

It takes more than a village. Effective Early Childhood Development, Education and Care services require competent systems

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There is a global consensus about the importance of high quality early childhood development, education and care (ECDEC) programmes. Increasingly, the systemic characteristics of early childhood programmes are recognised by policy makers and international bodies. This ‘systemic turn’ has created new challenges. Education, primary healthcare, nutrition, children’s rights, social cohesion, equality and other aspects that contribute to the ECDEC system are often grounded in different, and not necessarily matching, conceptualisations, understandings, terminologies and accepted practices. Bringing them together in a *Competent System* (Urban et al, 2012) requires coordinated approaches to governance, resourcing, professional preparation, and evaluation that embrace complexity.

Challenge

Early childhood development, education and care (ECDEC) has rightly gained a prominent place on national and international policy agendas. In recent years a broad global consensus has emerged that ensuring access to high quality early childhood development, education and care programmes is one of the most effective policy tools countries can employ to impact both individual and collective (i.e. national) well-being and educational achievement. Children learn and make significant experiences from birth, long before they enter formal schooling.

The importance of the earliest years of human life as a ‘critical period’ (Woodhead, 1996) is recognised not least through the inclusion of early childhood in the frameworks of lifelong learning, encompassing all stages of education, in Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). One of the targets of Strategic Development Goal 4 (Education) is to ensure, by 2030, *‘that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education’* (<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals>)^[1]. While there is a strong focus on formal education in SDG 4, it comes with a clear understanding that educational achievement and lifelong learning are embedded in, and dependent on, contextual factors that impact a child’s holistic development from the very beginning of their life.

However, early childhood development, education and care programmes don’t exist in a vacuum. The fact that they are embedded in complex social, cultural and political systems and, despite being of global concern, the upbringing of young children is an inevitably *local* practice. This raises fundamental questions that can only be addressed through democratic debate of all stakeholders within countries, and at all levels of government. As John Bennett, writing for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) puts it, early childhood policy is *‘deeply influenced by underlying assumptions about childhood and education: what does childhood mean in this society? How should young children be reared and educated? What are the purposes of education and care, of early childhood institutions? What are the functions of early childhood staff?’* (OECD, 2001, p. 63)

Moreover, caring for, and educating young children comprises physical, emotional, cognitive, social, cultural and spiritual aspects from birth (Cardini et al., 2017).

It has to be welcomed that the systemic characteristics of early childhood programmes are increasingly recognised by policy makers and international bodies.

Countries in both the global north and south are increasingly adopting policy frameworks that address early childhood from a holistic perspective (Cardini & Guevara, in press). Examples include the *European Union Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care* (Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014) and the *Comprehensive Care Strategy De Cero a Siempre* in Colombia (Republic of Colombia, 2013). These documents (and similar approaches in a growing number of countries) urgently require new and effective approaches to governance, resourcing, professional preparation and evaluation at all levels of the early childhood system. They also point to the need – and possibility – for shared learning from, with, and between policy and practice initiatives in the global south and north.

This need for a ‘systemic turn’ has created new challenges. Education, primary healthcare, nutrition, children’s rights, social cohesion, equality and other aspects that contribute to the ECD/ECEC system are often grounded in different, and not necessarily matching, conceptualisations, understandings, terminologies and accepted practices. The need to coordinate not only within one professional system (early education) but across several professional and disciplinary systems in ECD adds to the complexity of the task. Bringing them together in a *Competent System* (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2012) that ensure practices, knowledge and orienting values are shared between actors with a wide range of professional and disciplinary backgrounds, and across all levels of the system requires coordinated approaches to governance, resourcing, professional preparation, and evaluation that embrace complexity. This policy brief identifies such possibilities and suggests a course of action that should be taken by governments of G20 countries in order to build effective, holistic, and sustainable support systems for young children and their families.

^[1] As the 2017 SDG report states, ‘Pre-primary education is, in fact, considered an important part of a holistic and robust educational system’ (United Nations, 2017, p. 24). Participation in ‘pre-primary or primary education in the year prior to the official entrance age to primary school’ (ibid) has increased to around 9 out of 10 children in Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean and North America; the rate in the least developed countries remains much lower (4 out of 10).

Proposal

Supporting the systemic turn in early childhood development, education and care

The acknowledgement that access to high quality early childhood development and care services from birth is an important precondition for educational achievement (and therefore a critical factor for achieving SDG 4) is supported by a strong body of research evidence and, increasingly, by policy makers and international ECD/ECE advocates (World Bank, 2011).

Increasingly, countries in both the global south and north are beginning to adopt *systemic* approaches to developing early childhood development, education and care services. Examples include programmes that are designed to provide health, nutrition, early education as well as a range of other supports for young children from birth, their families and communities. Programmes are framed, at policy level, by intersectoral and interdepartmental approaches to governance, implementation and evaluation. For instance, the European Union has adopted *Council Conclusions* that emphasise the need for *systemic approaches to professionalising the early childhood workforce* in its 28 member states (Council of the European Union, 2011). In Latin America, some countries are developing new, intersectoral and holistic public policy approaches to early childhood development, education and care systems, e.g. *Uruguay Crece Contigo* (<http://crececontigo.opp.gub.uy/>), *Chile Crece Contigo* (<http://www.crececontigo.gob.cl/>) and *De Cero a Siempre* (<http://www.deceroasiempre.gov.co/>). Moreover, the **World Bank**, as part of its SABER initiative (*Systems Approach for Better Education Results* – <http://saber.worldbank.org/>), recognises that ‘ECE exists within a larger [social, cultural and political] context’ and points to the importance of coordinated ECD approaches that span ‘education, health, protections and social welfare’, requiring ‘both horizontal and vertical coordination’ (Powers & Paulsell, 2018). ^[1]

The increasing recognition that early childhood development programmes require systemic, cross-sectoral approaches (i.e. *Competent Systems*) in order to be effective has to be welcomed. However, such recognition will have to be matched with proactive measures at the levels of policy, practice, professional preparation and research.

Research into early childhood systems commissioned by the European Union has shown that *Competent Systems* (Urban, Vandenberg, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2011; Urban et al., 2012) require matching relationships, communication and coordination between all levels of an early childhood system:

- **Individual** (*educators, teachers, childcare workers etc.*)
- **Institutional** (*e.g. preschool settings*)
- **Inter-institutional** (*e.g. preschool settings and professional preparation, various child and family services in the community, practice and research*)
- **Governance** (*e.g. strategic planning, policy formulation, regulation, resourcing, implementation and evaluation*)

Relationships in and between the levels of a *Competent System* unfold in three interconnected dimensions:

- **Knowledge(s)**
- **Practice(s)**
- **Values**

At all levels of a *Competent System*, actors require a sound body of *knowledge* (e.g. about the purpose and aims of ECDEC, about children's rights, democracy, about the importance of addressing diversity, equality, and social justice). At present, individual and institutional actors with different roles and professional backgrounds often operate on the basis of distinct bodies of knowledge (e.g. pedagogical, medical, legal, administrative). Shared knowledge and understanding across the entire system is the precondition for the development of shared and matching *practices*. If, for instance, national policy frameworks expect practitioners to work with children and families in rights-based, non-discriminatory, culturally appropriate and participatory ways, matching practices are required by administrators, by local, regional and national policy makers, in professional preparation, evaluation etc. Systemic and rights-based practices (at all levels of the system) develop on the basis of shared orienting values. It is a crucial task to enable systematic encounters and democratic dialogue between all stakeholders in order to raise awareness of own and others' values, and to work towards a shared orientation towards rights, equality, and social justice for all children and families.

The need to coordinate not only within one professional system (early education) but across several professional and disciplinary systems in ECDEC adds to the complexity of the task. Education, primary healthcare, nutrition, children's rights, social cohesion, equality and other aspects that contribute to the ECD/ECEC system are often grounded in different, and not necessarily matching, conceptualisations, understandings, terminologies and accepted practices. Bringing them together in a *Competent System* requires targeted action at systems level that G20 governments should seek to provide.

G20 governments can and should take decisive action, taking a three-pronged approach: upporting the systemic turn in early childhood development, education and care

Initiate and support measures that make systemic approaches sustainable

In order to build sustainable and effective early childhood development, education and care services, G20 governments should:

1. Systematically develop national (i.e. State) policy frameworks and strategies that reach beyond electoral cycles and policies of a specific government. In order to be sustainable, the frameworks need to be strong enough to resist changes in government and administration;
2. proactively initiate, support and resource **multi-dimensional networks** of all actors involved in developing and providing ECD services at all levels of government: *local, regional and national*;
3. systematically take into account and build on the capabilities, desires, aspirations and needs of *all families and communities*. Integrated

3. systematically take into account and build on the capabilities, desires, aspirations and needs of all families and communities. Integrated ECDEC programmes should always aim at empowering and supporting, never at supplanting families;
4. always conceptualise and develop ECDEC programmes and services as *universal* services for all children and families in order to avoid stigmatisation of services targeted at disadvantaged groups as *services for the poor*. Within a universal system additional resources can and should then be allocated according to specific needs (*progressive universalism*);
5. support a *systemic qualification framework*: shared approaches to professional preparation, qualification, and continuous professional development across all practitioners and professionals working with young children, families and communities including (but not limited to) health workers, childcare workers, educators and teachers;
6. initiate processes to include the roles, competences and professional profile of *facilitators* for such networks into the professional role profiles of ECD/ECEC personnel, and initiate, commission and adequately resource '*systems research* [that] looks beyond evaluation of *individual* programs and policies (beyond "proximate causes" of child outcomes)' with a view on how to take systemic ECD/ECEC approaches to scale (Powers & Paulsell, 2018).

Initiate and support joint learning from and with forward-looking ECD/ECEC initiatives across G20 countries

ECDEC contexts and needs of diverse communities differ widely in individual countries and across the G20 group. Countries have developed a wealth of approaches to meet the needs of these diverse communities. While life situations of young children and their families and communities are always specific, concrete and local, there are also shared experiences across country contexts, and increasingly across the global south and global north. They include often traumatic experiences, e.g. with migration and displacement, marginalisation and exclusion of minority and indigenous groups, poverty, malnutrition and other issues affecting the wellbeing of young children. Even in the most affluent G20 countries an increasing number of children are growing up under conditions that some (arrogantly and entirely inappropriately) still call 'third world conditions'.

Many G20 countries in Europe and North America have attempted to integrate the early education and care aspects of early childhood services, albeit with varying levels of commitment and success. G20 countries in other regions, on the other hand, are operating on a much broader understanding of 'integrated services' that comprise health and well-being, nutrition, education, social cohesion and reconciliation, and equality. Excellent examples for such approaches can be found in Latin America.

Governments should draw on the wealth and diversity of policy and practice approaches within the G20 group and initiate systematic learning:

1. proactively initiate, support and resource **cross-national exchange** and networking between policy makers, practitioners, ECD advocates, and researchers in order to make successful and forward-looking approaches to holistic ECD/ECEC services in the global south accessible to stakeholders in other countries
2. encourage and equip these cross-national initiatives to systematically **explore** possible **shared understandings across differences**, with particular attention to questions of purpose and values that underpin approaches to ECD/ECEC services (e.g. public good vs. private responsibilities)
3. Enable and resource cross-national, cross-professional and cross-disciplinary initiatives to explore and develop shared bodies of knowledge, shared practices, and first and foremost **shared concepts and language**.

Embrace and support systemic approaches to ECD/ECEC governance, policy implementation, and evaluation

Competent Systems require new approaches to governance, policy implementation and evaluation. Overcoming traditional and often simplistic understandings remains a major challenge. Governance theory and systems theory have shown that top-down approaches to policy implementation don't work, and that the only way to influence ('govern') a complex system is through influencing and shaping its context (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; Willke, 1998). However, in ECD/ECEC the standard mode of governance often tends to follow an implicit top-down logic: Step one involves developing policy (often based on research evidence and/or internationally accepted 'best practice'); step two involves devising an implementation strategy ('from theory to practice'). This, ideally, is followed by step three which comprises measures to assess the effectiveness of the policy at ground level.

Not only are such models overly simplistic; they lend themselves to inappropriately and evidently ineffective technocratic approaches aimed at *managing* professional performance *regulating* autonomous professional practice and *measuring* only predetermined outcomes.

Competent Systems in ECD/ECEC thrive on the *agency* of all actors and stakeholders: children and families, practitioners, community leaders ('elders'), scholars, administrators, policy makers all shape the early childhood system through their everyday (inter-)actions. Inevitably, they all bring their own readings and interpretations of national policy frameworks into the picture. Herein lies a tremendous opportunity to make use of what the Brazilian author Roberto M. Unger (2005) calls *democratic experimentalism*. In consequence, G20 governments should proactively encourage the shift from linear ('top-down') approaches to ECD/ECEC policy making and implementation to circular processes that systematically connect policy development, implementation/interpretation at local and regional level with careful systemic evaluation that feeds back into the policy making cycle.

1. **Initiate**, resource and document **ECD/ECEC policy-practice cycles** that follow and build on successful documented examples, e.g. the *Centres of Innovation* programme in New Zealand and the current *Centres of Excellence* initiative in the Province of Ontario, Canada
2. From national government level, initiate and support the development of **local ('grassroots') ECD/ECEC Competent Systems** drawing on existing expertise, e.g. in Colombia (Ruta Integral de Atenciones)

Initiate, commission and **resource systemic, participatory evaluation** of local processes in the context of national ECD/ECEC policy frameworks.

[\[1\]](#) The existence of these policy frameworks marks important progress towards integrated systems. However, for them to affect sustainable change governments will have to address two main challenges: 1. Ensure a 'strong and equal relationship' (Bennett) between ECDEC and the compulsory school system. 2. Adopt participatory implementation strategies that avoid inappropriate 'top-down' processes. These are still prevalent in national policy documents, for instance in expressions like 'bajar la política a los territorios' (De Cero a Siempre).

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Existing Initiatives & Analysis