

Tony Bertram & Chris Pascal (2016) Review of Early Childhood Policies and Systems in Eight Countries: Findings from IEA's Early Childhood Education Study. Springer Open.

The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement's (IEA) Early Childhood Education (ECE) study has brought together available data from other international studies and reports, such as OECD, EIU and European Commission, and national and sub-national policy documents supported with national expert advice, to compare the ECE systems of 8 countries volunteered for this comparison: Chile, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Italy, Poland, Russian Federation, and the USA. The main purpose of the 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." (p. 9, my emphasis). Overall, I think the report offers some useful information for those who want to familiarise themselves with these countries' ECE systems and to gain a first-hand introduction to their policy frames and provisional patterns. It also helps to advance an understanding of the basic specificities of these systems, such as governance and management levels, split or integrated provision types, legislative and statutory entitlements for children and parents, parental leave provisions, or upcoming policy changes, in comparison to others. There are also useful tables all through the report to facilitate systemic comparison and to draw out some general, but basic, comparative observations. The authors make those observations with careful consideration; for example, it is noted with the decentralized, federal system in the US, local services may differ quite starkly. This makes country-wide generalizations of the US problematic. I have, however, a major issue with the aim of this multi-country comparison. The authors position ECE in the purpose of the study as a *preparation* for further education and to address social issues, rather than an important aspect of children's present lives to which issues of quality and equality connect.

The report also has some novel aspects. One of these perhaps is the emphasis on the identification of transition points in a comparative manner, describing points when children move between types of services and the concerns associated with those as the children experience different learning and social environments. I also found some interesting and worrying details that are rarely portrayed in these types of reports. For example, an interesting detail is the annual salary levels of different countries (where available) broken down according to professional qualification. One of the concerning finding is that "in the study countries, inspection is more frequently reported than accreditation as a means to assure quality services at both ECED and PPE [pre-primary] levels, although in the majority of countries the two processes complement one another, with inspection more commonly used to monitor setting quality and provide accreditation for authorization of setting quality". (p. 122). Observations such as these provide good basis for further research.

While I highly command the breadth of this study and its usefulness for first glimpse overviews, such as the country profile chapter that succinctly summarizes system specificities and also provides an easy overview table, I also have a couple of critical observations. First, the report unproblematically compares countries that have strikingly different histories that have impacted greatly on the development, policy structures, provision and administration of these systems and their current and future trajectories. For example, the Czech Republic, Poland, Estonia and the Russian Federation are post-socialist countries, where childhood, both as a construction and as the early period of a person's life, had an exceptional importance during state socialism because it was closely linked to the socialist utopian ideal. Children, as the new generation, had a unique role in

society and provisions for them enjoyed high priority in policy making and investments resulting in the early development of universal systemic provisions in most socialist countries and different trajectories for their development after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Second, there is a lack of attention in the review to the different political economies that sustain and develop these systems and provide the societal backdrop to them, such as types of welfare states or other related welfare provisions, parental employment levels or casualization of workforce, levels of disadvantage and general levels of inequalities in these societies and so on. Third, while the primary aim of the comparison is to analyse systemic level data, some cautions could have also been taken in light of how these systematic provisions are experienced. For example, salary levels look very different if compared to local average salaries in some countries, so the sum comparisons are less meaningful.

The comparisons of this report also describe the changing field of ECE in these countries that require constant policy attention in the view of the authors. Attention should focus on, for example, conflicting policy aims; provision patterns that strongly influence participation in ECE and also lead to inequities and quality issues; the lack of systemic coherence towards which countries are striving for; and the remuneration of staff that needs to improve especially at leadership level. With the understanding that ECE policy has only in the last couple of decades gained this importance internationally and for national governments worldwide, I strongly support the authors' call for continuing attention.

All in all, I have found this comparison between 8 countries working well as a touchstone for further research and the conclusions serve a good basis for further policy attention required from national governments and international bodies. The report is also very useful for teaching, as students can gain a good understanding of the differences between systemic provisions of ECE. However, I also found the comparison lacking context and more detail that could have been added with the inclusion of situated explorations of the local contexts.

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