IPPO INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC POLICY OBSERVATORY

International policy scan

Increasing access to early years childcare and education among ethnic minority children and families

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Project background

This policy scan is part of a broader project led by the International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO) on access to childcare for ethnic minority children and families. The IPPO Policy Summary highlights overarching findings and recommendations.

Increasing access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a global priority. ECEC is widely seen as key for reducing educational and social inequalities. Experts and policymakers agree that investing in high-quality, child-centred, inclusive, and affordable ECEC services strengthens future educational achievements, prevents early skill gaps and school leaving, reduces long-term social inequalities, and contributes to social cohesion (The Council of the European Union, 2019). ECEC's status as a priority is cemented through international initiatives like the UN Sustainable Development Goal on 'quality education' and the G20 Initiative for Early Childhood Development.

Demand for early childhood care and education often exceeds supply in high-income countries, with many families unable to locate or afford childcare arrangements that best suit their needs, and engagement with ECEC can vary significantly across demographic groups (Wood, 2021). In the UK, the primary policy intervention aimed at increasing access to ECEC has been increasing the number of free childcare hours available to parents of young children. Eligibility varies across the four nations but generally provides between fifteen and thirty hours per week of term-time childcare for working parents of two to four-year-olds, with additional eligibility for disadvantaged families. Nationally, successive waves of funding expansion and increased availability of childcare hours have been linked to supporting working parents to maintain employment or become economically active, though this government objective is not always aligned with objectives concerned with child development and learning.

As well as increasing overall access to ECEC for young children, policymakers and practitioners are also concerned with ensuring equal access across demographic groups so that ECEC helps to reduce, not widen, education inequalities more broadly across the life course. There is some evidence of low participation and poorer experiences in ECEC among Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic children and families. This includes a 2022 study by the Centre for Evidence and Implementation (Hughes and Jones, 2021), an evidence review for England's Department for Education by Albakri et al. (2018), and qualitative evidence shared with the Welsh Parliament (Equality and Social Justice Committee 2022). However, large-scale data on participation rates in ECEC among Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic communities is not routinely collected across services.

This project was initiated following discussions with the Welsh Government about their policy goals related to Early Childcare, Play, Learning and Care (the Welsh Government's approach to ECEC). Preliminary evidence in Wales identified the low uptake of early years childcare among Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic children and families as a critical issue. The Welsh Government is actively examining and addressing the ways racism is built into policies and ways of working following the launch of the Anti-Racist Action Plan for Wales (ArWAP). To create a more equitable nation for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic children and families, Childcare and Play is highlighted by the ArWAP as a key policy area due to its importance for child development, lifelong learning, and social integration. Further detail on the Welsh ECEC policy context is provided in our **Workshop Insight Note**.

The research questions and approach to this project were developed in consultation with the Welsh Government but designed to be relevant across the UK and globally. The lack of clear and recent data on gaps in access to ECEC necessitated exploring the global evidence to provide better insight into the participation challenges Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic children and families face. A clearer identification of potential barriers and facilitators will: inform the ongoing phased expansion of Early Years Provision in Wales and England, support the ArWAP's delivery especially in terms of childcare and play, and contribute to broader policy discussions on education, child development, and enabling parental employment or training.

Summary of findings

In this section, we distil key overarching insights and themes from across the international policy evidence identified across the report.

1. **There is an abundance of policies and initiatives, but few are evaluated, and we know little of their effectiveness.**

ECEC policies and interventions are rarely evaluated. Importantly, research designs of new policies/interventions often do not support long-term data collection on effectiveness, for which randomised controlled trials or quasi-experimental designs are often best suited. One positive example of such a trial is the study conducted in Bulgaria, comparing the impact of three different types of interventions on ECEC enrolment and attendance among Roma children (see page 9). Retrospective qualitative studies can also provide useful insights, as shown in in the case of the British Columbia $10/day programme (see page 11).

2. **Deciding which outcomes to track and for how long is key to evaluating effectiveness.**

While some interventions have tracked language, cognitive, and gross motor outcomes in young children, there is much less data on long-term outcomes through later childhood and early adulthood.

The randomised controlled trial in Bulgaria (see page 9) showed that while the removal of fees almost immediately and significantly increased attendance and enrolment, it took several years for developmental outcomes to improve. This underscores the importance of embedding long-term evaluation measures in policy development to enable a more accurate understanding of effectiveness and impact.

3. **Removing financial barriers is only part of the solution.**

Cost is a significant barrier, and removing or significantly reducing it has been shown to improve enrolment and attendance, as evidenced by the Bulgarian trial. Cost reduction positively impacted women's ability to stay in the workforce, reduced reliance on precarious "gig" work, and enabled parents to seek better jobs, as shown in the evaluation of British Columbia's $10/day programme (see page 11).

However, reducing costs is necessary but not sufficient to retain increased ECEC attendance among communities that may not see the social benefit of ECEC, experience linguistic or cultural barriers, or have low trust in state institutions due to long-term marginalisation.

4. **A well-trained, well-paid workforce with good career development prospects is crucial to the success of new ECEC programmes.**

Across all regions, policies focusing on workforce development, including recruitment, education, in-work training, and career development, are more likely to succeed long-term. This is particularly important for ECEC staff from visible minorities and disadvantaged groups, who are often expected to play additional roles beyond ordinary childcare, such as mediating community relationships, providing translation or language support, and offering one-to-one support or reassurance for parents.

However, these staff often face disparities and discrimination in compensation, support, and professional development.

Where ECEC staff were employed ad-hoc, poorly paid, or lacking career opportunities, the success of ECEC programmes was short-lived. State policy should focus on improving pay and providing consistent support and training for staff, including specialised training to address the unique needs of minority communities.

5. **Creating and maintaining deep community relationships is essential for supporting ethnic minority families.**

Strong community links, cultural knowledge, and linguistic skills of ECEC providers are key factors impacting the uptake of ECEC among ethnic minority children and families from Roma in Europe to Pacific Islander and Māori families in New Zealand. Community links can be secured through the direct involvement of families in childcare centres (e.g., Māori immersion, see page 16) or through other forms of community brokerage, including caseworkers or community support staff/volunteers. However, this should not be interpreted as placing the entire burden on staff or community volunteers from minority communities performing additional duties. Rather, on-going support for community brokerage and community liaison should be embedded into government and provider-level policies. Further, brokerage should be considered a formal part of job roles, with those performing such functions appropriately resourced and supported.

6. **ECEC policies must be integrated with other policies, services and sectors.**

The examples reviewed in this policy scan, particularly from Latin American countries, show that ECEC policies cannot stand alone but must be supported by and integrated with a range of other laws and policies. From educational policies extending beyond ECEC, policies supporting women and carers, to labour and immigration laws and policies promoting Indigenous and minority rights, the success of ECEC programmes depended on cross-departmental, intersectional policy to maximise effectiveness and impact.

Policy scan methodology

This policy scan was led by the International Network for Government Science Advice (INGSA), an open-access network with a mission to translate evidence into policy by sharing knowledge, perspectives, and experience in practice and research. INGSA focuses on integrating the Global South into these networks, with secretariats in New Zealand and Canada, three regional chapters (Latin America & Caribbean, Africa, and Asia), and two chapters in development (Europe and North America). The policy scan addresses the following research question, identified as part of overall project aims:

- *How have countries outside the United Kingdom approached ensuring equitable participation in early years childcare and education for ethnic minority families, as well as other minoritised or disadvantaged groups?*

This scan was conducted through desk-based research and discussions with researchers, NGOs, and policymakers. It was led by the secretariat in New Zealand in collaboration with the INGSA Latin America & Caribbean chapter.

Following an initial broad survey and discussions with all INGSA chapters and the secretariat, INGSA identified two broader regions (Europe and Latin America) and three additional countries (Australia, New Zealand, and Canada) for inclusion in the scan. In Europe, policies addressing ECEC participation among Roma children and families provided a relevant case study. Australia, New Zealand, and Canada all have longstanding programmes supporting ECEC for Indigenous and immigrant populations. INGSA invited colleagues from the Global South to participate in the policy scan and the Latin American chapter agreed to collaborate. Within the Latin American region, Mexico and Brazil were selected due to their large and diverse populations, and Costa Rica was selected as a case of a small country with a strong welfare system.

ECEC-related policies in these regions were examined to identify approaches taken by policymakers and to highlight insights into innovations, advancements, and challenges experienced by policymakers, practitioners, families, and researchers.

We note that the targets of ECEC-promoting policies do not always match the categories used by UK policymakers. 'Ethnic minority' is a contested term. In Europe, proactive policy interventions often focus on longstanding minority groups, while recent migrants and refugee groups are not always considered. In Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, particular attention

is given to culturally appropriate early childhood education for Indigenous peoples, with a primary objective of preserving culture and language. Outside the Global North, targeted ECEC interventions are usually aimed at socioeconomically deprived groups regardless of ethnicity, culture or migration status.

While the case studies presented may not always be directly transferable to a British context, this international overview may provide UK policymakers with inspiration and examples of how governments around the world have approached widening access to childcare among minority groups.

OECD and EU

The right of all children to affordable, high-quality ECEC is affirmed by the European Pillar of Social Rights, in line with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, which recognises education as a right, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and UN Sustainable Development Goal 4.2, which ensures access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education. ECEC is widely seen as crucial for reducing educational and social inequalities, achieving equity in educational systems, and fostering a sense of belonging (Aguiar et al., 2020).

ECEC is foundational not only for further educational success and the realisation of the full potential of future adults but also for preventing school segregation (The Council of the European Union, 2019). Experts and policymakers agree that investing in high-quality, child-centred, inclusive, and affordable ECEC services enhances future educational achievements, prevents early skills gaps and early school leaving, and contributes to social cohesion (The Council of the European Union, 2019).

While the ECEC attendance rates of children from immigrant families in many OECD countries are relatively high, the UK's ECEC attendance rate for foreign-born children is slightly below the OECD average and significantly below that of most European countries (Table 1, Figure 1, based on OECD 2023, p174-175). However, while the attendance rates may appear good, the quality of ECEC and its ability to cater to diverse groups vary. Overall, ECEC attendance appears beneficial. Children who attended preschool have higher PISA reading scores at 15 years of age, even when accounting for socioeconomic background. The benefit of preschool is not evenly distributed; it amounts to almost 1.5 years of schooling advantage in Germany and Italy and nearly a year in Austria and Portugal, more so than for children of native-born parents. The benefits of preschool are less pronounced in Australia, North America, and the Netherlands.

	Foreign-born households	Native-born households
Australia	46.5	50.7
United States	60.6	61.0
Cyprus	63.0	86.8
United Kingdom	71.9	74.9
OECD total (26)	72.2	75.3
Finland	72.8	78.2
Switzerland	76.6	65.9
Netherlands	79.4	97.0
Ireland	80.5	82.6
Germany	80.8	79.7
Austria	82.1	81 .7
EU total (22)	87.6	88.2
Greece	87.9	91.1
Italy	88.6	97.5
Belgium	89.8	95.4
France	89.9	93.7
Luxembourg	90.0	91.1
Slovenia	91.2	94.9
Norway	92.3	97.8
Spain	97.7	97.4

Table 1: Early childhood education attendance rates by parents' or guardians' place of birth, 2-5 year olds, 2020, in OECD countries (OECD 2023, pp. 174-175). The data for the United States refers to 3-5 year olds. Norway data refers to participation rates in kindergarten among language minority children (rather than immigrant children) and other children (rather than children in native-born households)

Figure 1. Gap in early childhood education attendance rate between native-born and foreign-born households in OECD countries, based on OECD 2023, p174-175.
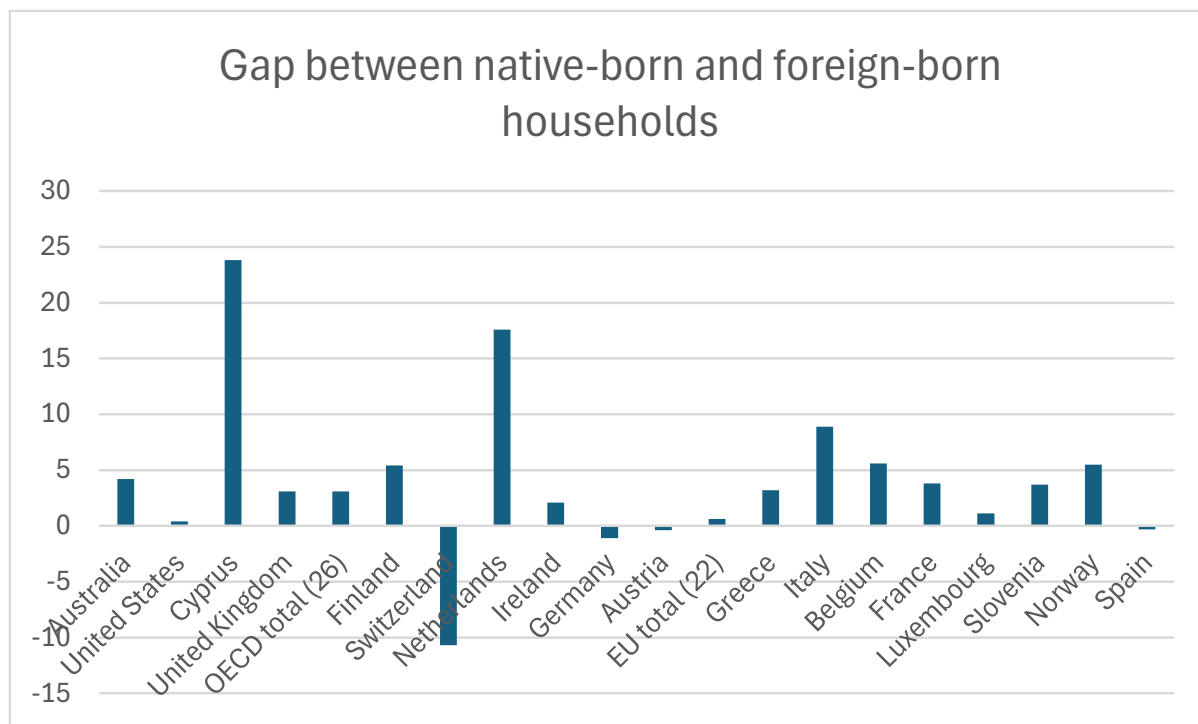
There is limited evidence on what works to tackle inequalities in ECEC. A recent meta-evaluation of ECEC and primary school[1] interventions addressing inequalities in eight EU countries identified over 500 interventions targeting immigrant or ethnic minority, low-income, and/or Roma children (Aguiar et al., 2020).[2] The review analysed a subset of these interventions (78 out of 500) and found that over three-quarters targeted language skills. Language support activities included conventional language lessons, reading and writing activities, the use of language in the context of play, arts-based language enrichment, and routine activities. Most of these targeted children, though some included parents or other family members. Of all the language interventions, only 32% considered the children's heritage language. Academic skills, intercultural competence, and parental/family involvement were covered substantially less and need to be addressed for future successful interventions. This evaluation only considered interventions related to the school curriculum and environment and did not account for policy-level differences in how education is delivered and funded.

The overall conclusion of this review was that while participating countries were testing and implementing a wide range of interventions to tackle social and educational inequalities through the curriculum, only a small number of interventions could be labelled as "effective," since only a small proportion had research designs to measure effectiveness (such as randomised control trials or quasi-experimental studies). The remaining interventions were labelled "promising", meaning that while they did not yet have effectiveness data, they had some positive evidence and were highly regarded among stakeholders. Two key recommendations from this review were to support high-quality research that allows for the evaluation of effectiveness and to support the professional development of ECEC staff to design and implement high-quality interventions. Other recommendations included prioritising and supporting communication and positive intercultural contact between minority and majority groups.

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[1] Age range 3-10/12 years.
[2] In EU at the time of the study. The 8 countries included: Czech Republic, England, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Portugal.

Roma children in Europe

The Roma or Romani are an ethnic group with a distinct language and culture. Despite residing in Europe since the Middle Ages, they continue to experience segregation and exclusion. The Roma are among the most deprived and discriminated minorities in Europe. Roma children have the lowest participation rates in early childhood education in Europe, attending at half the rate of their peers (Bennett et al., 2012; Klaus and Siraj, 2020). These early experiences, combined with lower school participation, partly explain the significant gap in social and economic outcomes between Roma and other Europeans, perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage (Klaus and Siraj, 2020). Interestingly, unlike many other groups, recent decades have seen several new initiatives across Europe to encourage Roma participation in ECEC.

Removing fees helps to increase access

One crucial condition for ensuring that Roma and disadvantaged children have access to high-quality ECEC and preschool is removing cost barriers and providing additional financial support for travel, toys, books, medical services, and meals (Vandekerckhove et al., 2019). A nationwide randomised controlled trial conducted in Bulgaria in 2014-2015, in collaboration with a local NGO and the World Bank, aimed to understand the reasons behind the kindergarten attendance gap between Roma and Bulgarian children: 1) lack of awareness about kindergartens, how to enrol, and their benefits; 2) inability to afford the fees; and 3) reluctance to enrol for other reasons (Volen and De Laat, 2021). The tested interventions included: a community campaign informing parents about the benefits of kindergartens, removal of the fees, and providing financial incentives to parents (e.g., food vouchers) conditional on kindergarten attendance.

After a year, the follow-up study in April-May 2015 showed that removing the fees increased registration by 19%, nearly halved the proportion of unenrolled children, and boosted daily attendance by about 20%. Additional financial incentives did not impact measured outcomes and were more expensive to administer (18-51% costlier). The information campaign increased enrolment but not attendance. A challenging finding was that developmental outcomes did not improve after the first year. Possible explanations included teachers struggling to cope with the increased proportion of disadvantaged minority children, unconscious bias, and the possibility that one year of participation was insufficient to close the pre-existing gap in outcomes (Volen and De Laat, 2021).

Positive impacts on children's developmental outcomes emerged over time. A 2017 evaluation showed that ethnic minority children attending free ECEC scored significantly better on emergent numeracy and literacy tests than children in control communities. This underscores the importance of maintaining interventions and related evaluations for the medium term. The evaluation advocated for the universal policy of fee removal, which the Bulgarian Parliament adopted in 2020 (Volen and De Laat, 2021; Volen, 2023). As of 1 April 2022, all children in Bulgaria attend nursery and kindergarten free of charge (Volen, 2023). However, researchers involved in the project from the start warned that without improving the quality of kindergartens and enhancing parental understanding of high-quality childcare and its benefits, these policy gains towards expanding access remain fragile (Volen, 2023). Shifting the framing of ECEC as both a child service and a societal service, in addition to an individual (adult) service, may help achieve this goal.

Importance of hiring and training Roma teaching staff

The literature reviewed revealed significant cultural issues: few Roma teachers, some parents believing children are too young for preschool, and others thinking preschool attendance offers no particular benefit if care is available at home. The employment of Roma teaching assistants as "cultural brokers" is based on this concept. While hiring Roma staff into educational settings as cultural brokers dates back to Italy and Spain in the 1980s, few countries have adopted this strategy nationally, with Serbia being a notable exception. A study combining a survey conducted in 21 countries where Roma teaching assistants were hired in early education and primary schools, and a qualitative study in Serbia and the UK, found positive impacts of hiring Roma staff across many domains: children's cognitive and academic outcomes, social-emotional development, communication with families, and trust between parents and institutions (Klaus and Siraj, 2020). It was noted that Roma teaching assistants in the UK were less effective when not fully fluent in English.

The key recommendation of this study was that hiring Roma assistants is valuable and should be encouraged, but it should ensure professional development and career prospects. Ad hoc hiring, with minimal training and few networking opportunities, should be avoided. Recruiting Roma ECEC staff should not mean that the responsibility for interacting with Roma families is solely delegated to these assistants.

Support for reading at home improves ECEC attendance and outcomes

Reading stories in the family or an informal setting to Roma children of preschool age is an innovative method for raising school preparedness and avoiding segregation in primary schools. The Roma Education Fund implemented a programme of preliteracy training called "Your Story" (Meséd) in 16 localities across Hungary, North Macedonia, Romania, and Slovakia (Surdu and Switzer, 2015). The nine-month project supported Romani mothers in reading storybooks aloud daily in groups moderated by a facilitator and discussing them with their children. Most of the Romani women involved had not completed more than lower secondary education. The facilitator's role was to increase mothers' self-confidence in reading and discussing stories, abilities that were then transferred to the children. The project donated storybooks to build Roma families' libraries and brought Roma and non-Roma children together in reading groups and other extracurricular activities moderated by a facilitator. The evaluation found that mothers participating in the "Your Story" programme valued kindergarten significantly more than those who did not. The project improved kindergarten enrolment and increased Roma academic skills (Surdu and Switzer, 2015).

Interventions like "Your Story" have been implemented in several other projects and locations. Researchers found that early reading by parents at home is an effective, evidence-based intervention for the cognitive and academic development of children from disadvantaged families (Andersen et al., 2022; Shahaeian et al., 2018) as well as for children from ethnic minorities (Dias-Broens and van Steensel, 2022; Shen and Del Tufo, 2022). A recent evaluation found that reading children's stories at home improves vocabulary and reading skills as well as writing abilities (Andersen et al., 2022). This study acknowledges that "the intervention effects on writing tended to be stronger for children from low maternal education households, thus reducing some of the early achievement gaps evident in writing skills" (Andersen et al., 2022, p.7).

Providing home-based support through community initiatives

Another evaluated project is Omama in Slovakia, which won the SozialMarie prize for Social Innovation in Central and Eastern Europe in 2019 (Program Omama 2024). Conducted by the Slovak civic organisation Cesta von (Way Out), Omama is an early child development home-visiting programme supporting the cognitive, social, and physical development of Roma children (0-4 years) living in poverty. Trained Roma women (Omamas) from local communities deliver regular home visits as part of the programme. Omamas are trained by psychologists, special educators, and doctors. They stimulate children through educational activities, games, and counselling conducted in the families' homes or the Omamas' homes. Omamas teach Roma mothers to better stimulate their children through reading books together, playing games, and teaching them colours, shapes, words, and numbers.

The impact of the Omama programme is measured in collaboration with the University of Oxford. Impact measurement compares the neurodevelopment of two-year-old children in the programme with control samples of children from settlements outside the Omama programme and children from the majority ethnic group. A study carried out in 2022 found that Omama intervention improved neurocognitive outcomes among poor Roma children, particularly in cognitive, gross motor, and language outcomes (Shaw et al., 2022). No impact on the uptake of ECEC among involved families has been reported in the literature.

Canada

The Canadian government has invested significantly in building an early learning and childcare system across Canada. In the 2021 budget, it allocated over $27 billion over five years. Combined with other investments, this budget amounts to up to $30 billion to support early learning and childcare, focusing on inclusiveness and meeting the needs of official language minority communities (OLMC).

Canada has implemented several policies and frameworks to support childcare and early childhood education for recent migrants, minority language and cultural groups, and First Nations communities. In 2018, the federal government published its Indigenous Early Learning and Childcare Framework, co-developed with Indigenous partners (Government of Canada, 2018). This framework focuses on providing culturally appropriate programmes that incorporate the cultures, languages, traditions, values, and customs of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities, emphasising the importance of a child's cultural identity and sense of worth.

Policy spotlight: The $10-per-day childcare programme

In 2018, the Government of British Columbia (BC) introduced a 10-year plan to build a fully universal $10-a-day childcare system, now called "$10-a-Day Childcare BC" (Caragata, Ellis, and Alemayehu, 2023). This policy followed decades of advocacy by the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC. System-building began with an initial $1 billion in funding over three years, and the subsequent rollout of licensed spaces starting in 2021. Initially, more than 2,500 spaces and fifty "$10-a-day" centres were approved through the Canada-British Columbia Early Learning and Care Agreement 2021-2026. By April 2022, the number of places increased to 6,500, and in 2023 it reached 13,261 spaces. For the lowest-income families accessing a $10-a-day centre who met eligibility criteria, the cost was brought to zero.

A 2023 report, using qualitative methodology (peer interviews), studied the impact of this programme on the lives of low-income, lone parents (Caragata, Ellis, and Alemayehu, 2023). Over half of the participants identified as Indigenous, Black, or other racialised/minority groups. The report showed positive impacts on women's ability to stay in the workforce, reduce reliance on precarious "gig" work, and seek better jobs. Women reported improved health and wellbeing, including the ability to attend medical appointments. However, its positive impact was jeopardised by issues such as a lack of sufficient spaces, lack of transparency in the allocation process, no system to prioritise those most marginalised/most in need, long waitlists, inadequate provision for children with special needs, locations and hours of operation that did not work for parents in precarious jobs, and high staff turnover affecting the quality of care.

This report is especially valuable as the Canadian government prepares to roll out a similar programme ($10-a-day 'on average') by March 2026.[3] In their 2021 Budget, the Government of Canada made an investment of $27 billion towards improving access to and quality of ECEC in all provinces, with a commitment to "an average fee of $10/day everywhere outside Quebec".[4]

While the investment details differ for each province, responding to diverse needs, it includes fee subsidies, the growth of quality childcare spaces, and a focus on workforce development. A significant proportion of childcare workers in Canada are immigrants or non-permanent residents, many belonging to minority groups. The childcare workforce faces challenges such as low wages and a lack of training, especially for specialised needs. The Indigenous childcare workforce in Canada includes a variety of roles and faces challenges related to funding, service

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[3] 'Governments of Canada and Nova Scotia release early learning and child care action plan. Accessed 4 March 2024. https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/governments-of-canada-and-nova-scotia-release-early-learning-and-child-care-action-plan-849370026.html

[4] Quebec chose to stay outside the federal framework. Note that Quebec already has subsidized ECEC under $10, since the late 1990s – and also higher women's workforce participation than the rest of Canada; On the 2021-2026 Budget commitment, see Government of Canada. Budget 2021: A Canada-wide Early Learning and Childcare Plan. https://www.canada.ca/en/department-finance/news/2021/04/budget-2021-a-canada-wide-early-learning-and-child-care-plan.html

provision, and compensation. There is a need for more consistent support and training for staff, including specialised training to address the unique needs of Indigenous communities.

Recent legislation, namely the Canada Early Learning and Child Care Act, embeds the plans set out in the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan into law, realised through the investment of the 2021 Budget. Among other goals, it aims to establish a more equitable and inclusive childcare system, explicitly referring to the "recruitment and retention of a qualified and well-supported early childhood education workforce" (Canada Early Learning and Child Care Act 2024).

Australia

The Australian Federal Government, as well as individual states, have been implementing various policies and packages to improve ECEC enrolment, attendance, and experiences among minority children, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) children.

A 2021 report by Settlement Services International (SSI), a national non-profit provider of human and social services focusing on CALD families, examined the state of CALD children's early development (Rajwani, Culos and McMahon, 2021). Using data from the Australian Early Development Census, it found clear differences in ECEC participation among CALD children compared to non-CALD children, which in turn appear to be reflected in the greater likelihood of CALD children being developmentally vulnerable. These disparities are likely to become a bigger challenge given the increasing cultural diversity among young Australian children. The Australian Federal Government is finalising an Early Years Strategy to create a more integrated and holistic approach to early childhood that will improve the wellbeing of Australia's children (Australian Government, 2024). The draft strategy has been informed by a National Summit, roundtables, and consultations with the public and children. A key theme of the Summit was the inclusion of ATSI and CALD children. The diverse knowledge of child development among CALD families and the need to work in partnership with local communities were also recognised.

While broad in scope, the strategy considers ECEC and notes its importance for supporting cultural identity among ATSI children. A priority focus is empowering parents and caregivers, in part by ensuring supports and services are culturally safe and responsive. The strategy intends to complement and amplify the 2021 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy.

There is also an ongoing inquiry into the ECEC system with recommendations to address access barriers to services and support better outcomes for children and families (Chalmers, 2024). The final inquiry report is due to the Government by 30 June 2024.

In this section we consider several policies/policy packages implemented by the Australian federal and state governments over the past decade.

Make ECEC more affordable

The Australian Government's Child Care Package, implemented in 2018, was designed to significantly reform childcare provision and funding. It aimed to make ECEC more affordable and accessible, particularly for low- and middle-income families, and to increase workforce participation. Although the package was not specifically developed to target ethnic minority children and families, many of its elements indirectly assist this group.

The primary component is the Child Care Subsidy, with the subsidy amount tiered according to how engaged parents are in a range of recognised activities such as paid or unpaid work, training, or study. However, exemptions are available, including for parents of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Services Australia, 2024). The subsidy is paid to approved ECEC providers who then charge eligible families reduced fees. Subsidy payments are monitored for overpayment, and debt or infringement notices may be issued for non-compliance.

Another key component is the Child Care Safety Net, providing additional support for disadvantaged families. Measures within this component include the Additional Child Care Subsidy, which offers extra financial support to families experiencing difficult circumstances such as temporary financial hardship and transitioning to work. This subsidy is also paid to providers and passed on to families as reduced fees.

A 2019 evaluation undertaken just before and shortly after the introduction of the package found that the majority of services were prepared for the transition and were generally able to meet the needs of vulnerable children, including Indigenous children and those from CALD backgrounds (Baxter et al., 2019). The latter group may have benefited from efforts to recruit staff with non-English language skills.

However, a second evaluation report (2021) found that while the package successfully improved childcare affordability for low- and middle-income families, there was no clear increase in childcare use among ATSI children or some children with CALD backgrounds. Participation rates among these groups remain substantially lower than in the overall community (Bray et al., 2021a). This suggests that in supporting vulnerable children, having equal access is insufficient, and more proactive interventions may be required. Nevertheless, a 2022 Government response noted a 9.3% increase in the participation of ATSI children from March 2020 to March 2021, indicating the importance of long-term interventions and evaluations. Further long-term data will clarify if this is a consistent trend (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2022). Workforce participation of ethnic minority parents was not evaluated, but among all parents, a small increase – albeit potentially continuing historical trends – was observed.

Improve inclusive practice in ECEC across the system

The nationwide Inclusion Support Program is part of the Government's Child Care Subsidy scheme (Department of Education, 2024). It promotes ECEC participation among children with additional needs by offering tailored support and funding to ECEC services to address barriers to inclusion, build capacity, and implement inclusive practices (Department of Education, 2024). This programme, while not specifically targeted at children from ethnic and linguistic minorities, targets children experiencing a broad range of challenging circumstances, including disability, disadvantaged backgrounds, ATSI children, CALD children, and those from refugee or humanitarian backgrounds. Support types include professional assistance to identify barriers to inclusion, specialist equipment, and funding for specific support such as additional educators.

The Inclusion Support Program was evaluated in 2021 (Bray et al., 2021b), and a full independent review was released in 2023 (Deloitte Access Economics, 2023). It was found that the programme could achieve its objectives as long as the support offered was delivered and accessed as intended. However, improvements could be made in areas such as better integration with other services, enhanced workforce capability, simplified application processes, and stronger monitoring mechanisms. The review made recommendations for strategic intent, capability building, needs-based support, effective resourcing, and monitoring and evaluation. It was noted that achieving full inclusion will require structural and systemic reforms to ECEC policy and not be limited to a single programme.

The Victorian Government funds the Early Start Kindergarten grant, which pays for 15 hours a week of kindergarten for three-year-old children from refugee or asylum seeker backgrounds, ATSI children, or those known to Child Protection (State Government of Victoria, 2024a). Recognising that providing proof of eligibility can be a barrier, there is considerable flexibility in how eligibility is established, such as accepting verbal proof from parents or referring professionals without requiring additional action (State Government of Victoria, 2024b).

Ensure ECEC is delivered in culturally appropriate ways

One component of the nationwide Inclusion Support Program is the Inclusion Development Fund Innovative Solutions Support, which helps ECEC services find solutions to tackle inclusion barriers (Department of Education, 2023). This initiative has been used to provide cultural advice and mentoring by Indigenous community elders and bicultural support workers, as well as bilingual support through interpreting services and bilingual workers. Another component is

Specialist Equipment Libraries that loan, among many other items, books in non-English languages to support the full participation of ATSI and CALD children.

The State of Victoria supports initiatives that provide services and resources specifically for the CALD community (State Government of Victoria, 2024b). For example, a CALD Community Event toolkit has been developed to help services engage with CALD families and communities in early learning and encourage kindergarten participation. It offers ideas for incorporating cultural diversity events into programmes and guidance on participating in external events relevant to CALD families. The CALD Outreach Initiative focuses on addressing barriers to kindergarten access and participation for CALD children and their families, supporting children's transition to school, and assisting with ongoing engagement and participation in education (Office of the Premier of Victoria, 2023). This is undertaken by CALD outreach workers employed by local councils. Additional funding has also been provided for bicultural workers to reach out to CALD families living in public housing in several cities throughout Victoria.

Services and resources for CALD families are supported by free interpreting services and resources translated into 30 languages (State Government of Victoria, 2024c). These resources include written, audio, and visual material about kindergarten in Victoria and the benefits of participation. For services, a dedicated portal offers brochures, posters, and social media content to promote kindergarten participation among CALD communities (State Government of Victoria, 2024b).

The Family Learning Support Programme, funded by the Australian Government and run by the social justice charity Brotherhood of St Laurence is another key initiative (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2024). This 12-week professional outreach service is delivered by a bicultural workforce through home visits, group facilitation, and individual consultations. It aims to help families living in public housing across several Victorian cities, many of whom are recent immigrants or from a refugee background, to navigate barriers in accessing ECEC and support parents in providing active home learning. The support is tailored to build and strengthen families' relationships with formal education settings and assist with enrolment and accessing financial assistance. Families can also connect to other Brotherhood initiatives, such as Multicultural Family Learning Playgroups and additional culturally inclusive practice support. This programme has not been formally evaluated but received renewed funding in 2023.

New Zealand

New Zealand, one of the most ethnically diverse countries globally, has a relatively short history of early childhood education initiatives targeting specific ethnic, linguistic, or social groups. This began with provisions for the indigenous Māori and children and families from other Pacific islands, most frequently Samoa, Fiji, Tonga and Cook Islands commonly referred to as "Pasifika" or Pacific. In the late 1990s, the Māori Education Strategy and the Pasifika Education Plan aimed to increase ECEC participation among Māori and Pacific children, who had been significantly under-represented compared to New Zealand European children (Mallard, 2002; Dixon et al., 2007).

Policy spotlight: Promoting ECE participation among Pacific Island and Māori children

The Promoting ECE Participation Project (PPP) was introduced in 2000. Initially, PPP was an "information and brokerage intervention" targeted solely at Māori and Pacific children, whereby local ECE providers from within targeted communities were contracted to identify non-participating families and provide tailored support to encourage enrolment (Dixon et al., 2007).

An evaluation of the pilot years of PPP reported that the increase in participation varied widely between regions. Māori and Pacific ECE providers identified the following determinants of success:

- ECE providers being the same ethnicity as target families
- Speaking the language

- Having strong community links

According to families, access to services that supported their own language and cultural practices was crucial for participation, as was receiving home visits from PPP fieldworkers to build relationships and trust.

Barriers to participation included:

- Cost of fees/transport
- Transience, with low home ownership rates in Pacific and Māori communities and poor legal protection for renters in New Zealand
- Lack of familiarity with the benefits of ECE
- Issues around responsiveness to the needs of Māori and Pasifika families among mainstream (i.e. non-Māori or Pacific) services (Dixon et al., 2007).

By 2014, the project had been redeveloped and extended to other low-participation groups, including low-income families and those in rural and isolated areas. It was expanded into six initiatives:

1. Engaging Priority Families (EPF): an intensive support service for 3- and 4-year-olds similar to the original PPP brokerage intervention.
2. Supported Playgroups (SP): local community playgroups.
3. Flexible and Responsive Home-based Services (FRHB): offering home-based ECE.
4. Identity, Language, Culture, and Community Engagement (ILCCE): professional support for services that are not responsive to their community.
5. Intensive Community Participation Programme (ICPP): community-led participation projects addressing specific reasons children are not participating in ECE.
6. Targeted Assistance for Participation (TAP): grants to help establish new services or expand a service in areas of need.

PPP was further evaluated in 2014 and 2016. Although the initiatives were no longer targeted only by ethnicity, participants remained predominantly Māori and Pacific (95% of enrolments by 2013) (Mitchell et all. 2014; Mitchell et al., 2016; Ministry of Education, 2024). Key factors making initiatives effective in increasing participation were:

1. One-on-one relationships with families of 3- and 4-year-olds from the point of first contact to the first three months of school. This allowed time and space to develop deep relationships and address specific needs, such as negotiating fees.
2. A brokering role in respect to health, housing, and other social services and agencies.
3. Fieldworkers with strong, established community networks, including with local iwi (Māori tribes).
4. A sense of belonging for families, typically achieved by staff being the same ethnicity, speaking the same language, and upholding cultural practices.
5. Low or no cost, sometimes achieved by offsetting parental work done within the centre against fees payable, having a sliding scale related to individual circumstances, or finding sponsorship.
6. Limited need for transport, sometimes achieved by referrals to services within walking distance, encouraging car-pooling, or providers using vans (Mitchell et al., 2016).

In 2016, national policy targets aimed for 98% of Māori and Pacific children to have participated in "quality ECE" before starting school. From 2010 to 2016, Māori enrolments increased from 89.3% to 92.9%, and Pacific enrolments from 85.9% to 90.3%, indicating some positive impact (Mitchell et al., 2016). EPF, SP, and TAP were the most successful at increasing enrolment numbers and are still running today, while the other initiatives have been discontinued (Mitchell et al., 2016; Ministry of Education, 2024). However, the project had only limited success in sustaining participation after enrolment. Many children left initiatives for unknown reasons. Providers cited transience, lack of transport, and the cost of fees as the most common reasons they thought families left (Mitchell et al., 2016).

Policy spotlight: Māori immersion

The British colonisation of New Zealand led to significant language, culture, and identity loss among the indigenous Māori people. During a period of revitalisation in the 1970s, many Māori people were reasserting their identity as Māori. At the same time, the New Zealand government sought to better incorporate the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) into legislation. The Treaty, a written agreement between the British Crown and Māori tribal leaders, stipulated that Māori would retain ownership of lands and other possessions and be granted the rights of British subjects. While the exact principles and their implementation remain a matter of political debate, the New Zealand government has accepted its responsibility to protect Māori interests.

Māori leaders proposed that families and their children aged 0 to 6 years were the appropriate and most effective age group to revitalise te reo Māori (the Māori language) and Māori customs. In 1981, the Ministry of Māori Development agreed to pilot a kōhanga reo. Translating to 'language nest,' kōhanga reo are total Māori immersion ECE services for children from birth to six years (Te Kōhanga Reo, 2024).

Enablers of participation in kōhanga reo

Two studies of children enrolled in kōhanga reo identified the following enablers of participation, which could be implemented in other contexts:

- Opportunity to develop a strong sense of pride and identity
- Ability to learn Māori language and customs in a safe environment
- Flexible opening hours
- Family-oriented ECE (Cooper et al., 2004; Farquhar et al., 1991).

Family members were expected to volunteer at centres, engaging in activities such as assisting teachers, administration, and repairs (Cooper et al., 2004; Farquhar et al., 2004; Haar et al., n.d.). An exploratory study investigating the level of family commitment required and potential impacts on work-life balance reported that while kōhanga reo can place heavy time demands on employed family members, this was considered a normal aspect of the kōhanga reo environment and seen as part of an equal 'give and take' relationship with the service. The volunteer system allowed family members to fulfil socially expected contributions to their culture and community while spending time with their children, thus reducing time-based conflict as the needs of both roles were met simultaneously. Additionally, flexible hours and reciprocal support from friends also utilising kōhanga reo significantly reduced strain from working or having a partner who was working (Haar et al., n.d.).

Factors affecting participation negatively

Kōhanga reo expanded rapidly following the initial pilot, with 819 centres operating by 1994 (Te Kōhanga Reo, 2024). However, government support has fluctuated over the decades, and participation has slowly declined. The number of services currently operating has almost halved to around 460 (Te Kōhanga Reo, 2024). In 1989, 45% of Māori children attending ECE were enrolled in kōhanga reo; in 2021, this figure was around 15% (Farquhar et al., 1991; Ministry of Education, 2022).Reasons for declining participation appear to fall under two main categories:

1) Lingering intergenerational impacts of language, culture and identity loss.

Many Māori continue to experience the effects of historical language loss, which can deter parents from participating in the kōhanga reo environment (Te Pae Roa 2022). Interviews reveal ongoing feelings of disempowerment, grief, and whakamā (shame or embarrassment) about perceived inadequacies in Māori cultural identity, te reo fluency, past educational experiences, and socioeconomic status (Hond-Flavell et al., 2021).

2) The imperfect assimilation of kōhanga reo into the national mainstream ECE sector. This appears to be the more pertinent issue.

The integration of kōhanga reo into the mainstream ECE sector has been controversial. The shift to the Ministry of Education subjected kōhanga reo to mainstream review criteria, which many believe undermined its role in revitalising te reo Māori, despite the development of a unique review process and additional funding (Education Review Office, 2005; New Zealand Government, 2019). Furthermore, the transition from kōhanga reo to primary education, whether kura Kaupapa Māori (Māori school), bilingual units, or mainstream schools, has not been adequately studied (Rona and McLachlan, 2018).

In 2022, the Ministry of Education engaged an independent Māori education group to develop a regulatory framework to expand the Māori medium education sector from ECE to tertiary, aiming for 30% of Māori children to participate by 2040; the group identified issues including the Crown's Treaty obligations, the need for Māori to determine their educational direction, language loss, poor maintenance of buildings, funding deficiencies, and a widespread workforce shortage with undervalued teachers facing higher demands in Māori medium settings (Te Pae Roa, 2022).

The proposed action to remedy these issues and sustain Māori medium education is to establish an independent body to govern Māori education. This would facilitate:
- Māori agency and empowerment over the structure and function of Māori medium education.
- A more connected approach from kōhanga reo though to school and on to tertiary.
- Ability to set the curriculum.
- Ability to redefine the role of teacher in Māori medium settings, with responsibility for setting specific standards for training and credentialling (Te Pae Roa, 2022b).

This work is ongoing.

Key learnings and policy implications

The initial strong growth of kōhanga reo following its inception indicates demand for such a service, but participation has declined over time. Supporting kōhanga reo within the mainstream system is not seen as appropriate to achieve the goal of 30% participation or to sustain a flourishing Māori ECE sector. Instead, there is a strong desire for kōhanga reo and all levels of Māori immersion to separate from the Crown and self-govern.

New Zealand's colonial history is integral to the story of kōhanga reo. Self-governance may not be necessary for successful participation in native language immersion ECE services for ethnic minorities in countries without such a past. Success may be achieved through a legitimate co-design process with genuine community engagement and good faith negotiations with mainstream governing bodies.

The characteristics that would appear to support participation and could be extrapolated to other contexts include:

- An environment that affirms cultural identity for children and their families.
- Acknowledgement and support of the lived experiences of families, including impacts of intergenerational trauma, displacement, and marginalisation.
- Recognition of the need for a culturally appropriate curriculum that may differ from mainstream services.
- Adequate recognition, remuneration, and career progression for teaching staff, potentially requiring different processes from mainstream services.
- Commitment to building and maintaining physical assets and infrastructure

Latin America

During the late 2000s, ECEC became a policy priority for several Latin American countries, reflecting a growing regional and international consensus that the state should guarantee high-quality social benefits to the entire population, with affirmative action and selective policies for those most in need (Leon-Espinoza, 2022; Franzoni & Sánchez-Ancochea, 2018, 2019; Sojo, 2011). Broadly, ECEC policies aim to achieve a better balance for families between parenthood, care responsibilities, and employment (Glass & Waldrep, 2023). They are part of a suite of family policies alongside income transfers, time off work (including maternity, paternity, and parental leave), and services such as childcare or elderly care within education spaces (Blofield & Martinez Franzoni, 2015).

These policies further aim to assist vulnerable people and promote the social inclusion of ethnic minority families and other minority or disadvantaged groups (Archambault, Côté, and Raynault, 2020). Conditional cash transfer programmes are a key policy instrument, providing cash benefits to households, usually mothers, if certain conditions are met, such as attendance at preventive healthcare visits for younger children and school attendance for older children (Fiszbein et al, 2009). Evaluations of large-scale CCT programmes in Mexico and Brazil reported positive results in educational attendance and child health (Saucedo Delgado et al., 2018; Owusu-Addo & Cross, 2014; Berlinski & Vera-Hernández, 2019).

This section of the policy scan examines early years childcare and education associated with disadvantaged and minority groups in a Latin American context (ECLAC, 2018; ECLAC, 2009; ILO, 2008) (Franzoni & Sanchez-Aconchea, 2019). It summarises the overall approach to family and ECEC policy rather than providing detail on ECEC-specific evaluations. The Latin American countries featured in this section include Brazil and Mexico, the two most populous and ethnically diverse countries in the region, and Costa Rica, a small country with a strong welfare system.

Brazil

Key family and education policy approaches

The Fund for the Maintenance and Development of Basic Education and the Valorisation of Education Professionals (FUNDEB). FUNDEB ensures that marginalised schools receive sufficient resources and aims to expand access to education in rural areas, underserved regions, and among indigenous populations, through supporting transportation, food, materials, equipment, books, and professional development at the local level (Brasil, 2020; Raikes et al., 2023).

ECEC-specific elements

- **Building childcare centres to expand access:** "Proinfância" funds the construction of new ECE centres including the purchasing of furniture and materials to help municipalities expand access to ECEC. Starting in 2007, Proinfância had funded and initiated over 15,000 construction projects for ECEC by 2020 (Brasil, 2020; Raikes et al., 2023).
- **Cash transfers:** The Bolsa Família Programme is the most significant cash transfer programme, operating for over 20 years to combat poverty and social exclusion. The programme targets families living in extreme poverty — on less than US$2.15-day (World Bank 2024) or with a monthly income of no more than less US $43.60 — especially families with children under 18 years-old. Each family receives a base benefit of US$136.92, with an additional US$30.30 per child aged 0-6. To continue receiving benefits, families must meet certain conditions related to health, education, and child development, including children's enrolment in daycare or preschool (Brasil, 2024a; Sorj & Gama 2014).
- **Addressing specific needs of Indigenous people and descendants of Afro-Brazilian slaves:** In 2023, the Minister of Indigenous Peoples, Sonia Guajajara, created a specific

category of the Bolsa Família programme targeted at Indigenous and Quilombola peoples (Brasil, 2023). This category was created in order to address the specific cultural needs of these groups, including language maintenance and spiritual connections. This is a new initiative lacking official data and evaluation.

Outcomes

- From 2010 to 2022, the illiteracy rate of indigenous people fell from 17.4% to 6.7% in the 25-34 age group, corresponding to National Fund for Education Development (FNDE) — a branch of FUNDEB — interventions in the ECEC stage in 2007 (IBGE, 2022; Brasil, 2020; Brasil, 2024b).
- A significant reduction in child mortality has been reported among those served by Bolsa Família, particularly the disadvantaged groups (Ramos et al., 2021).

Mexico

Key family and education policy approaches and programmes

The Mexican government groups its policy agenda into "annexes" related to funding allocations for different policy areas. "Annexes" include funding allocations dedicated to supporting vulnerable groups and education issues. The ECEC programmes outlined below are included in several main social "annexes," e. g., policy areas targeting indigenous communities, vulnerable populations, and genders (see Mexico, 2024a).

Additionally, the National Program for Indigenous Peoples (Programa Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas 2018-2024, in Spanish) of the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples (INPI) recognises Indigenous and Afro-Mexican Peoples and Communities as subjects of public law, providing them a unique legal standing with certain rights (Mexico, 2018). Two programmes, 'Programa de Apoyo a la Educación Indígena (Programme for Indigenous Education Support)' and 'Programa de Derechos Indígenas (Programme for Indigenous Rights)' (Mexico, 2020), support interventions in ECEC.

ECEC-specific elements

- **Subsidising ECEC centre enrolment:** The federal daycare initiative for working mothers, Program of Childcare Centres to Support Working Mothers (Programa de Estancias Infantiles para Apoyar a Madres Trabajadoras), covers approximately 90% of childcare costs for both community and home-based daycare centres (Staab &Gerhard, 2011). The government provides direct subsidies to daycare centres to cover operating costs and ensure quality childcare (ASF, 2018).

- **Direct financial support/cash transfers for early childcare:** A later programme addressing the same issue, Support for the Well-being of Children of Working Mothers (Apoyo para el Bienestar de las Niñas y Niños, Hijos de Madres Trabajadoras), provides direct financial support to families (Mexico 2024b). Unlike Estancias Infantiles (described in the previous bullet), this programme aims to give parents, especially working mothers, the freedom to choose how to use the funding for childcare, whether in daycare centres, with the parents themselves, or in other ways they consider appropriate.

Costa Rica

Key family and education policy approaches and programmes

Initially, Costa Rica implemented care services that focused exclusively on children from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The Centres of Education and Nutrition (Centros de Educación y Nutrición) or CEN), and the Children's Centres of Nutrition and Integral Attention (Centros Infantiles de Nutrición y Atención Integral) or CINAI, were established in the early 1970s to provide nutrition, psychoeducational development, and care for children (Franzoni & Sanchez-Aconchea, 2019).

By 2008, there were 552 CEN-CINAIs, of which 51 centres offered full-time services (up to 12 hours per day), each catering to an average of 80 children (Franzoni & Sanchez-Aconchea, 2019). These initial interventions were later complemented by additional programmes, for example, to support abandoned children. The main providers were state-managed CEN-CINAIs. The aims are to improve nutrition and reduce chronic malnutrition in children under 13, by promoting breastfeeding among mothers and healthy eating for older children (Mata, 2018).

These policies were later reframed under a social co-responsibility approach. The Care Network in Costa Rica explicitly states that one of its objectives is to "allow labour market participation and educational attainments of all fathers and mothers" (Asamblea Legislativa 2014; Leon-Espinoza, 2022). The 2014 National Network of Care and Child Development Law (Franzoni & Sanchez-Aconchea, 2019) aims to protect and care for children in poverty and vulnerability through access to childcare and development services.

ECEC-specific elements

Starting in 2010, Costa Rica, as part of a larger regional effort promoted by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, implemented significant reforms in ECEC. The government established non-profits to run Centres for Care and Child Development (Centros de Cuidado y Desarrollo Infantil), overseen by local governments (Franzoni & Sanchez-Aconchea, 2019).

Outcomes

A 2014 report on the political and conceptual formulation of this policy argues that the establishment of this national network was an important step in asserting government commitment to childcare and development. Providing childcare was a key factor supporting mothers who were, or wanted to be, economically active. The report recognises that better policy development in this new policy area for Costa Rica is an ongoing process.

At the time of evaluation, 32,000 children, predominately from families living in poverty and who previously would have lacked access to education and to food, were participating across 852 sites. The provision of ECEC through local government-led non-profits led to increases in access to providers, professionalisation of management practices, and available benefits for children and mothers (León, 2014).

Ultimately the evaluation argues for further steps toward universalising the policy to achieve greater impact especially for the most vulnerable socioeconomically.

Conclusion

Globally, high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) supports parental workforce participation, reduces educational and social inequalities, achieves equity in educational systems, fosters a sense of belonging, and improves social cohesion. Many countries adopt a universalist approach to ECEC, ensuring the participation of all children through free hours (or entirely free access to childcare) or cash transfers. However, free childcare or cash transfers have little value if ECEC places are unavailable.

Securing access to ECEC through full or significant subsidisation is only the first step. Effective measures to increase access to ECEC need to combine universalist and targeted policy measures. Beyond Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States, such policies are rare and generally not evaluated. As the section on Latin America shows, countries such as Brazil are only beginning to consider specific programmes for Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian children.

Among targeted interventions, some of the oldest and most assessed over decades are ECEC programmes for Indigenous children in former settler colonies. These programmes aim to preserve and promote Indigenous language and culture while addressing longstanding socioeconomic inequalities. However, as the case study of kōhanga reo in New Zealand illustrates, balancing universalist and targeted approaches can be challenging. Family involvement in kōhanga reo supported its primary cultural and linguistic goals but did not facilitate parental workforce participation. Furthermore, separating kōhanga reo from mainstream ECEC led to insufficient funding and support for facilities. Integrating it into the mainstream system also presented challenges, as the mainstream curriculum was not seen as conducive to the flourishing of Māori language and culture. While a wholly separate ECEC system for a particular ethnic group is not feasible for UK policymakers, this case offers valuable lessons.

One of the biggest challenges is the workforce. Evidence shows that recruiting and retaining ECEC teachers who provide high-quality care while also acting as cultural translators and building community links is essential. This is particularly evident in the case of Roma teaching assistants, where programmes with permanent contracts and career development fared better than those treating Roma assistants as casual staff. In Canada, the low pay and status of ECEC staff from minority groups have been key obstacles to expanding access.

The Roma case study also highlights how an ECEC system extending beyond institutional daycare can improve language skills (including heritage languages), parental confidence and trust, developmental outcomes, and ultimately lead to better school readiness and educational outcomes. Evidence from other projects shows that integrated work – involving both care in ECEC centres and support for parents – is the best approach. This integration benefits children's outcomes and helps organisations and professionals by reducing duplication across sectors and maximising human, financial and material resources.

Finally, well-supported evaluations are crucial for engaging and persuading policymakers. Determining the outcomes to be measured and followed over time should be a collaborative effort between researchers and policymakers. The randomised controlled trial conducted in Bulgaria is a particularly illuminating example of a robust study that can inform future policymaking. It demonstrates the importance of looking beyond attendance and evaluating longer-term social and educational outcomes to design the best possible ECEC system for children and parents.

Acknowledgments

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