also be involved in the development of the curriculum that will include effective methods of communication with parents, and approaches to the comprehensive development of children. Moreover, the training courses for ECEC educators and managers should incorporate such components as engagement of the family and community in learning and care.

Sources:

OECD (2021). Starting Strong VI: Supporting Meaningful Interactions in Early Childhood Education and Care, Starting Strong, OECD Publishing, Paris.

<https://quality-ecec.oecd.org/policy-levers>