

CHAPTER 3:

Overview of the Structures of the Early Childhood Education and Care Systems in the Participating Countries

The IEA ECES policy report focuses on eight countries that participated in an iterative development and review process to create and evaluate the data presented in this report. It should be noted that, although all of the participating countries continue to further develop their ECE provision and have their own systemic approach to delivering these services, each country is also subject to global demands and developments in ECE, which are impacting on their direction of policy travel. This diverse and dynamic context has led to a complexity in the current structures and systems for ECE in many countries. To set the results of the policy analysis into context, it is important first to understand the basic structure of the ECE system in each of the participating countries.

The aim of this chapter therefore is to provide a short overview of the main features of ECE systems operating in 2014/2015 in the participating countries. It is hoped that this information will enable readers to compare and contrast the different systemic and structural approaches taken by the countries in the study and establish a basis for making transnational comparisons in subsequent chapters. This chapter sets out the structure of the systems, with a particular emphasis on the year before entry into ISCED Level 1.

Further information about educational structures and systems in each of the participating countries can be found in the individual Country Profiles provided in Chapter 9.

Structure of ECE Systems

Based on the definition of ECE provision as outlined previously and the further distinction into two levels, there are two basic ECE structures:

- a split phase structure, in which provision is delivered in separate settings for younger and older children; and
- a unitary system, where younger and older children are catered for in integrated settings.

In split phase systems, there is a divide between “child care” and “early education,” with the early levels being more care and development oriented and the later levels being increasingly oriented towards education. Sometimes an increased emphasis on preparing children for the transition to primary schooling can be found during the final year of PPE programs.

In unitary systems, provision is organized as an integrated offer catering for the whole age phase. Priorities on care and education are more balanced and there are no structural transfers between settings until the children start primary school.

Seven of the eight participating countries have a split ECE system, with either two or sometimes three levels, depending on the age of the children (Figure 2). Estonia is the only country of the eight participating countries with a fully unitary system of education and care for children from birth to primary school entry. The Czech Republic, Italy and

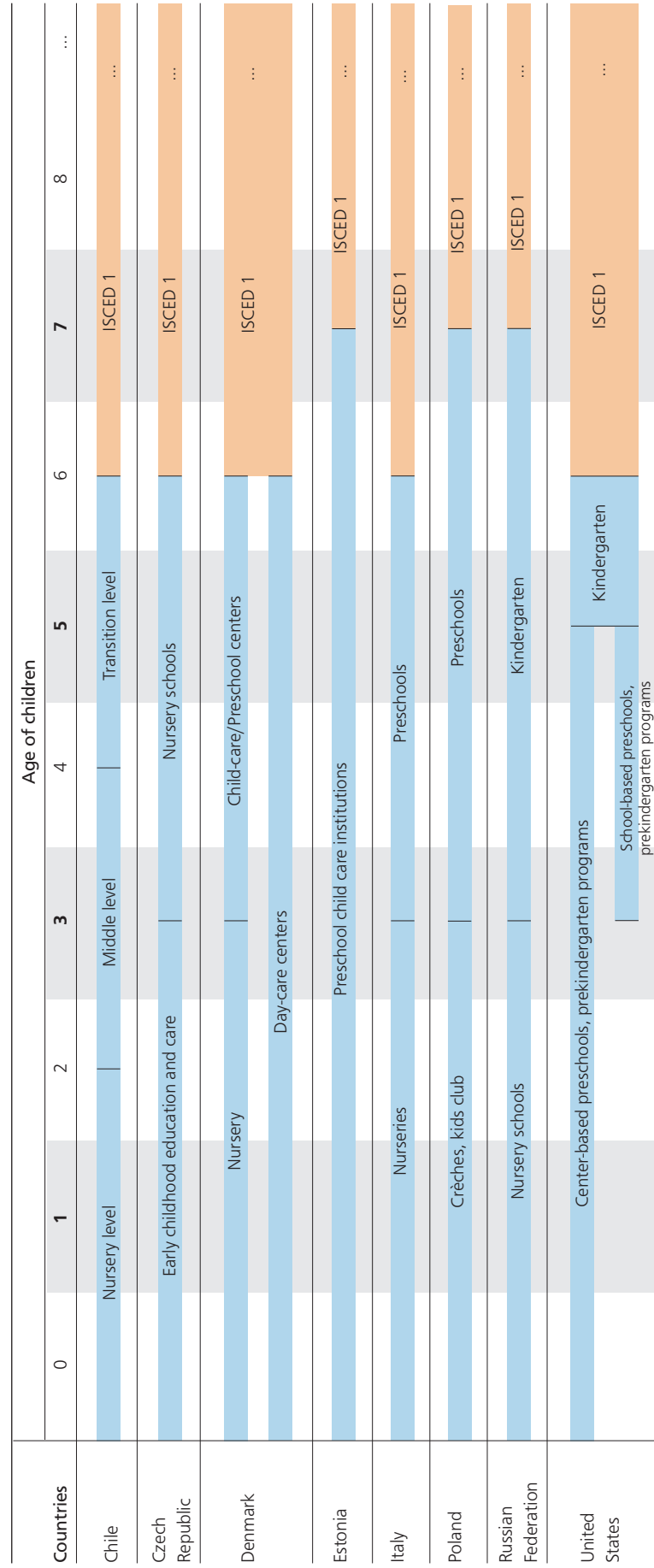
Poland have a clear distinction between provision for children aged under three years (ECED) and provision for children from three years to the start of primary education (PPE). Chile has three levels of ECE provision based on the age of the children: a Nursery level for children from birth to two years, a Middle level for children aged two to four years, and a Transition level for children aged four to six years. Denmark, the Russian Federation and the United States also offer a form of unitary provision for children from birth till school entry, where settings cater for the whole ISCED Level 0 age range in one setting, and these run in parallel to their split system and extend the system structure options. All study countries reported that there is also regulated and unregulated home-based provision throughout the age phase.

The year before entry to primary school (ISCED Level 1) is of particular interest in this study and structurally this year is the final year of ISCED Level 0. In all countries, ECED provision and most of the PPE programs are noncompulsory, although the final year of PPE provision is compulsory in Chile and Poland. In Chile, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Poland, and the Russian Federation, access to PPE in the year before entry to primary schooling is viewed as a universal entitlement. In Italy, it is reported that universal access is promoted, although children might not have the right to a place. It is noncompulsory in the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Italy, the Russian Federation and the United States. In the United States, it is also compulsory; however, in 45 states and the District of Columbia (DC), school districts are required to provide education (i.e. kindergarten programs) in the final year of ISCED Level 0. The age of the child during this final year before transfer to primary school varies, with it being five to six years of age in Chile, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Italy and the United States. In Estonia and Poland, the age of the children in this year is six to seven years and, in the Russian Federation, it could be at any time between the ages of six-and-a-half years to eight years, according to the school readiness of the child. It should be noted that, as from the school year 2004/2005, all six-year-old children in Poland attended a nursery school (*przedszkole*) or preschool class (*oddziały przedszkolne*) located in primary schools, as the [School Education Act](#) (ISN: POL-1991-L-92248) and subsequent revisions introduced a one-year obligatory preschool preparation.

In all eight of the study countries, this final year of ISCED Level 0 is under the auspices of the Ministry/Department of Education and is usually sited in a form of nursery school or preschool (*Kindergarten* or *Second Transition Level* in Chile; *Materska Skol* in the Czech Republic; *Aldersintegrerede Institutioner* or *Bornehaver* in Denmark; *Koolioelne Lasteasutus* in Estonia; *Schola dell'Infanzia* in Italy; *Oddziały Przedszkolne* in Poland; *Kindergarten* in the United States). In the Russian Federation, this final year can be home-based, center-based, or on primary school sites, all of which are officially approved to offer the pre-primary year.

The number of years covered by the ISCED Level 0 age phase varies between the participating countries ([Figure 2](#)). It ranges from six years in Chile, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Italy, Poland and the United States, to up to seven years in Estonia and the Russian Federation. This provides ECE (ISCED Level 0) with a potentially longer time span of a child's life to cover than any other ISCED-defined phase in the educational system, which indicates the significance of this phase of policy for governments in terms of potential impact.

Figure 2: Overview of ISCED Level 0 in the eight participating countries



Key:
■ ISCED level 0
■ ISCED level 1

In the countries offering a split system, ECED provision usually covers the first three years of life and PPE covers the adjacent years until the age of transfer to primary schooling. Chile is an exception to this as each of Chile's three ECE phases cover shorter time spans. In the participating countries offering a unitary system, the provision can cover up to seven years.

Depending on each country's ECE system, the number of system transition points varies as children progress through the ECE (ISCED Level 0) system to primary schooling (ISCED Level 1). In countries with a unitary ECE system (Estonia), the child may encounter as few as two transition points (entry from home to the ECE provision and the transfer from ECE provision to primary schooling). The United States system varies, with children encountering as few as two transition points, but in some cases many more.

In countries with a split ECE system, there can be either three or four transition points, depending on the number of stages in ISCED Level 0. The Czech Republic, Denmark, Poland, and the Russian Federation have three transition points: entry from home to ECED provision; transfer from ECED to PPE provision; and transfer from PPE provision to primary schooling. In Chile, four system transition points are possible: entry from home to first ISCED Level 0 provision; transfer from first ISCED Level 0 to second ISCED Level 0 provision; transfer from second ISCED Level 0 to third ISCED Level 0 (pre-primary) provision; and transfer from third ISCED Level 0 to ISCED Level 1 (primary schooling).

Besides these transition points provided by the structure of an ECE system, a child may encounter additional transition experiences if they change setting or attend multiple settings within an age phase. Systemic structures that create multiple settings at each age phase can also mean that, in a single day, a child may experience different physical environments, behavior regimes, friendship groups, curricula, and pedagogies. The evidence from the participating countries reveals that many young children in these countries are experiencing multiple system transitions during their first six to seven years of life and this pattern is very different to children at later stages in the education system where entry to primary or secondary schooling tends to mean entry to one setting for the duration of that age phase.

Enrollment of children in early education and care services in each age phase varies significantly between the study countries, and also changes significantly within countries as the children move from phase to phase (Table 1). For children under three years (ECED), the highest enrollment rate is found in Denmark (67%) and the lowest in the Czech Republic (5.0%). There may be a number of reasons for this variability between the study countries at this age, but the level of entitlement to parental leave in the study countries may be a factor in enrollment levels. Between three to five years (PPE) the highest enrollment rate is in Denmark (97.7%) and Italy (95.1%), and the lowest in the United States (65.7%). Again, there may be a number of reasons for these differences, such as the limited availability of provision in some communities and the ease of access to ECE for all children. The significant increase in enrollment of children in ECE as they move between ISCED Level 0 age phases is clear in all study countries (Table 1).

Table 1: Percentage enrollment in formal care and preschool by age phase in study countries

Country	Enrollment in formal care and preschool by age phase (%)	
	Under 3 years	3 to 5 years
Chile	17.6 ^a	71.2
Czech Republic	5.0	76.4
Denmark	67.0	97.7
Estonia	23.3	89.6
Italy	22.8	95.1
Poland	11.2	69.2
Russian Federation	–	91.7 ^b
United States	24.9 ^c	60.9 ^d

Key:

– No data available

Source:

OECD Family Database: PF3.2 Enrolment in child care and preschool (<http://www.oecd.org/social/family/database.htm>). Year of reference: 2012.

Explanatory notes:

It should be noted that data in this table may vary slightly from data presented later for some countries where the data sources differed (Table 9), and so the calculation of enrollment levels may have been differently achieved.

Country specific notes:

^a Year of reference: 2011 (no data available for 2012).

^b Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2014). Year of reference: 2013.

^c Year of reference: 2012, numbers are provided by the United States NRC. ECED (under 3 years) includes enrollment in center-based ECE and licensed home-based ECE.

^d Year of reference: 2012, numbers are provided by the United States NRC. PPE (3–5 years) includes enrollment in center-based ECE, licensed home-based ECE, and kindergarten.

Parental Leave

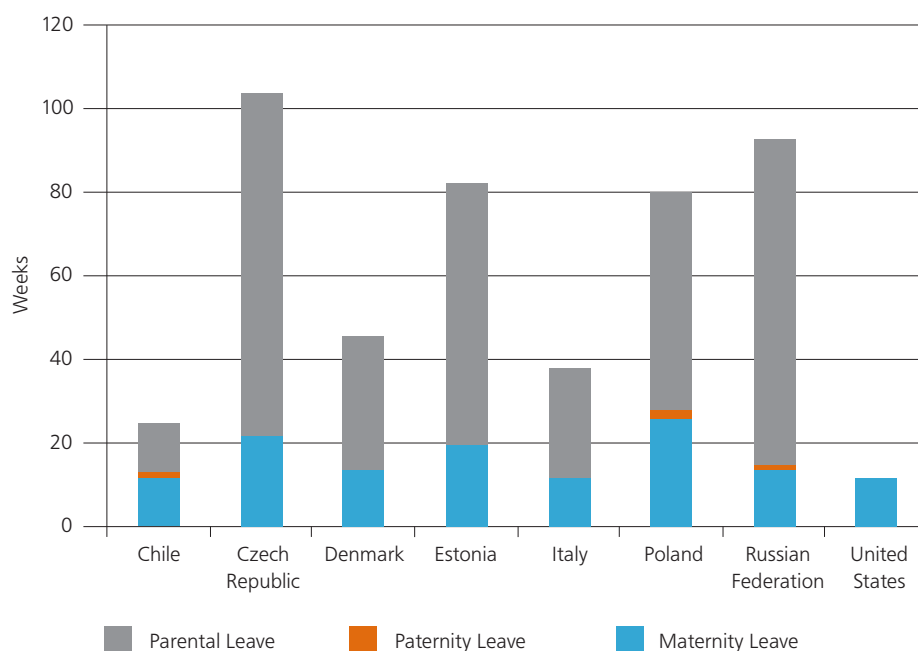
The provision of parental leave during ISCED Level 0 forms a significant element and impacts on most ECE systems as its extent and nature will shape other provision within that system. This is particularly the case during the ECED phase, where ECE provision is often not required until later if the parental leave entitlement is more generous and universally accessed. Although this element of the system is a result of wider social and economic policies, it is complementary to ECE policies and both influences, and is influenced by, the ECE system and so is relevant in this context of this report.

There are usually three types of parental leave described in ECE policy statements. The first is **Maternity leave**, which is normally available for mothers and has two elements: prenatal (before birth) and postnatal (after birth) and provides leave entitlement for some weeks before the child's birth and also for some weeks after the birth of the child. **Paternity leave** is normally for fathers and is a shorter leave entitlement that is usually taken directly after the birth of the child. Parental leave follows the end of maternity and paternity leave and is for a defined, and sometimes extended period once other leave entitlements have been used. Usually either the mother or the father can take this entitlement.

The scope and duration of parental leave varies from country to country within the study, with some countries offering substantially more entitlement than others (Figure 3). Sometimes the parental leave is fully paid or partially compensated and sometimes it is not (unpaid). In some cases it is offered to mothers only (maternity leave), sometimes

to fathers (paternity leave), sometimes to both, and sometimes to either parent (parental leave). All countries in the study, except the United States, have a universal and statutory entitlement to parental leave during ISCED Level 0.

Figure 3: Length of postnatal maternity, paternity and parental leave (in weeks)



Source:

European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat (2014). Year of reference: 2013.

Explanatory notes:

The figures indicate the accumulated length of the three types of leave in calendar weeks (one year consists of 52 weeks).

Country specific notes:

For Chile, Italy, Poland, Russian Federation, and United States data were provided by the NRCs.

United States: Up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave per year including parental leave in all organizations with 50 or more employees.

Russian Federation: An extended maternity leave of 17–22 weeks is available for twins or other multiple births.

In summary, Chile, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Poland and the Russian Federation have universal paid maternity leave, ranging from 10 weeks to 26 weeks after birth, although in most countries this entitlement can be extended with reduced payment. In Italy, maternity leave is not universal, but targeted (only for employees, and not for self-employed mothers). The most generous total parental leave entitlements are found in the Czech Republic (82 weeks); the Russian Federation (78 weeks) and Estonia (62 weeks), and the shortest (apart from the United States) is found in Chile (24 weeks). Poland and the Russian Federation also offer unpaid maternity leave that can extend the paid entitlement for up to four years. The level of compensation paid to parents on leave also varies between the participating countries, with some offering full salary compensation and others offering only partial compensation.

It should be noted that although there is not a statutory entitlement in the United States, there is the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA; US Department of Labor, 1993). The FMLA provides certain employees with up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave per year, which includes parental leave. It also requires that group health benefits are

maintained during the leave. The FMLA applies to all public agencies, all public and private elementary and secondary schools, and companies with 50 or more employees.

In Chile, the Czech Republic, Denmark, and Estonia, the maternity leave entitlement is offered as a leave entitlement that either the mother or father can take. In addition, there is a range of other leave entitlements and rights offered in some countries during both ISCED Level 0 phases, including additional paid or unpaid parental leave under certain circumstances, e.g. child illness, health needs, special needs and disabled children, school meetings (the Czech Republic, Denmark, Italy, Poland, and the Russian Federation), and the right for working mothers to regular work breaks for breastfeeding or feeding young children (Chile, Italy, and Poland). More detail on parental leave entitlements is provided in Chapter 4.

Final Remarks

When reflecting on the information presented in the rest of this report it should be noted that, as the United States is a federal system, and ECE may be a federal, state or local level responsibility, there is a wide local variation in the ECE systems and structures. This means that, in the context of this report, much of the data from the United States is based on maximum and/or minimum requirements, and thus caution should be exercised when making country-wide generalizations about policy, systems and structures from these data.

It should also be noted that, in July 2015, Italy passed a general education system reform. This law foresees new legislation for the reunification of the split system in order to establish an integrated or unitary ISCED Level 0 system serving children from birth to six years.

In summary, this chapter presents important information that should be taken into account when considering the transnational policy analysis presented in the proceeding chapters. Many system characteristics, such as historical structural divisions, age range coverage, wider social policies, goal orientation of provision, and the number and nature of transition points can affect the challenges associated with developing ECE policy in the contemporary world. Beyond that, clearly the length of access to ECE before entry to ISCED Level 1 varies among countries. The considerable system variation across the eight participating countries summarized in this chapter provides a complex backdrop for considering the alternative possibilities for developing ECE policies for the future, which are set out in the rest of this report.

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