

Building early childhood systems

- ▷ New research findings identify strategies for countries building early childhood systems.
- ▷ Researchers examined six countries where early childhood education and care is advanced.
- ▷ Lessons include the need to respect contextual variations when addressing systemic elements.

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Many countries are rapidly expanding programmes for young children and families, but often these programmes are not high quality, equitably distributed, efficient or sustained. The USA's National Center for Education and the Economy supported scholars to carry out a comparative analysis of six countries with advanced early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems – Australia, England, Finland, Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea – to identify practices, strategies and mechanisms that can help leaders plan and implement contextually appropriate systems for their countries.¹

The findings, published in a series of *Early Advantage* studies, identified four key lessons.

1 Different contexts, different systems

In all the studied countries, ECEC systems reflect and affect two types of context:

- socio-cultural (values, beliefs, heritages, religions), and
- econo-political (demographics, social thinking/movements, government leadership, funding).

The socio-cultural context helps shape the design and pedagogical orientation of services. For example, when commitments to valuing, trusting, and providing for children are embedded in country ideologies – and sometimes reflected in their constitutions – services tend to be more universally available, and are accompanied by less governmental accountability. The econo-political context influences the availability of funding for ECEC systems and the trajectory and nature of their implementation. For example, in times of social crises when women are needed in the workforce, funding for childcare may increase dramatically.

The studied countries differed markedly based on their context. Finland, for instance, offers most services via large public-sector provision, so ECEC is almost fully subsidised by governmental funds; in contrast, the three Asian countries, which function under a market-driven fiscal strategy, rely more on private provision.

¹ Principal investigators of the project include Rebecca Bull (Singapore), Sharon Lynn Kagan (USA), Kristiina Kumpulainen (Finland), Mugyeong Moon (Republic of Korea), Nirmala Rao (Hong Kong), Kathy Sylva (England), and Collette Taylor (Australia). The six countries were chosen based on the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) performance rankings for mathematics and the Economist Intelligence Unit's *Starting Well* report (2012).

2 Many services, many strategies

Services for young children and their families are plentifully provided in the studied countries; these include home visiting programmes, paid family leave policies, subsidies for healthcare, parenting support, childcare, pre-kindergarten, teacher training, aid for at-risk families, and transition efforts.

Service provision in the countries shares three main characteristics. First, it starts early: most countries provide pre- and perinatal care to mothers and families. Second, provision continues throughout children's development, with age-appropriate programmes and transition efforts supporting infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and children in their earliest years of school. Third, the services are overseen by multiple ministries and typically diversely funded using both demand-side and supply-side strategies.

There are also notable differences in service provision. Some countries give more priority to children's earliest years, others to the years immediately preceding entry into formal school. The method and pace of organising, delivering and evaluating programmes and policies also vary.

Paid family leave is one of the services provided in the studied countries



3 Clear, common building blocks

Context matters: no country can adopt another country's system wholesale. Nonetheless, high-quality systems share common structural and functional elements. *The Early Advantage* (Kagan, 2018; Kagan and Landsberg, 2019) identified 15 systemic 'building blocks' and organised them into five pillars:

- strong policy foundations that recognise the unique context and needs of stakeholders and the public
- comprehensive services, sufficient funding, and coordinated governance mechanisms
- knowledgeable and supported teachers and families who can foster community through engagement and effective leadership
- informed, individualised and continuous pedagogy that promotes child-centred learning experiences
- effective data collection and utilisation to improve policies and programmes.

4 Plan for synergy

Most importantly, successful countries are strategic in their efforts to create structural and functional alignment among their ECEC services. They understand that work on one pillar or building block affects others, so they plan for synergies that strengthen the system as a whole.

For example, each of the studied countries has a national curriculum framework – a mandated policy or adopted guidance document outlining how and what children should learn. These frameworks align curricula across programmes, and often drive policies and practices associated with different building blocks or pillars (such as shaping professional development standards, establishing criteria for programme monitoring, and providing fiscal incentives). By planning for synergy among the pillars and essential building blocks, countries achieve greater philosophical and practical ECEC integration. Moreover, they achieve systemic outcomes – service quality, equity, sustainability, and efficiency – far more effectively and efficiently than by focusing on a single building block or pillar individually.

In conclusion, by sharing these four lessons and addressing the essential pillars and building blocks, countries can gain helpful and strategic insights into creating the kinds of effective ECEC systems their societies need and their children deserve.

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