Introduction

This introductory chapter outlines the background of the Early Childhood Education Study (ECES). It sets out the policy study aims and research questions, and describes the ECES two phase research design. It also identifies the intentions and outputs for the policy module, and the methodology of the policy questionnaire. Finally, it gives basic information on the participating countries and briefly describes how the data in this report are to be presented.

The results discussed in this report are based on data collected in the context of the IEA's ECES. The purpose of this study is to explore, describe and analyze ECE provision and its role in preparing children for the learning and social demands of school and wider society. In particular, the study aims to provide meaningful information for countries, states and jurisdictions across the world on the relationships between policy context, early child education structures and processes, parents' views and expectations, and child outcomes.

The ECES explores ECE policy and its implementation in eight countries. 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 examples of ECE policy in action in a range of diverse contexts.

The ECES is designed to be conducted in two phases. The first phase of ECES is intended to form the policy context for early child education in the participating countries. As this varies considerably across participating countries, it is planned to feed the outcomes of Phase 1 into the development of the methods to be used in Phase 2. Phase 2 of the study is designed to collect information on children's competencies at the end of early childhood education complemented by contextual data on ECE settings, leaders/ managers, practitioners and parents. While this report discusses the outcomes of Phase 1 (that is, the results of the policy questionnaire), the future implementation of Phase 2 of the study depends on the educational policy and interests of the participating countries.

The Policy Questionnaire

The results presented in this report were collected using a policy questionnaire addressed to and completed by the National Research Coordinator (NRC) of the eight participating countries between November 2014 and March 2015.

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 level. Furthermore, its purpose was to capture transnational comparisons in policy and systems, and document key policy changes underway and planned.

More precisely, the policy questionnaire aimed to gather data for the following overarching research questions:

- What are the policy aims for ECE systems?
- What are the key features of ECE systems?

- What are the main delivery models and providers of ECE?
- What are access and participation levels for children in ECE?
- How is quality regulated and assured in ECE?
- What are the expectations for child outcomes from ECE?
- What key changes are underway or planned in ECE?
- What are the variations in ECE policy, systems, provision, access, quality regulation and child outcomes between countries?

Definition of Early Childhood Education (ECE) Programs

In the context of the 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 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).

While ECED programs are designed for younger children *usually* in the age range birth to three years, PPE programs are aimed for children *usually* from age three years to the start of primary education (ISCED Level 1). In some education systems, the pre-primary education programs may take place during the first stage or cycle of compulsory education and may be located in a primary school. For example, kindergarten in the United States is typically thought of as the beginning of primary schooling, but is included in ISCED level 0. If programs fulfil the criteria for ISCED Level 0, they are covered in this study.

In some countries, pre-primary programs may be located in a primary school and might be linked to ISCED Level 1, while in other countries these years before entry to primary schooling are not part of the educational system. In addition, ECE is often viewed as noncompulsory and can be more locally determined, thus being subject to much more variation in its structures and systems internationally than schooling systems. ECE is also more likely to be devolved to nongovernment bodies, such as religious charities and other private, voluntary and independent providers.

In summary, this report includes:

1. public, private and voluntary ECE provision for children in ISCED Level 0 that falls within a national regulatory framework, i.e. has to comply with a set of rules, minimum standards and/or undergo accreditation procedures;
2. publicly-subsidized and non-subsidized private and voluntary provision;
3. the most common types of ECE provision.

The report does not cover:

1. unregulated home-based provision;
2. settings that operate before or after the main ECE provision, e.g. breakfast clubs, after school clubs and holiday programs;
3. "specialist" provision, e.g. programs integrated into hospitals, orphanages or other such institutions;
4. pilot or experimental ECE provision.

Participating Countries

Eight countries participated in the first phase of the ECES and submitted data on their ECE policy for analysis and interpretation: namely, Chile, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Italy, Poland, the Russian Federation and the United States (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The study countries

Methodology of the Policy Questionnaire

Data for the policy report was gathered using an online policy questionnaire that collected information on the wider policy context for ECE (from birth to the age of primary schooling) from each participating country. One questionnaire per country was completed by the NRC (or a country designate) to provide national level evidence; this included questions on:

- Background information about whole educational system
- Public policy
- Delivery models and providers
- Participation and enrollment
- Supporting quality in ECE
- Expectations for child outcomes

Data were collected primarily at a national (country) level but, in questions where there was a need for subnational variations to be acknowledged, data were recorded at either national and/or subnational (state or regional) level. In addition, where there was a wide variation in policy or system provision data were provided that indicated a typical "mid-range" situation, a typical "maximum" situation and a typical "minimum" situation to convey a sense of the range of variation. Lack of accurate data was also recorded.

The policy questionnaire was completed using official documents (recognized by central/government level authorities) as the primary source of information, and also drew on the expertise of ECE specialists and educators as required. In countries where responsibility for ECE was at a regional or local level, information was gathered that was sufficiently representative and the regions covered were specified. In such cases,

information was provided on an "average" situation across regions, or "maximum/minimum" situations were indicated. If there were no central data sources or evidence, information about the most common practices was required, supported by references to surveys, analyses and reports. The information provided was the most recent available, and where possible referred to the period 2013/2014.

Structure of the Policy Report

The policy report begins with a background chapter that gives an overview of the ECE and care systems and structures in the eight participating countries. The main body of the report is then organized in five key sections matching the main areas as addressed in the policy questionnaire. In each of the sections, data from all participating countries are collated and emerging findings are identified, as set out below:

1. **Public policy:** The aim of this section is to provide information on stated policy aims; the location of responsibility for ECE; the legislative status and statutory entitlements for ECE and care; the statutory entitlements to parental leave and pay; and key policy changes in ECE.

2. **Delivery models and providers:** The aim of this section is to provide information on policy implementation, such as provider types for different ages of children; whether different providers target different groups of parents/primary care-givers; funding strategies; and transition points and practices and the relationship of early care and education to the school system.

3. **Access and participation:** The aim of this section is to provide information on the percentage of the preschool population accessing ECE; participation by child characteristics; the diversity of provision and cultural responsiveness; the cost to parents, subsidies, and early intervention programs.

4. **Supporting quality in ECE:** The aim of this section is to provide information on the regulatory environment; staff qualifications and training; group size and ratios; health, safety, and child protection; ECE curriculum guidance; quality assurance, accreditation, inspection, reporting and accountability.

5. **Expectations for child outcomes:** The aim of this section is to provide information on expectations for child outcomes for different age groups, whether these are recorded, and how outcome data are used in policy and practice.

The report concludes with a set of individual country profiles, and thorough consideration of the central themes identified as critical for ECE policymakers.