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## Transforming the future with Early Childhood Education

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### ABSTRACT

Early childhood education (ECE) is widely recognized as foundational to children's cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical development. Research across developmental psychology, neuroscience, sociology, and economics suggests that high-quality early learning experiences foster long-term academic success, emotional well-being, personal and professional success, inner peace, maturity and social adaptability (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). This paper synthesizes contemporary research on ECE, exploring theoretical frameworks, pedagogical models, socio-economic influences, and emerging directions in the field. This document provides a comprehensive and original synthesis of contemporary ECE research, highlighting developmental theories, pedagogical models, the role of caregivers, cultural and socio-economic influences, and future directions. The intention is to offer educators, researchers, and policymakers a clear understanding of the evolving landscape of early childhood education. This paper also tries to briefly portray the national approaches to early childhood education (ECE) in Finland, Denmark, India, South Korea, Japan, Sweden, and Canada. The synthesis identifies four cross-national trends: movement toward integrated care-and-education models, expanding universal access, stronger quality frameworks and teacher qualifications, and tensions between academic readiness and play-based approaches. Implications for policy and practice are discussed. (Keywords: early



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childhood education, ECE, comparative policy, play-based learning, universal access)

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## **Introduction**

Early childhood, spanning birth to age six, represents a critical developmental window characterized by rapid brain growth and heightened environmental sensitivity. Experiences during this period play essential roles in shaping language acquisition, emotional regulation, early literacy, and social competence (National Research Council, 2015). As global awareness of ECE's importance increases, many nations continue to improve preschool access, curriculum quality, teacher training, and family engagement programs. The research consensus suggests that experiences during these formative years significantly shape lifelong learning trajectories. The importance of ECE has grown in global discourse as we can see the increasing awareness created by universal preschool programs, teacher training, curriculum reforms, and parental involvement initiatives. However, early education is not a uniform concept; it encompasses diverse philosophies, cultural expectations, and socio-economic conditions. This document examines major themes influencing ECE and synthesizes insights across global contexts.

Countries approach governance and pedagogy differently, shaped by social welfare models, historical trajectories, and recent policy priorities (e.g., universal access, workforce professionalisation, and integration of care and education). Below I present concise, country-level descriptions followed by a comparative synthesis. The country summaries rely on national documents, international agency reporting, and recent sector reviews.

## **Historical Background and Evolution of ECE**

Early childhood education as a formal field has roots in theories of child development proposed by scholars such as Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, and Jean Piaget. Froebel emphasized structured play; Montessori introduced self-directed learning and sensory materials; Piaget focused on cognitive stages. Lev Vygotsky later contributed the sociocultural theory, emphasizing the role of interaction in learning, in his sociocultural theory placed learning within the context of social interaction (Edwards, 2013). Advances in neuroscience have further demonstrated that early relationships and stimulation influence synaptic development and long-term learning patterns (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016).

In the 20th and 21st centuries, research expanded to include neuroscience findings that revealed the importance of synaptic growth, plasticity, and the role of relationships in shaping brain architecture.



Global organizations such as UNESCO and UNICEF have subsequently promoted early education as a human right, emphasizing access, equity, and quality.

India's early childhood education system has a dual foundation in informal traditions and formal government initiatives, with the latter gaining significant momentum post-independence. Notable milestones include the establishment of the first formal center by Tarabai Modak in 1945, the government's launch of the Integrated Child Development Services program in 1975, and subsequent policy emphasis in the National Policies on Education of 1986 and 1992, which recognized early childhood education as a critical first step in the educational hierarchy. While informal care has historically been provided through family, formal early childhood education was limited until the 1970s and has since been expanded and structured through programs like ICDS.

### **Theoretical Frameworks in Early Childhood Education**

#### **Cognitive Development Theory**

Piaget's theory frames learning as a constructivist process where children build understanding through active engagement (Piaget, 1977). Modern interpretations acknowledge variability in developmental progression and emphasize enriched environments that promote problem-solving.

#### **Sociocultural Theory**

Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective highlights the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding, emphasizing learning through guided interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers support children's emerging skills until independent competence develops.

#### **Behaviourist and Constructivist Approaches**

Behaviourist strategies, such as reinforcement, remain common in early literacy instruction, while constructivist approaches emphasize exploration and inquiry (Skinner, 1953). Balanced curricula integrate both depending on context.

#### **Ecological Systems Theory**

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory positions the child within multiple interacting environments—from family to societal structures—shaping developmental outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).



## **Components of High-Quality Early Childhood Education**

### **Play-Based Learning**

Play—free, structured, symbolic, and physical—is central to cognitive and social development. It fosters creativity, language formation, and problem-solving (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009).

### **Language and Early Literacy**

Exposure to rich language, dialogic reading, and phonological awareness activities supports early literacy development and later reading proficiency (Snow et al., 1998).

### **Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)**

SEL programs promote emotional regulation, empathy, cooperation, resilience, and positive behavior (Denham, 2006). Teacher responsiveness and warm relationships correlate strongly with improved social outcomes.

### **Early Mathematics and Science Learning**

Young children naturally engage in quantitative reasoning and scientific inquiry. Early numeracy predicts future academic achievement (Duncan et al., 2007), while hands-on exploration enhances conceptual understanding.

### **Health, Nutrition, and Physical Development**

Cognitive and physical development are interlinked; adequate nutrition and physical activity support attention, motor development, and learning readiness (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007).

### **Role of Teachers and Caregivers**

#### **Teacher Competencies**

Competent educators possess knowledge of child development, design developmentally appropriate learning experiences, demonstrate emotional sensitivity, and accurately document progress (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

#### **Professional Development**



Continuous professional learning—collaborative planning, reflective practice, and coursework—improves instructional quality and child outcomes (Zaslow et al., 2010).

### **Teacher-Child Interaction**

Positive, responsive teacher-child relationships enhance motivation, emotional security, and engagement while reducing behavioural challenges (Hamre & Pianta, 2005).

### **Parental and Community Involvement**

Parents are children's primary educators. Home learning activities, parent-teacher communication, and community support structures such as libraries and health centres enrich children's learning environments (Epstein, 2018).

### **Curriculum Models and Pedagogical Approaches**

#### **Montessori Method**

Emphasizes independence, sensory learning, mixed-age groups, and self-paced exploration (Lillard, 2018).

The Montessori approach, developed by Maria Montessori, emphasizes autonomy, sensory engagement, and intrinsic motivation. Classrooms are intentionally designed as structured learning environments where every material has a purpose and fosters cognitive, motor, and practical-life skills. Children move freely between activities, selecting tasks that match their developmental readiness—a process known as "auto-education."

Central principles include:

- **Prepared Environment:** Classrooms are calm, orderly, and aesthetically arranged to support independence. Materials are displayed at child height and designed using natural textures to promote sensory exploration.
- **Self-Correcting Materials:** Montessori materials allow children to evaluate their own progress, encouraging persistence and problem-solving.
- **Mixed-Age Groups:** Older children reinforce their learning through peer teaching, while younger children benefit from modeling.



Research suggests that Montessori environments enhance executive functioning, concentration, and social responsibility.

### **Reggio Emilia Approach**

Focuses on creativity, collaboration, project-based learning, and the learning environment as a "third teacher" (Edwards et al., 2012).

Originating in post-war Italy, the Reggio Emilia philosophy views children as strong, capable, and resourceful. Learning is deeply social, emerging through collaboration with peers, teachers, families, and the wider community.

Core elements include:

- **Project-Based Learning:** Projects ("progettazione") are long-term investigations driven by children's curiosity. Teachers document children's responses to guide the project's evolution.
- **The Hundred Languages of Children:** Expression through drawing, construction, dance, clay, storytelling, and digital media is viewed as equally important. This multimodal communication enhances creativity and identity formation.
- **Environment as a Third Teacher:** Classrooms include natural light, open spaces, mirrors, plants, and displays of children's work to create a sense of belonging and inspiration.

Documentation—photographs, transcripts, learning journals

### **Waldorf Education**

Integrates imagination, rhythm, nature-based learning, and limited early technology exposure (Uhrmacher, 1995).

Waldorf pedagogy, founded by Rudolf Steiner, integrates imagination, rhythm, and holistic development. Rooted in the idea that early learning should nourish the body, mind, and spirit, Waldorf programs prioritize sensory experiences, storytelling, and nature-based activities.

Distinctive features include:

- **Emphasis on Rhythm and Routine:** Predictable daily structures support security and emotional grounding.



- Delayed Academics: Formal literacy instruction often begins later to allow imaginative play and oral language to mature naturally.
- Artistic Integration: Painting, music, handcrafting, and movement (e.g., eurythmy) are embedded in daily lessons.
- Nature Engagement: Outdoor learning, gardening, and seasonal festivals promote ecological awareness and community.

Waldorf settings typically limit screen time to encourage interpersonal interaction and sensory-rich play.

### **HighScope Curriculum**

Promotes active learning, daily routines, and child-initiated planning (Schweinhart et al., 2005).

Grounded in Piagetian theory, the HighScope approach emphasizes active learning through the “plan–do–review” cycle, where children set intentions, engage in activities, and reflect on outcomes.

Key components include:

- Active Participatory Learning: Children learn through hands-on experiences with materials, peers, and adults.
- Consistent Daily Routine: Predictable segments—greetings, small groups, large groups, cleanup, meals—help children develop executive functioning.
- Adult–Child Interaction: Teachers use scaffolding strategies, open-ended questions, and intentional conversations to extend learning.
- Key Developmental Indicators (KDIs): A structured framework that supports planning and assessment across cognitive, social, and physical domains.

The Perry Preschool Project, based on HighScope principles, demonstrated long-term benefits such as improved academic achievement, higher earnings, and reduced social challenges in adulthood.

### **Play- and Inquiry-Based Curricula**

Flexible models that prioritize exploration, experimentation, and dialogue promote both academic and social growth (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009).



Play-based learning is rooted in the understanding that play is the natural mode through which young children understand the world. Inquiry-based learning complements this by positioning children as investigators who seek answers to their own questions.

In these flexible models:

- **Play is Purposeful:** Teachers observe play to identify teachable moments and embed learning outcomes into activities.
- **Inquiry Cycles:** Children ask questions, develop hypotheses, test ideas, and discuss outcomes, mirroring scientific thinking.
- **Integrated Learning:** Literacy, numeracy, science, and social skills blend seamlessly into activities—block building may teach geometry while dramatic play fosters language and empathy.
- **Teacher as Facilitator:** Rather than directing learning, educators create provocations,

### **Socio-Economic and Cultural Influences**

#### **Poverty and Access**

Children in low-income communities often face barriers such as limited resources and nutrition deficits. High-quality preschool participation reduces achievement gaps and improves long-term outcomes (Heckman, 2011).

#### **Cultural Values and Practices**

Cultural norms shape parenting styles, communication patterns, and educational expectations. Culturally responsive curriculum enhances engagement and identity formation (Gay, 2010).

#### **Gender and Inclusion**

Inclusive education practices—UDL, individual supports, differentiated instruction—ensure equitable participation for all learners (Florian, 2014).

### **Technology and Digital Learning in ECE**

Research shows that interactive apps and digital storytelling support literacy and numeracy when used in moderation and under adult supervision (Neumann & Neumann, 2014). Much better, these activities can



be made into paper based, props based, imaginary aligned, or game-based activities to reduce the dangers of radiation. Excessive screen time may reduce active play and social interaction.

### **Assessment in Early Childhood Education**

Developmentally appropriate assessment methods—observations, portfolios, anecdotes, and checklists—inform instruction and identify developmental needs (NAEYC, 2020).

### **Country summaries in ECE**

#### **Finland**

Finland's ECEC system foregrounds holistic, child-centred pedagogy that integrates care and education; national core curricula provide guiding principles rather than prescriptive lessons. Recent years have seen refinement of a national core curriculum and legislative frameworks strengthening quality and equity across municipalities. Emphasis remains on play, child agency, and staff professionalism within a universal, publicly funded structure.

#### **Denmark**

Danish ECEC is shaped by Nordic welfare principles: municipal responsibility, subsidised access, emphasis on child wellbeing and play, and strong pedagogical professionalism. The sector features diverse types of day-care and preschool provision and continued policy debate about quality, inclusion, and workforce conditions. Recent research highlights the persistence of child-centred, local pedagogical traditions while policymakers monitor quality indicators and access.

#### **India**

India's ECE landscape is mixed: long-standing Anganwadi centres provide nutrition and basic child services, while recent policy impetus — notably the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 — emphasises expansion of early childhood care and education (ECCE) and integration of pre-primary provision into the formal education system (targeted universal provisioning by 2030). States are implementing playschool upgrades and initiatives to align with NEP recommendations, but resource and capacity gaps remain large across regions.

#### **South Korea**



South Korea's ECE has expanded substantially over the past decade, with increasing kindergarten enrolment and policy attention to reducing inequality. Governance historically split across ministries (education vs. welfare) has prompted reforms to better coordinate funding and quality. Recent OECD country analyses document rising enrolment and efforts to integrate services and professional standards.

### **Japan**

Japan maintains a mixed system of nursery (hoikuen) and kindergarten (yōchien) institutions, with longstanding cultural emphases on socialisation, group skills, and holistic development. Scholarly reviews describe historical shifts toward more integrated care-and-education models and recent policy moves to expand access and improve quality while balancing care and educational goals.

### **Sweden**

Sweden's preschool (förskola) is rooted in play-based, egalitarian Nordic pedagogy and heavily public-funded municipal provision. Current debates include proposed structural changes to school starting age and the balance between play and early formal instruction; recent national discussions and reforms have drawn attention to maintaining play-based approaches while meeting literacy and numeracy goals.

### **Canada**

Canada's ECE/ELCC (early learning and child care) is largely provincially/territorially governed with recent federal–province agreements aiming to expand affordable, accessible early learning and child care across jurisdictions (e.g., Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care agreements). Reforms since 2021 focus on affordability targets, workforce support, and multi-year action plans per province.

### **Synthesis: cross-national trends and tensions**

1. Integration of care and education: Many systems (Finland, parts of Japan/Korea, Canada's evolving frameworks) emphasise integrated care-and-education rather than strict separation; this reflects research linking combined approaches to holistic development.
2. Expansion toward universal access: Nordic countries have long universal systems; other nations (Canada via federal agreements, India via NEP 2020 targets, Korea via enrolment expansion) show clear policy moves toward widespread access, though implementation capacity and equity differ.



3. Professionalisation and quality frameworks: Across contexts, policy emphasis has shifted to staff qualifications, curricular guidance (national core curricula or provincial frameworks), and licensing/inspection regimes (e.g., UAE regulators, Canada's funding tied to standards).
4. Play vs. early academic instruction tension: Several countries (Sweden debate about lowering school start age; international discussions in Nordic and other systems) are negotiating the balance between preserving play-based pedagogy and meeting pressure for early literacy/numeracy. This tension is visible in policy debates and reforms.

## **Some Challenges in ECE**

### **1. Unequal access and persistent inequities**

What it is: Large and persistent gaps in access to quality early childhood education (ECE) exist within and between countries — children from low-income families, rural areas, ethnic minorities, migrants, and those in conflict-affected or climate-vulnerable settings are least likely to receive high-quality ECE.

Why it matters: Early years are critical for brain development; unequal access entrenches later educational and social inequalities.

Evidence: UNICEF's global reporting highlights substantial gaps in access and the concentration of the most deprived children outside quality services, while regional analyses show that progress has been uneven and that the most marginalised groups are still missing out.

Mitigation: Targeted expansion (prioritising disadvantaged groups), conditional funding linked to equity indicators, community-based outreach (including mobile or home-visiting models), and cross-sectoral linkages with health and nutrition services.

### **2. Workforce shortages, low pay, and weak professionalisation**

What it is: The ECE workforce often faces low wages, insecure working conditions, varied and sometimes insufficient pre-service training, and limited opportunities for continuing professional development. High turnover and low morale reduce continuity and programme quality.

Why it matters: Quality of interactions with trained staff is one of the strongest in-program predictors of child outcomes; workforce instability undermines quality and programme scale-up.

Evidence: OECD's thematic work on the ECEC workforce documents variation in initial education



requirements, gaps in practice-focused training, and the need to improve working conditions and professional development to sustain quality.

Recent research also documents compensation and retention challenges in multiple contexts. Mitigation: Raise qualification standards while financing scholarships/bridging courses; introduce career pathways, improve pay and benefits (parity strategies), and mandate and fund regular in-service professional development with coaching/mentoring components.

### **3. Inclusion challenges: children with disabilities, multilingual and migrant groups**

What it is: Services often lack trained staff, adapted curricula, and accessible infrastructure to include children with disabilities or those from linguistic/ethnic minority and migrant families

Why it matters: Exclusion during early years magnifies later learning gaps and social exclusion.

Evidence: UNICEF and program evaluations highlight that marginalised groups are least likely to access quality ECE and that inclusive practice requires specialist training and resource allocation. Mitigation:

Strengthen inclusive education training, allocate funds for reasonable accommodations, recruit multilingual staff, and use community partnerships to identify and support vulnerable children.

### **4. Digital divides, technology use, and inappropriate screen exposure**

What it is: The pandemic accelerated the use of digital tools for early learning, but access is uneven and screen time recommendations for very young children are often ignored or applied inconsistently. Teacher readiness to use pedagogically appropriate digital resources is variable.

Why it matters:

Poorly designed or excessive digital exposure can harm developmental processes; however, appropriately used digital tools can support learning when access and guidance exist.

Evidence: Studies and reviews since COVID-19 indicate both the potential and the risks of digital modalities in ECE; equitable access and teacher preparation are central concerns.

Mitigation: Develop evidence-based guidance on digital tool use for early childhood, invest in teacher training for pedagogical use of technology, and prioritise equitable access.

### **Policy implications and recommendations (brief)**

- Preserve play-based, developmentally appropriate pedagogy while aligning assessment and accountability systems so they do not narrow early childhood curricula.



- Prioritise workforce support (pre-service qualifications, in-service training, pay) as core to sustained quality.
- Use phased, context-sensitive scaling strategies when expanding access (target vulnerable groups first, build infrastructure and training pipelines).
- Promote cross-sector coordination (education, health, social protection) to deliver integrated ECD services—especially critical in contexts with split governance.

### **Global Trends and Policy Innovations in ECE**

Across countries analysed, several cross-cutting trends and innovations appear repeatedly:

1. **Integration of care and education** — Strong emphasis on holistic “educare” models that treat care and pedagogy as unified tasks (notably Finland and many Nordic countries).
2. **Universal access and affordability** — Efforts to expand publicly supported hours or subsidized places (e.g., Canada’s multilateral ELCC agreements; Korea’s subsidy schemes for Nuri curriculum).
3. **Curriculum modernization toward child-centred/play-based approaches** — Revisions to national curricula to emphasize play, socio-emotional learning, and holistic development (e.g., Korea’s Nuri curriculum; Sweden’s Lpfö 18).
4. **Quality assurance frameworks and measurable standards** — Growth of explicit quality frameworks and inspection or accreditation regimes (e.g., KHDA’s ECCE Quality Framework in Dubai).
5. **Workforce professionalization and training** — Policies targeting qualification upgrades, continuous professional development, and improved staff–child ratios. (OECD)
6. **India: NEP 2020, Anganwadi reform, and scale challenges** places ECCE at the center of school readiness reforms and aims for universal access to high-quality ECCE by 2030. These trends reflect converging policy logics: raise the quality of early childhood experiences, expand access equitably, and systematize accountability while allowing for local adaptation.

### **Conclusion**

ECE remains a cornerstone of lifelong development. By integrating research-based teaching, culturally responsive practices, and collaborative partnerships, societies can support equitable learning



environments that empower every child. National approaches to ECE reflect different historical, cultural, and policy legacies. Across all contexts, the international movement is toward greater access, stronger quality frameworks, and attention to workforce professionalisation — tempered by local political choices about the role of play and early instruction. The main challenges in ECE are interlinked: low investment and fragmented governance constrain workforce development, which in turn limits quality and equitable access. Effective responses require integrated policy packages—sustained financing, workforce professionalisation, robust data systems, cross-sectoral governance, and a firm commitment to equity and developmentally appropriate practice. International guidance (UNICEF, OECD) and country evaluations consistently recommend comprehensive strategies that sequence expansion with quality and inclusion.

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