



Pre-primary education around the world



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Max ♡



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Kym Simoncini is an Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education and President of OMEP Australia. Over many years, she has worked in partnership with communities, teachers, and organisations in Australia and the Pacific to promote children's rights and access to high-quality early childhood education.

Her research and advocacy focus on play, early learning, and ensuring that children see their cultures, languages, and everyday lives valued in both policy and practice.

On behalf of OMEP Australia, Kym initiated and coordinated this pre-primary book project and oversaw its development from the initial concept through to publication.



OMEP Australia has fully funded the book as part of its commitment to supporting early childhood teachers and children with practical, contextually relevant resources.

Kym hopes this book will be a useful and inspiring companion for those working with young children and a reminder that their daily efforts make a profound difference in children's lives.



Megan McGee, OMEF UK.

In 2017, I was fortunate enough to be given the opportunity to participate in the ERASMUS + scheme, which enabled me to live in Denmark for a semester during the second year of my undergraduate degree.

Whilst living in Denmark, I was able to undertake a brief placement in a Danish elementary school and learned about the Danish education system, while also experiencing the Danish culture and lifestyle. It was around this period of time that I began to draw my own comparisons between the education system in Denmark and the education system in England.

From there, my interest in this area continued to expand. Since my return to England, I have written and published two academic journal articles, both drawing comparisons between England and Denmark. That semester in Denmark inspired me in a way I hadn't anticipated.

I first became involved with OMEF in 2019, where I attended the world assembly and conference taking place that year in Panama as a student observer, following my success in my application for a travel bursary.

After reaching out to multiple OMEF branches globally, meeting with Mercedes Mayol Lassalle (who I thank wholeheartedly for her blessing to do this project) and working with OMEF Australia (who I cannot thank enough as without them, this would not have been possible), the "Pre-Primary: My Right, Our Future" project was born.



To all who contributed to this project, I thank you for your time, patience, and interest. To our readers, I hope you enjoy this book.

The right to Early Childhood Education: A global commitment for every child



Across the world, millions of young children are still denied their right to education during the most formative years of life.

Since its founding in 1948, the World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP) has worked across more than eighty countries to promote and defend the right to education and care from birth.

Guided by the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), OMEP has consistently advocated for the recognition of early childhood care and education (ECCE) as a fundamental human right and a public good.

OMEP actively participated in the World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education, held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in 2022, and contributed to the drafting of the Tashkent Declaration and Commitments to Action for Transforming ECCE.

This landmark declaration, endorsed by 150 countries, recognizes that early childhood education and care are “key to achieving the right to education for all and to enabling the fulfilment of other social rights.”

It calls upon governments to “enhance policy and legal frameworks to ensure that the right to education includes ECCE,” and stresses that the “availability, accessibility, adaptability, and acceptability” of ECCE services must be reflected in policies and legislation.

In its first commitment, the Tashkent Declaration urges Member States to “ensure further improvements and implementation of policy and legal frameworks to guarantee the right of every child to inclusive, quality care and pre-primary education, with special reference to the most disadvantaged children.” OMEP’s engagement in the Tashkent process reaffirmed its long-standing position: that early childhood education must be recognized as an integral component of the right to education, requiring explicit legal protection and sustained public investment.

We now know that an opportunity was missed. Brains blaze in the early years. Children who benefit from pre-primary education start school ready to thrive; they repeat fewer grades, stay in school longer, learn more, and later they earn more, with the biggest lift for children from low-income families.





Following this global milestone, OMEP has continued its advocacy within the United Nations system, contributing to the Open-Ended Intergovernmental Working Group (OE-IGWG) mandated by Human Rights Council Resolution 56/5 (2024).

This group is examining whether a new Optional Protocol to the CRC should explicitly recognize early childhood education as part of the right to education and require States to guarantee at least one free, public pre-primary year for every child.

This process directly advances the Tashkent commitments, transforming their aspirations into enforceable obligations. While international human rights law includes early education implicitly in various instruments, it remains fragmented. The CRC guarantees free primary education but leaves pre-primary unaddressed, creating ambiguity and limiting accountability. As a result, only about 61% of children globally attend pre-primary education the year before entering primary school, and in Sub-Saharan Africa that figure drops to 24%.

A binding international instrument is essential to close this gap. Declarations and policy frameworks, however valuable, cannot compel governments to act.

A treaty can transform moral and political commitments into legal obligations requiring States to allocate budgets, strengthen public systems, and ensure monitoring and accountability.

Mercedes Mayol Lassalle

World President of the World Organization for Early Childhood Education OMEP (Jan. 2020 to Dec. 2025)

The experience of previous Optional Protocols, such as the one on children in armed conflict, demonstrates how legally binding norms can accelerate national reforms and generate tangible progress.

From OMEP's perspective, early childhood education is not a privilege, it is a human right and a public good. It forms the foundation of children's holistic development and of societies built on inclusion, equity, and peace.

Free and universal pre-primary education enables every child to develop their potential, safeguards against discrimination, and supports the rights to play, culture, and participation. When access depends on families' ability to pay, a universal right becomes a privilege, deepening inequality.

Guaranteeing this right also means recognizing the shared responsibility between families and States. The CRC already establishes that parents are the first educators and that governments must support them through appropriate services, policies, and resources.

Public systems must strengthen, not replace, family care. Financing ECCE must therefore be understood as a human rights obligation, not a political choice.

The UNESCO-UNICEF Global Report on Early Childhood Care and Education (2024) shows that average global spending on pre-primary education remains just 0.4% of GDP, far below what is needed to ensure quality, inclusive, and equitable access.

A binding international instrument could help transform these financial commitments into enforceable duties.

The proposed Optional Protocol represents the missing link in international human rights architecture. It would provide legal clarity, coherence, and accountability turning the vision of the Tashkent Declaration into reality.

Recognizing free early childhood education as part of the right to education is not about creating a new right; it is about fulfilling what the global community has already affirmed.

By strengthening legal frameworks and public systems, the international community can ensure that every child, regardless of origin, income, or circumstance enjoys the right to learn, play, and flourish from the very beginning of life.



Let's make free pre-primary education every child's right



In 1948, with much of the world in ruins in the aftermath of the Second World War, countries came together to draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to envision a better future for humanity. Among its various promises were two audaciously ambitious claims: “Everyone has the right to education” and “Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages.”

Ambitious, because at the time, only half of the world's children were even going to primary school. Yet, over the decades, communities built classrooms and trained teachers. Today, about 90 percent of the world's children complete primary school. Quietly, steadily (admittedly, sometimes too slowly) humanity pulled off one of its greatest achievements: enriching the lives of many millions with all the knowledge, skills, and empowerment that primary education provides.

But when that 1948 promise was turned into binding international conventions in the 1970s and 1980s, only free primary education was guaranteed to all. Early childhood education, including pre-primary education such as preschool and kindergarten, was entirely left on the sidelines. A few visionaries argued for it, but without success.

We now know that an opportunity was missed. Brains blaze in the early years. Children who benefit from pre-primary education start school ready to thrive, they repeat fewer grades, stay in school longer, learn more, and later they earn more, with the biggest lift for children from low-income families.



We hear from the children themselves how important the opportunity is. They tell us of the joy of learning about the world, exploring new skills, building confidence, and making friends. These first sparks can ignite life-long learning.

Opportunity is expanding. As the chapters in this book explore, countries on every continent are opening the gates to pre-primary education. But we are still far from universal access. Only about half of children of pre-primary age are enrolled; more than 175 million are not.





One of the most common and widespread barriers is brutally simple: cost. Registration fees, tuition, materials and supply costs, and “voluntary” payments that really aren’t. Fees that stack up into big walls for some families. In some places, a year of preschool can rival university tuition.

Remove the fees, and the picture flips: enrollment rises, children with disabilities can access the support they need, children arrive at primary school on track, parents (especially mothers) can return to public life and paid employment, and families stop gambling with the future to survive the present.

The evidence is clear. The economics are compelling. The human stakes are undeniable. Yet the silence on early childhood education in our core human rights treaties means the international human rights framework has not kept up with what children need to succeed.

It is time for a change.

In 2019, OMEP and the Latin American Campaign for the Right to Education met with the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child to share their research concluding that the legally binding human rights framework fails to adequately specify that the right to education should begin in early childhood.

Fast-forward to 2024, and a trio of countries from different regions and income levels; Sierra Leone, the Dominican Republic, and Luxembourg took a bold idea to the UN Human Rights Council, the pre-eminent global human rights body in Geneva. They proposed updating international law to

***Bede Sheppard*, Deputy Child Rights Director, Human Rights Watch**

recognise every child’s human right to early childhood education, and to guarantee every child free public pre-primary education, beginning with at least one year (they also proposed closing a second gap: guaranteeing every child free public secondary education.)

The idea has taken off. Over the coming years, governments will be meeting to consider and draft a new treaty known as an “optional protocol” that could update the world’s main children’s rights treaty, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Equally historic: children are participating in the process. More than 8,000 children, some as young as 3, from 40 countries have shared their views to inform the negotiations.

This is ambitious, and it might seem like a distant goal for some countries. But it would not be the first time that the international community set an ambitious goal on education. Ambition paid off in the past, and we believe it will pay off again.

Although law itself does not teach a child to count or to hold a pencil, it can move governments’ budgets, policies, and priorities.

It gives advocates a tool, families a promise to point to, and politicians around the world a standard to meet.



The chapters ahead prove that free, high-quality, inclusive pre-primary education is achievable in high-income and low-income countries, in cities and in rural communities. They show how removing fees, training early childhood educators, providing outreach to families, and designing for inclusion, can transform lives.

If these pages leave you convinced, as they will, then add your voice. Urge your government, your local representative, your union, or your favoured political party, to back the proposed optional protocol to strengthen the right to education. Ask them to make free and accessible pre-primary education a right for all.



AUSTRALIA



Construction area.



Outdoor play area including sandpit and loose parts.

Pre-primary education in Australia is a dynamic landscape shaped by diverse policies, historical evolution, pedagogical approaches, and cultural influences. Terminology for pre-primary or preschool education varies across states and territories and is implemented through a range of providers and curriculum frameworks.

Preschool education is not compulsory but highly valued, with approximately 90% of Australian children participating in a preschool program in 2023. Access and equity are ongoing concerns, and historically, underserved groups have faced barriers related to affordability, availability, and location.

These issues spurred significant policy developments like the 2008 National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education, committing all governments to providing universal access to quality pre-primary education for at least 15 hours per week, or 600 hours per year.

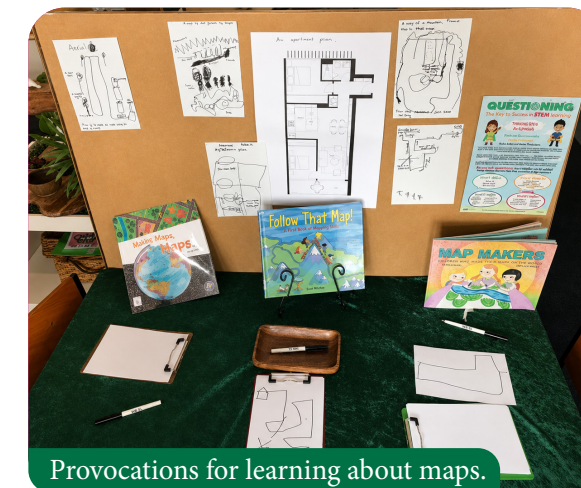
Each jurisdiction is responsible for delivering preschool education using federal funding, creating

a patchwork of models. Most states are rolling out funded preschool for two years.

Service models and curriculum

Preschool in Australia is delivered by a variety of service types including stand-alone preschools, preschools co-located within schools, and long day care services. Sessional preschools where children attend part-time are run by community-based not-for-profit organisations, or, as in South Australia, state government Education Departments.

As government funding is only for 15 hours a week, many children attend other early childhood services for the remainder of the week.



Provocations for learning about maps.



Obstacle course.



Undercover area with art and craft activities.





AUSTRALIA

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Reading area.



Dramatic play area, hairdressing salon.

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF): Belonging, Being & Becoming is the national curriculum guiding preschool programs for children aged birth to five.

States such as Victoria have expanded their framework to cover children up to eight, supporting transitions from preschool to school.

The EYLF focus on five learning outcomes reflects a vision of children as competent, capable and possessing agency, with:

- Strong sense of identity
- Connection and contribution to the world
- Sense of wellbeing
- Confidence and involvement in learning
- Effective communication

Daily routines and learning environments

Daily routines are shaped by play-based and intentional teaching that prioritises holistic development over narrow, school-readiness curricula. Preschool days typically involve a blend of indoor and outdoor play, group activities, mealtime routines, and opportunities for children to choose their own activities, fostering independence and engagement.

Benefiting from favourable weather and the availability of land, especially outside major cities, many preschools offer large outdoor areas with sandpits, vegetable and flower gardens, mud kitchens, and climbing equipment that support rich play and learning experiences.

Nature immersion programs such as bush and beach kindergartens, inspired by European Forest Schools, have become increasingly popular, enabling children to explore natural settings and strengthen their connection to the environment.

Indoor environments are rich with dedicated areas for reading, drama, music, arts, block play, and STEM activities. Children's artwork is regularly displayed, and digital resources, including iPads and interactive whiteboards, are used in some settings.

Professionalism, quality, and assessment

Australian preschool teachers must hold a Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education. They are supported by educators with Diploma or Certificate qualifications, working collaboratively with children and families.

Since 2012, all early childhood services have had to meet the national standards under the National Quality Framework (NQF), which benchmarks all aspects of education provision and ensures ongoing quality improvement through regular assessments and service quality ratings.

Documentation of children's learning informs families of their child's progress and helps identify developmental delays in children needing extra support. With parent permission, child reports are shared with school to help children's transition to school.

Special features of Australian pre-school

Inclusion: A key focus in policy design and implementation is creating inclusive environments where all children are welcomed, their strengths recognised, and their individual learning and wellbeing needs supported so they can participate fully.

Pedagogical diversity: International methodologies like Reggio Emilia, Montessori, and Steiner are present. The Reggio Emilia approach, for example, is evident in child-led learning, collaborative documentation, and the concept of the environment as a "third teacher".

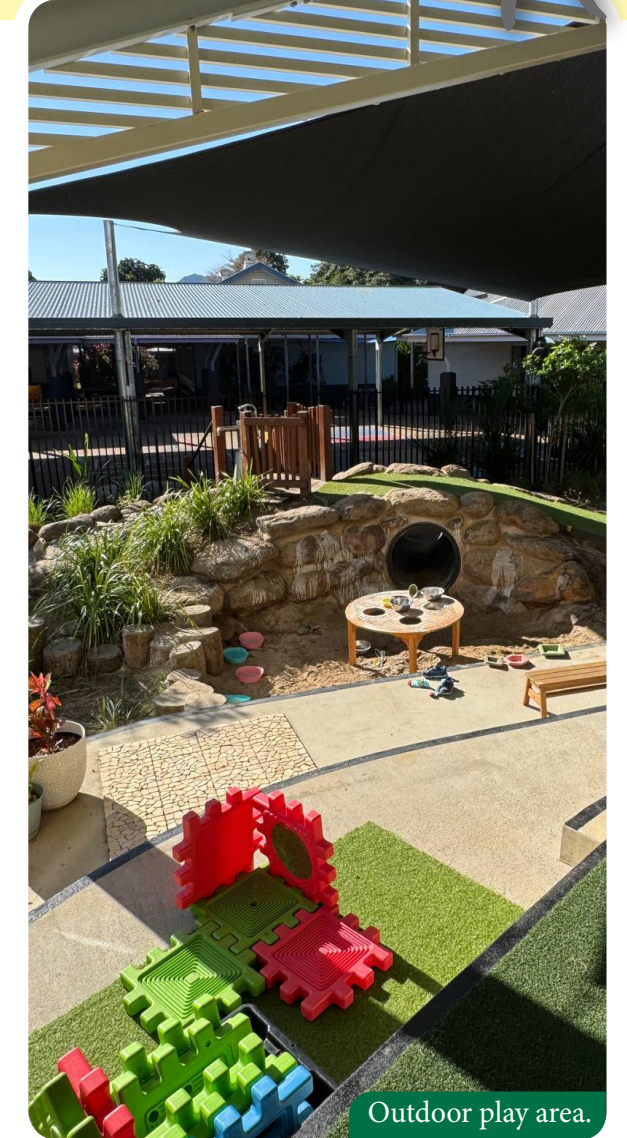
Indigenous perspectives and sustainability: Educators are encouraged to create culturally responsive learning environments where children connect with Country, respect First Nations knowledge systems, and engage in sustainable practices that nurture care for the natural world.

Excellence and equity

A strong commitment to excellence and equity characterises the sector, with a particular focus on ensuring universal access and participation. A continuing priority is to ensure that children experiencing disadvantage or vulnerability receive the support they need to achieve positive outcomes, regardless of where they live or their families' circumstances.



Acknowledgment of Country.



Outdoor play area.



BULGARIA



Kindergarten “Slantse” (Sun) Levski.



Kindergarten “Edelweiss” Sliven.

Preschool education in Bulgaria is regulated by the Ministry of Education and Science and covers children up to 7 years old, which is the age when primary school starts. Organized preschool education in Bulgaria has a long history, with the first public kindergarten established in 1882. Throughout this time, Bulgarian preschool education has been shaped by historical and sociopolitical context.

Preschool education is a compulsory component of the overall educational system in Bulgaria.

Attendance in Bulgarian kindergartens is very high: statistics show that approximately 90% of children aged 3-7 attend kindergarten. Preschool education in Bulgaria is provided by kindergartens for children aged 2/3-7 years (mandatory from age 4 onwards).

Younger children under the age of 3 can attend nurseries, or nursery groups in kindergartens. There are also some preparatory groups that operate within public or private schools, which cover the final two mandatory years of kindergarten i.e. children aged 5-6 and 6-7 years old.

Most kindergartens are full-day and usually children spend around 8-9 hours there. Apart from the various kindergarten activities and three daily meals, children also take afternoon naps in appropriate sleeping areas.

The overwhelming majority of kindergartens in Bulgaria are public institutions run by the municipalities, with a small but increasing number of private kindergartens being established in response to increased demand, particularly in urban areas.



Private Kindergarten “Doverie” (Trust) Sofia.



Kindergarten “Edelweiss” Pleven.



Kindergarten “Dora Gabe” Sofia.



BULGARIA

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Kindergarten “Svetlina”(Light) Stara Zagora.

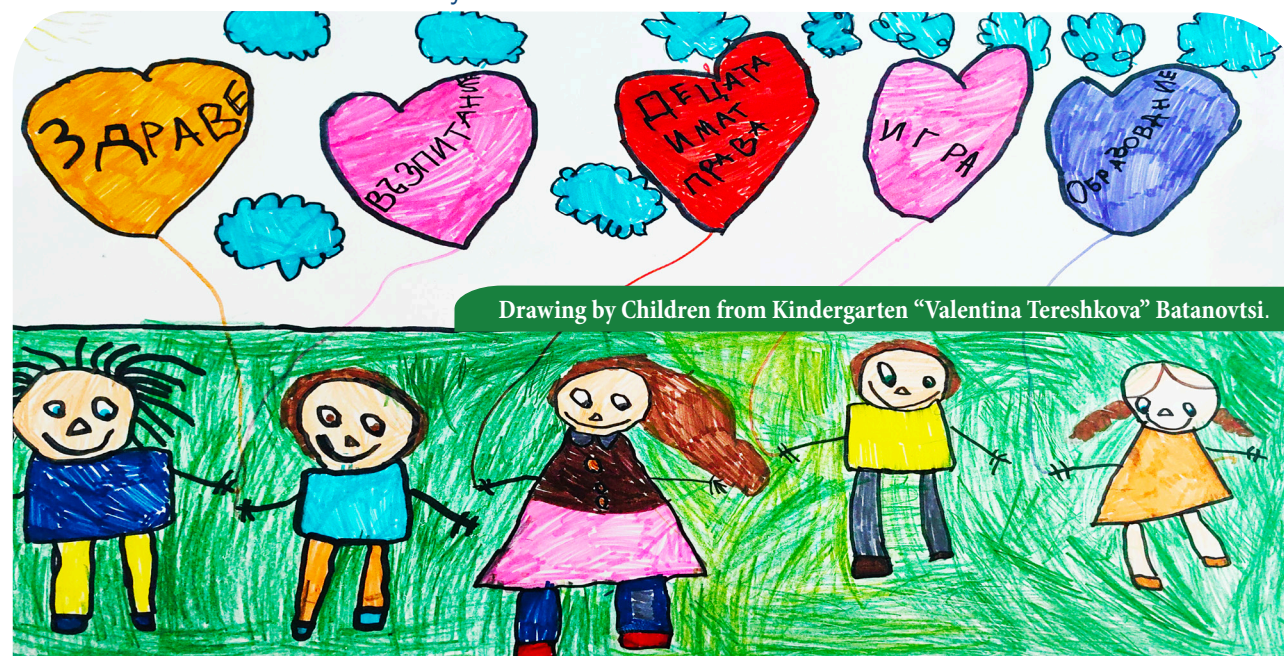
The contemporary preschool education curriculum in Bulgaria is based on the educational programs adopted in the 1990s, which focused on the ideas of significance and preciousness of childhood, stimulating functions of the material and intellectual surroundings, encouragement of the child's activities, importance of preschool education as a basic component of the educational system, and integration of the national educational experience with the universal educational practices.

The pedagogical situation is defined as the basic form of interaction, ensuring interaction on equal terms between adults and children, focusing on the individual child and his/her individuality.

The pedagogical interaction goals include, but are not limited to, cognitive development, stimulation of individual emotional experiences, and transference of practical experience.

Bulgarian preschool education is based on the National standards, which require preschool children to attain knowledge, skills, and attitudes according to each specific age group, in the following educational directions:

- Bulgarian language and literature
- Mathematics
- Social and natural environment



Drawing by Children from Kindergarten “Valentina Tereshkova” Batanovtsi.

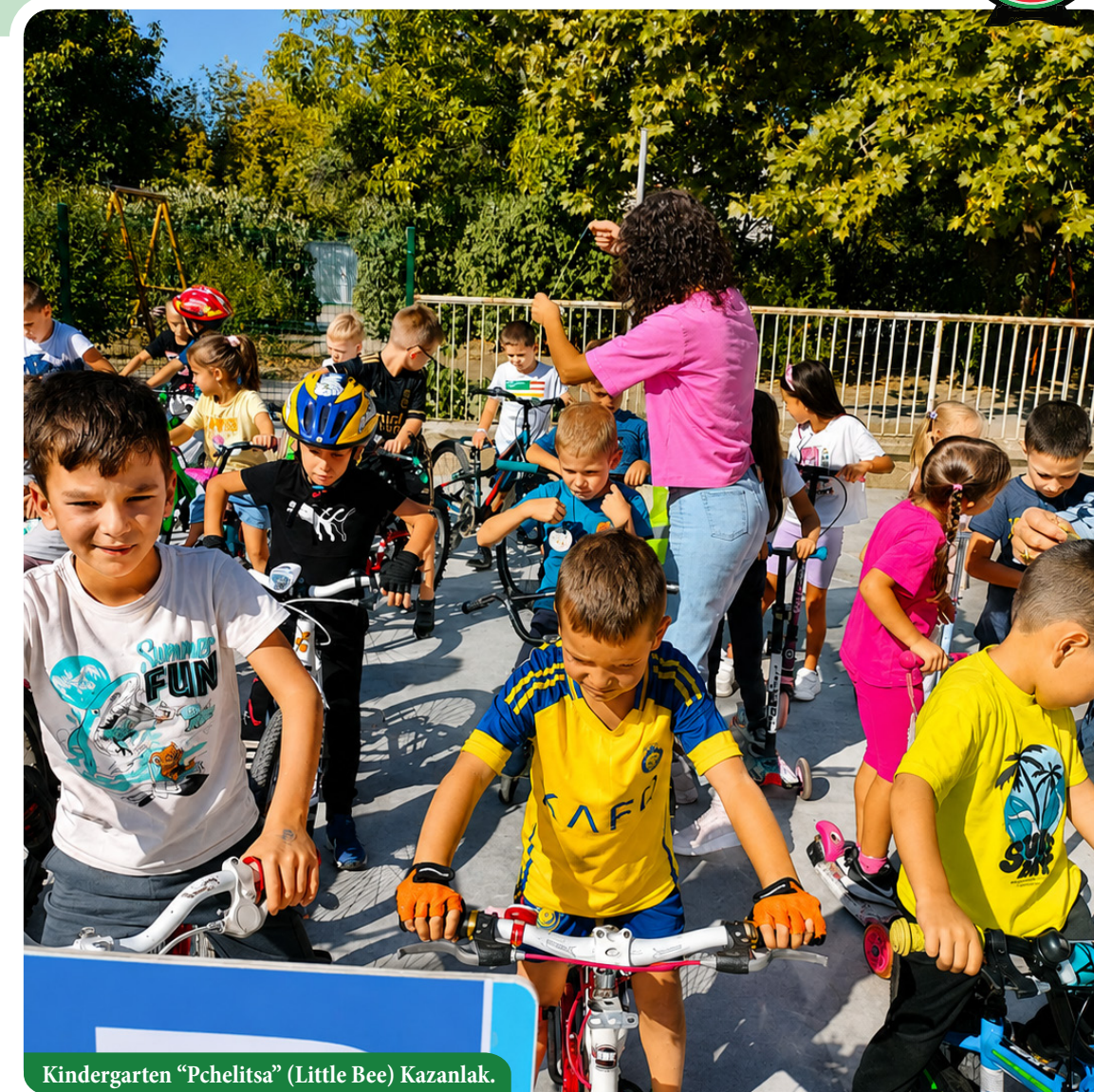
- Fine Arts
- Physical culture
- Music
- Construction and technology

Inclusivity is a key feature of Bulgarian preschool education. The relevant regulations ensure appropriate provisions are in place so that children with special educational needs or disabilities, as well as children with a migrant background or from ethnic minorities are integrated into mainstream institutions, including specialized materials and support staff where necessary.

In Bulgaria, the overwhelming majority of kindergarten teachers are university graduates.

The professional qualification of “preschool teacher” is obtained in Bulgarian universities after four years of training for a Bachelor's degree, with the option for an additional 1-1½ year of training in a Master's degree programme.

For practicing kindergarten teachers, there are multiple in-training or continuing education opportunities to enhance their qualifications. There are also three-year doctoral programs focused on preschool pedagogy for graduates with high academic performance.



Kindergarten “Pchelitsa” (Little Bee) Kazanlak.



CROATIA



Exploration center.

Kindergartens in Croatia provide organized out-of-home learning, care, and supervision for young children. Pre-primary programs in the year before school are compulsory; other ECEC participation is voluntary. Institutional ECEC in Croatia dates back to the 19th century. The earliest settings primarily safeguarded children so women could work, emphasizing care over education.

Nevertheless, preschool education has belonged to the education system since the early 20th century, when the Act on Primary Education regulated early learning and established its place within formal education.

Today, ECEC integrates education, health, nutrition, and social care for children from six months to six or seven years and constitutes the system's initial level.

Services are delivered by public and private providers under the same regulations. Financing is led by local authorities,

supplemented by parental fees and state co-funding. Enrollment reaches 48% of two-year-olds, 66% of three-year-olds, 71% of four-year-olds, and 75% of five-year-olds.

Service models and curriculum

The system is regulated by the National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education (2015), which sets values, goals, and pedagogical principles, and emphasizes holistic learning and the development of key competencies for lifelong learning.

The basic principles of the curriculum are:

- flexibility of the educational process in kindergarten
- partnership of kindergartens with parents and the wider community
- ensuring continuity of education
- openness to continuous learning and readiness to improve practice

The most common model is a regular full-day program (about 10 hours), but half-day, shorter, and special programs are also available.

Programs of special interest include children with disabilities, children from national minorities, and gifted children, as well as religious, language, sports, art, drama, and alternative programs (Montessori, Waldorf, Agazzi).

The mandatory preschool program facilitates the transition to primary school and supports school readiness.



Making pancakes.

Daily routines and learning environments

The daily routine is flexible and adapted to the individual needs, rhythm, and interests of children. Play, as a fundamental form of learning, occupies a central place.

The routine includes playtime, joint activities, meals and rest (adapted to age), free and targeted activities that encourage developmental outcomes, and regular time outdoors, which is considered essential for health, wellbeing, and learning.

Spaces are organized according to the principle of activity centers (corners), with the aim of encouraging independence, exploration, and inquiry.



Constructing in the building centre.



Construction centre.



CROATIA

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Photo credit: **Kindergarten Dobro Drvo** (interior) Kindergarten Prečko (exterior)



Outdoor play area with raised beds.

These include construction, art, family, early reading and writing, manipulative and research, and sensory centers.

Materials are carefully selected to be stimulating, diverse, and consistently available so children can independently choose and adapt their activities.

Many materials, as well as didactic resources, are developed and provided by educators themselves.

In a pedagogical sense, the space is designed as a “third educator,” a stimulating environment that actively supports children’s learning, autonomy, and development.

Professionalism, quality, and assessment

Conditions in early childhood education including institutional organization, group size, adult-child ratios, staffing profiles, spatial material standards, staff responsibilities, and governance are regulated by the State Pedagogical Standard (2008).

In practice, however, working conditions in many Croatian ECEC institutions still fall short of these prescribed standards.

ECE teachers are required to hold a university Bachelor’s degree in early childhood education, with an increasing number pursuing Master’s degrees.



Art centre.

In line with the standard, institutions may also employ additional professionals such as pedagogues, psychologists, speech therapists, rehabilitation specialists, and nurses, depending on funding and availability.

When qualified ECEC teachers are lacking, temporary hiring of non-specialists may be permitted.

Special features of Croatian pre-primary

A strong emphasis on a child-centered curriculum,

influenced by the Reggio Emilia approach, views the child as a competent and active co-creator of learning.

Partnership with families is highly valued, with parents actively involved in the life of the kindergarten and in supporting children’s development.

Special attention is also paid to inclusion, ensuring legal and practical support for children with developmental disabilities to participate fully in regular kindergarten programs and activities.



Symbolic play centre.



Handling a knife, cutting a pumpkin.



CZECH REPUBLIC



Kindergarten „MŠ Semínko, Toulcův dvůr“, Prague: Children are outside for as long as possible.

Pre-primary education is provided to children aged 2 to 6 by public or private kindergartens. Younger children can attend children's groups or clubs, such as forest clubs established as part of forest kindergartens. Parents can also choose alternative kindergartens (most often Montessori, Step By Step, or Waldorf schools) and individual-home schooling.

Kindergarten „MŠ Semínko, Toulcův dvůr“, Prague:
Nutritionally balanced food in kindergartens.



Kindergarten „MŠ Čtyřlístek“, Prague: Children love to play outside.



CZECH REPUBLIC

Hana Navrátilová, OMEP Czech, info@omep.cz



Kindergarten „MŠ Čtyřlístek“, Prague: Time to relax after lunch.

In kindergarten, children can be divided into classes according to age, or children of different ages can be placed in one class to form mixed-age classes. The minimum qualification level for kindergarten teachers is ISCED 354 (Eurydice, 2025).

Since 2017, pre-primary education has been compulsory for children from the age of 5 with the aim of supporting children's opportunities to develop in all areas in a stimulating environment.

Pre-primary education in the Czech Republic has undergone a number of changes over the last 20 years. Decentralized management and the humanization of schools give preschool teachers a relatively high degree of freedom to make their own decisions and design their own educational programs (Syslová & Najvarová, 2012).

The framework for preschool education is based on the concept of a personality-developing model and inclusive education as a means of creating conditions for the education of all children so that they can achieve their full personality development (Hejlová & Tomková, 2021).

Kindergarten creates an open and welcoming climate in which every child experiences success, feels safe, and is accepted (Framework Education Program for Pre-primary Education, 2025).

The main goal of pre-primary education is to develop the child's personality in social, emotional, cognitive, and physical terms, taking into account their disposition and uniqueness,

so that at the end of preschool education they are an independent personality, capable of coping with the demands of life that are normally placed on them in their immediate environment, especially in the family and school environment. In line with the democratic and humanistic values of our society, preschool education is focused on the child's personal development, based on respect for their individuality and uniqueness.

Preschool education is based on inclusive principles, striving for openness and respect for diversity in society and mutual understanding between people (Framework Education Programme for Pre-primary Education, 2025).

To achieve the goals of pre-primary education, educational strategies are used that fully respect the developmental specifics and learning styles of preschool-age children, their individual dispositions, needs, and interests. The most important ways of learning in preschool education include spontaneous learning, which takes place mainly through play, which the child engages in based on their interests and own choices (Framework Education Programme for Pre-primary Education, 2025).

A typical day in Czech kindergarten begins with the children playing in the classroom after arrival and having the opportunity to freely choose from

prepared stimuli for individualized skill development. In the morning, the teacher also conducts targeted educational activities on a selected topic.

The children then spend an hour or more outside, using the school garden with play equipment or going for a walk in the neighborhood. After lunch, some children go home, while others rest.

Traditionally, the teacher reads to the children during their rest time. The afternoon is again devoted to outdoor activities, interest groups, and various play activities. Kindergartens are often involved in community life and traditions.

Special features of Czech pre-primary:

- holistic development through experiential learning and play-based approaches.
- flexibility and inclusion in classes.
- majority of kindergartens have a garden for physical activities, environmental education and relaxation.
- spacious and well-equipped classrooms for play and learning.
- plenty of exercise outdoors, several healthy and balanced meals throughout the day.



Kindergarten „MŠ Semínko, Toulcův dvůr“, Prague: We celebrate Czech traditions.



ENGLAND

“Better a broken bone than a broken spirit.”

Lady Allen of Hurtwood, Co-founder of OMEP.



Children playing games under a colourful parachute.

The 1870 Education Act was one of the first pieces of legislation that sought to address education in England and Wales, while also showcasing a commitment to education provision nationally. The 1891 Elementary Education Act introduced free elementary education to children aged from three to fifteen. More recently, in 1990, the UK signed the UNCRC, which formally came into force in 1992. In 1997 the Labour government suggested the idea of providing childcare funding that covered a set amount per child. This did not cover the operating costs; thus, nurseries had to absorb the difference. Over time, policies were phased in and started with funded places for three- and four-year-old children. This did make early education more accessible, but affordability depended on a family's income.

Daily routines, learning environments, and support for parents:

In England, pre-primary education is not mandatory though it is encouraged, and it is expected that all children must begin full-time education once they reach the mandatory school age, which is five years of age. Typically, a day in an early years setting in England consists of an array of activities for children. For example, physical activities such as group times and group activities, free play, and messy play. Activities take place both indoors and outdoors.

Fifteen hours a week of free childcare is offered to all children aged three and four for thirty-eight weeks of the year. It is also offered to children aged two if the child and the parent or carer receive additional support.

For example, if the child has an education, health and care plan (EHCP). Some working parents are also eligible to claim thirty hours for their child aged nine months to school starting age. This expansion for working parents was implemented to assist with the cost of childcare for families.

Curriculum, quality and assessment:

The EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage) applies to all schools and early years providers in England. It seeks to provide standards for the development, care, and learning of children from birth to the age of five. The EYFS promotes learning and teaching so that children will have built a strong foundation that will support their progression throughout their school years and beyond.



A young boy watering plants.



Standing in a field looking into a telescope.

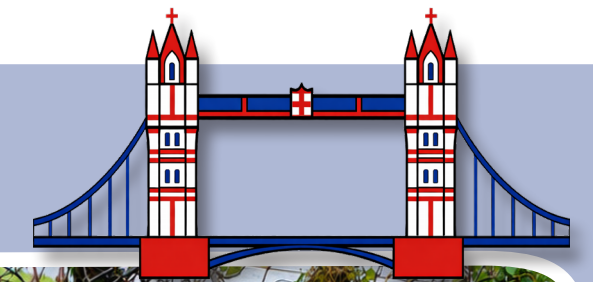


A young child playing with a toy tower.



ENGLAND

Megan McGee, OMEP UK. meganwritesuk@outlook.com



A group of children and a key worker walking through a muddy puddle.

Early years settings are inspected by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services, and Skills (OFSTED), where the provision offered by the setting is evaluated against the EYFS and a judgement will be made on the quality of the provision and the inspector will inform the setting of their judgement. The three prime areas of the EYFS children are assessed against are: Physical education, communication and language, and personal, social and emotional development.

Working in pre-primary education in England:

Many nurseries in England don't employ a teacher with Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS), as it is not mandatory. Typically, practitioners hold a level two or three qualification and early years settings are often led by professionals who hold these qualifications.

There are multiple routes to train to become an early years teacher in England:

1. An undergraduate degree.
2. A postgraduate degree, if an individual already has a degree or an equivalent qualification.
3. An early years teacher degree apprenticeship:

this route combines studying and employment within an early years setting.

What makes pre-primary education in England unique?

Arguably, one of the unique points of pre-primary education in England are the adult-to-child ratios, which may be seen as generous. These guidelines are set out by the EYFS; however, the numbers may depend on the type of setting.



A child playing on a swing.

England also has different kinds of settings that are available across the country. These include day nurseries, preschools and children's centres.

Thirdly, unlike reception class in some countries, those in England are not typically teacher-led. In fact, it is more common for them to be run by practitioners with level three qualifications.



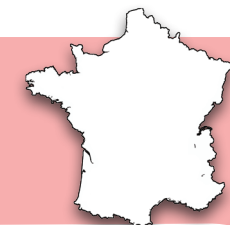
A boy gathering sticks.



A group of children looking at a body of water while on a walk.



FRANCE



Group teaching and storytelling.

Pre-school education in France is governed by national rules applied across the country. Children aged 2 or 3 to 6 attend école maternelle (nursery school), under the Ministry of National Education. The State defines curricula, recruits and trains teachers, and ensures quality and consistency. Local authorities complement this role by providing and maintaining buildings and employing non-teaching staff, particularly specialist nursery school assistants (ATSEM).

Participation

Education is free and has been compulsory from age 3 since 2019. Nursery schools therefore admit nearly all children, with limited exceptions based on family choice.

This reform has strengthened inclusion, particularly for disadvantaged families and children with disabilities.

Around 2.26 million children attend approximately 12,300 nursery schools. The public sector accommodates 87% of pupils, while the state-funded private sector operates under similar conditions, with families having to pay only for premises.

In priority education areas, children may enrol from age 2, representing around 10% of that age group. This early access supports equity and school readiness.

Service model: Pre-school and out-of-school hours

The nursery school timetable aligns with primary education: 24 hours per week over 36 weeks (864 hours annually). In most areas, children attend four days per week, each consisting of two three-hour sessions with a lunch break.

Out-of-school care is widely available, including before and after school childcare and lunch services organised by local authorities.

Fees are adjusted according to family income. As a result, many children spend over 30 hours per week in educational or care settings.

Curriculum

France operates a single national curriculum for nursery schools, updated regularly with guidance provided by the Ministry of Education.

The curriculum aims to support sensory, motor, cognitive, and social development, while promoting emotional well-being and preparing children for foundational learning.

A central principle is enabling children to act, succeed, and understand:

acting through exploration, succeeding by completing tasks, and understanding through reflection and transfer.

This approach recognises children as active participants in their learning. They develop language, early literacy and numeracy awareness, motor skills, creativity, and social competence. Teaching prioritises play, experimentation, and exploration. Historically, nursery school has balanced holistic development with preparation for formal schooling.

Recent curriculum changes (2021 and 2024) place stronger emphasis on “fundamental learning,” prompting debate about increasing academic expectations.



Early literacy activities.



FRANCE

Catherine Dumas (Honorary Education Inspector)
Gilles Pétreault. OMEP Representative to UNESCO, President of OMEP France



Classroom learning environments.

Daily routines and learning environments

Nursery school is designed as a learning environment adapted to young children, attentive to emotional security and developmental pace. Methods include play, hands-on activities, repetition, and problem-solving.

Daily routines alternate between whole-group, small-group, and independent activities, alongside free and guided play.

Physical activity is integrated, and some schools incorporate outdoor learning.

Spaces are organised to support autonomy and learning, including gathering areas, symbolic play

zones, and activity hubs for art, science, and early literacy. Displaying children's work supports motivation and self-esteem.

Relationships with families are central. The principle of co-education encourages collaboration between teachers and parents, ensuring continuity between home and school.

Professionalisation and quality

Nursery school teachers are fully qualified, holding a Master's degree and benefiting from the same professional conditions as primary teachers.

Ongoing reforms aim to strengthen early childhood education within teacher training.

Teachers collaborate with professionals such as psychologists, medical staff, and social workers to support children's development and well-being.

Specialist assistants (ATSEM) are present in most classes, supporting care and increasingly contributing to learning activities. Class sizes average 22 children per teacher, higher than OECD averages, though ratios improve when assistants are included.

Quality is supported through professional development, teacher evaluation, and internal and external school review systems.

Specific characteristics of nursery schools in France

French nursery schools are recognised for universal access, strong public provision, and integration within the education system. They play a key role in children's development, family life, and social cohesion.

Today, they must respond to evolving challenges, including inclusion of children with disabilities and integration of cross-cutting themes such as psychosocial development, sustainability, gender equality, and emotional education.

After more than a century of development, nursery schools remain a cornerstone of France's commitment to equitable, high quality education for all children.



Preschool architecture in Montpellier.



Sensory water play.



Changing shadows throughout the day.



Creative movement with umbrellas.



Outdoor learning and nature area.



HONG KONG



Children perform a traditional dragon dance.

In the vibrant, cosmopolitan heart of Asia, where Eastern heritage and Western influences converge, early childhood education (ECE) is not a privilege but a cornerstone of society.

For nearly every child in Hong Kong, the journey of lifelong learning begins in kindergarten. This near-universal participation reflects a profound cultural belief in the power of education. Hong Kong has since embarked on a transformative journey, moving from a historically hands-off approach to a system defined by strong government commitment to quality, equity, and access.

The Landscape: A Commitment to Quality and Access

Today, pre-primary education (or better known as kindergarten education) in Hong Kong is shaped by the landmark Kindergarten Education Scheme (KES). This policy represents an unprecedented investment, providing substantial government subsidies directly to eligible non-profit-making kindergartens. This makes ECE a tangible right: 75% of kindergartens now participate (Education Bureau, 2025), offering free half-day services to most children, with significantly reduced fees for whole-day programmes.

Inside these kindergartens, the focus has decisively shifted from rote learning to holistic, child-centred development. Guided by the Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide, our classrooms are vibrant spaces for exploration and discovery.

Learning through play is the central pedagogical approach, fostering children’s holistic growth in real-life, integrated themes. This commitment to quality is upheld by a robust assurance framework, including a 1:11 teacher-to-child ratio and a rigorous Quality Assurance Mechanism, which ensures accountability and promotes continuous improvement.

A Typical Day in a Hong Kong Kindergarten

A typical half-day session in a Hong Kong kindergarten, lasting about three hours, is a carefully structured and activity-packed experience, conducted primarily in Cantonese. The session begins with a warm welcome and a period of self-selected free play, during which children explore various interest corners dedicated to activities such as art, construction, and reading. This is followed by “circle time” for group activities like stories, songs, and thematic discussions.

The core of the session focuses on “learning through play”, with hands-on activities centred on an integrated theme. Within this compact timeframe, kindergartens skillfully weave in other experiences. There is a break for a snack (tea time), and dedicated time for gross motor activities, which, due to urban space constraints, often take place in indoor playrooms or multi-purpose halls. Brief, focused sessions for English and Putonghua are also integrated into the schedule, ensuring a balanced and stimulating morning or afternoon before children are dismissed.



A kindergarten child paints a large self-portrait.



Kindergarten children and a teacher visit an elderly care setting.



HONG KONG

Amelia N.Y. Lee, President of OMEP Hong Kong

Jessie M.S. Wong, Vice President of OMEP Hong Kong

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Children in festive Chinese attire proudly display their artwork.

What makes pre-primary education in Hong Kong unique?

Our approach is defined by our city's unique context, blending tradition with a forward-looking, global perspective. Key features include:

- **Structured “Trilingual and Biliterate” learning:**

While Cantonese is the primary medium of instruction as required, the curriculum places a strong emphasis on preparing children for the trilingual context of Hong Kong. Children are formally introduced to English and Putonghua through dedicated lessons and activities, building a foundational awareness that readies them for primary school.

- **East-meets-West cultural fusion:**

Classrooms are a rich tapestry of cultural experiences. Children celebrate traditional Chinese festivals like the Lunar New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival alongside Western traditions, fostering an appreciation for diverse cultural heritages.

- **A strong commitment to inclusion:**

Our system is built to support our most vulnerable learners. The On-site Pre-school Rehabilitation Services (OPRS) bring teams of therapists and

specialists directly into kindergartens to provide timely intervention for children with special educational needs.

Furthermore, a tiered funding model provides kindergartens with dedicated resources to support non-Chinese speaking (NCS) students, helping them learn Chinese and fostering a multicultural school environment.

- **Kindergartens as community anchors:**

In a city with many dual-income households, kindergartens provide essential care and a strong foundation for children's development, built upon a tradition of close home-school partnership that is highly valued by parents.

Our path forward: Resilience in the face of change

While we celebrate our progress, we are not complacent. Hong Kong's ECE sector faces significant challenges, most notably a sharply declining birth rate that threatens kindergarten viability and contributes to workforce instability, evidenced by a record-high teacher attrition rate of 19.1% in 2023/24 (Education Bureau, 2025).

Moreover, long waiting lists for specialised (SEN) support persist despite service expansion, highlighting an urgent need for greater capacity (Social Welfare Department, 2024). Addressing these challenges is our next great task.

Our journey shows that with vision and commitment, transformative change is possible. We stand with OMEP in affirming that high quality pre-primary education is every child's right, the essential foundation for their future and ours.



Children explore shapes, light, and reflection.



Chinese cultural activity.



HUNGARY



Children can help adults get to know traditional skills.



Kindergarten educators are playing and singing music with the children.

*H*ungary has a long and distinguished history in early childhood education. The first kindergarten in Hungary, and in all of Central Europe, was founded in 1828 in Buda by Countess Teréz Brunszvik, establishing a pedagogical tradition that continues to shape early learning today.

This heritage is reflected even in terminology:

The Hungarian ‘óvoda’ does not translate directly as “pre-school” or “nursery,” as kindergarten education does not prioritise academic preparation but rather holistic upbringing.

Accordingly, professionals are known as kindergarten educators, emphasising pedagogy, nurture, and social-emotional development rather than formal teaching.

Where play meets tradition: A folk-inspired Hungarian approach to early childhood education.

Early childhood provision in Hungary is organised in two phases:

non-compulsory care for children aged 0–3, followed by compulsory kindergarten education from age 3 until school entry.

Since 2015, children have been required to attend kindergarten for at least four hours daily, a policy designed to strengthen equity and ensure access for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those living in deep poverty.

Kindergarten education forms part of the state-funded public education system and is free of charge.

Equity, accessibility, and inclusion are core principles. Parents may choose among available kindergartens, while local district systems guarantee places for all children.

The Hungarian National Core Program, introduced in 1996, defines overarching goals: safeguarding children, nurturing their personalities, and supporting social development.

While kindergarten assists children in becoming ready for school, it explicitly avoids premature academic pressure.

A central principle of the Core Program is that the child’s personality is the starting point for all pedagogy.

The system is firmly child-centred and inclusive, accepting children as they arrive from their families. Close cooperation with parents is essential, reflecting the belief that child-rearing is primarily the family’s responsibility, with kindergartens playing an ancillary and sometimes compensatory role. This partnership supports smooth transitions from home to kindergarten and later to school.



A folk doll.



HUNGARY

Anikó Varga Nagy PhD, Associate Professor, University of Debrecen Faculty of Education for Children and Special Educational Needs, vnaniko@ped.



Children learning about food preservation.

Daily schedules are continuous and flexible, balancing a range of activities while giving priority to play. Unstructured play dominates the kindergarten day and is supported by parallel activities that allow children to choose, explore, and engage at their own pace. Educators design daily and weekly routines based on children's needs rather than rigid timetables.

Folk traditions at the heart of pedagogy

Hungary's approach is distinctive in grounding everyday learning in folk culture and the Kodály-influenced musical tradition. Folk tales, children's games, traditional songs, and dances are integral to daily practice rather than occasional enrichment activities.

Through these playful, embodied experiences, children strengthen cultural identity and belonging, develop language, musicality, coordination, and memory, and build strong emotional and social bonds.

Tradition and modern developmental knowledge coexist seamlessly. Educators are highly qualified, holding a three-year university bachelor's degree, and enjoy significant professional autonomy. While the Core Program provides national direction,

each kindergarten develops its own pedagogical program aligned with local culture and community values. Sustainability is woven into everyday life through nature-based and culture-driven experiences. Gardening, food preservation, recycling, farm visits, and family involvement, often including parents and grandparents sharing traditional skills, make environmental responsibility tangible, joyful, and meaningful for children.



Music is an integral part of the Hungarian kindergarten experience.

Holistic school readiness

In Hungary, school readiness is understood holistically, encompassing physical, emotional, social, and cognitive maturity. Children usually enter school at age six, with individual pathways available.

Readiness is not measured through academic testing but through play-based learning, storytelling, movement, and social interaction. As a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Hungary places strong emphasis on children's wellbeing, secure relationships, and having their voices heard.

Conclusion

Hungary's early childhood education system demonstrates how universal access can coexist with a deeply cultural, play-based, and holistic pedagogy. Its folk-inspired model offers a globally relevant message: innovation in early childhood education may begin by safeguarding the cultural treasures already present in children's lives; play, tradition, and community.



Playing with natural elements.



Folk traditions: dance and music enrich children's activities.



JAPAN



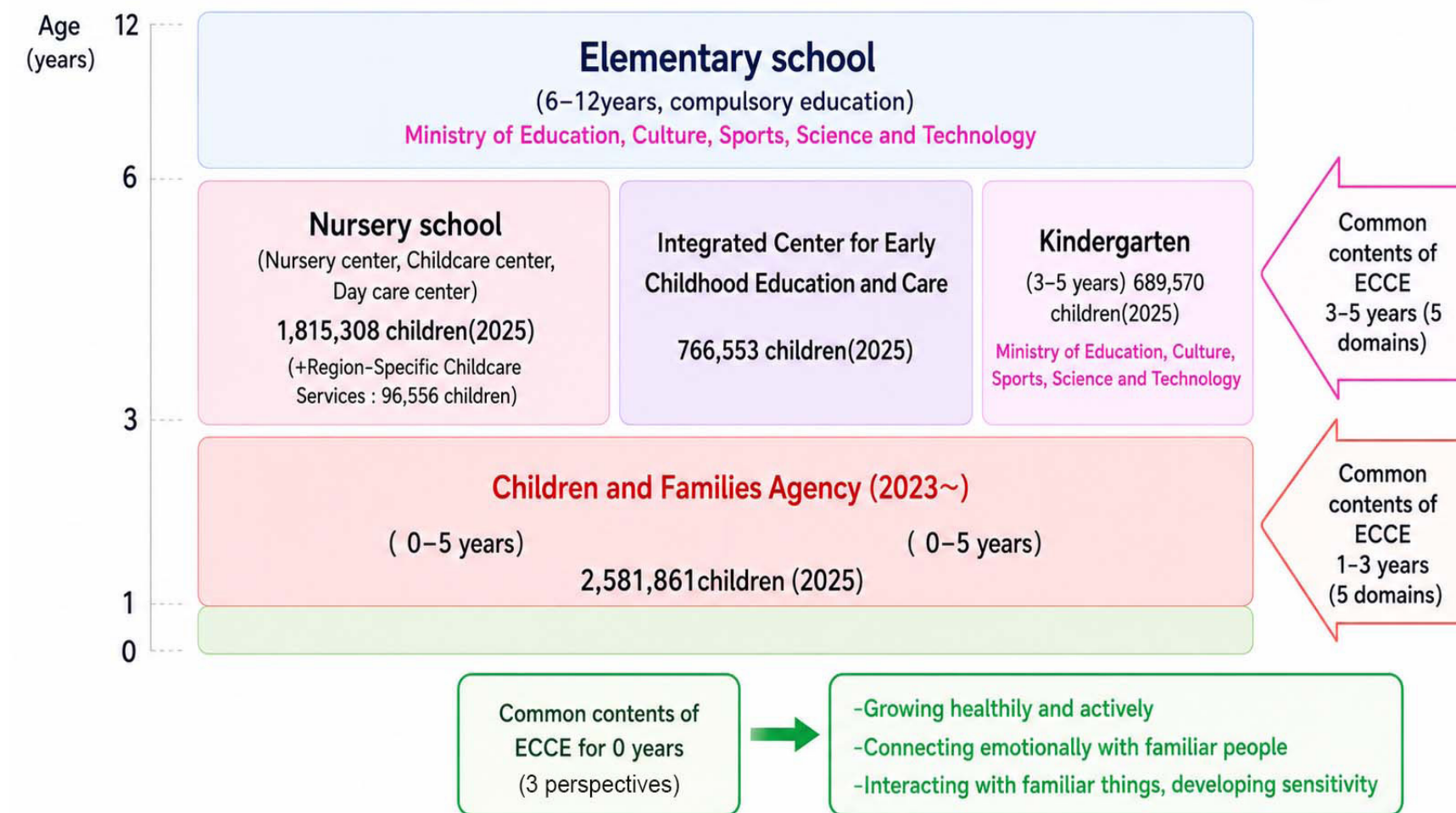
Children arriving in the morning.



Circle time discussing 'The Wonders of Life' (Nursery School).

In Japan, the majority of pre-school education facilities are made up of nursery schools (childcare centres) and certified childcare centers (under the Children and Families Agency), and together with kindergartens (under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology), these three types of facilities account for almost all five-year-olds. The guidelines and principles for these three types of facility set out three pillars of qualities and abilities to be nurtured through early childhood education: the foundations of knowledge and skills, the foundations of thinking, judgement and expression, and the capacity for learning and human qualities.

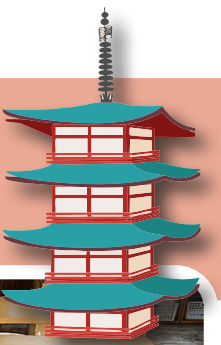
ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) System in Japan





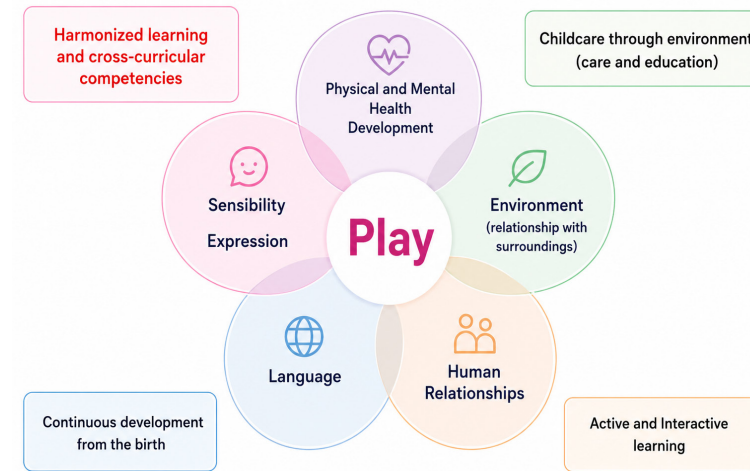
JAPAN

Mie Oba, Fukuyama City University(Hiroshima), Vice-president of OMEP Japan f-vicepresident@omepjpn.org



Outdoor activity.

Contents of ECEC in Japan 1-5 years



The five common domains of childcare content across these three types of facilities are based on health (physical and mental health and development), environment (relationships with the surrounding world), human relationships, language, and expression (sensitivity and expression), with the aim of fostering active, interactive and deep learning.

These perspectives require that childcare and early childhood education be provided through the environment, whilst ensuring that play is recognised as an active form of engagement.

Furthermore, whilst ten desired characteristics are listed for children to develop by the end of early childhood.

It is important to note that these are not finalised goals to be achieved, but rather qualities that children have developed by that point and will continue to develop in the future.

- Healthy mind and body
- Independence
- Cooperation
- The beginnings of morality and a sense of norms
- Engagement with social life
- The beginnings of critical thinking
- Engagement with nature and respect for life
- Interest in and awareness of numbers, shapes and letters
- Verbal communication
- Rich sensitivity and expression



Lunch.

In Japan, the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) system started in the late 19th century, with childcare facilities and kindergartens being separated, and the ministries in charge of each were also administratively different. Before World War II, not all children were in the ECCE system.

Despite an attempt to integrate childcare and early childhood education in 1948, nursery schools (childcare centres) for children aged 0 to 5 and kindergartens for children aged 3 to 5 were positioned in a way that followed the pre-war framework, and the ECCE content as common across the guidelines and instructions for each.



Evacuation drill.

Due to changes in society, the Child and Childcare-Related Bill was enacted in 2012, and a new system was started with the aim of “providing high-quality childcare and education for all children”.

The newly established certified childcare centres (for children aged 0 to 5) were also recognized as “early childhood education facilities” alongside nursery schools (childcare centres) and kindergartens.

In April 2023, a comprehensive Basic Law for Children was implemented to comprehensively promote child policies throughout society, and the Children and Families Agency was established.

Free early childhood education for children aged 3 to 5 has been implemented; however, the situation regarding the recruitment of nursery teachers and the provision of facilities and equipment cannot be described as adequate.

Japan is a country blessed with rich natural and historical treasures. Simultaneously, we recognise the power of nature and maintain a deep respect for it.

Early childhood care and education in Japan leverages these natural, historical and social resources, incorporating the distinctive characteristics of each region into daily life and ECCE activities.



NEW ZEALAND



Making a pretend hangi (earth oven) using natural resources, Birdwood Kindergarten.

Early Childhood Education and Care in Aotearoa New Zealand encompasses early learning from birth to school entry and is grounded in the principles of Te Whāriki and Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo. These curricula reflect the nation's bicultural foundation under Te Tiriti o Wāitangi, ensuring that tamariki experience environments where their languages, identities, and cultures are nurtured from the earliest years.

The Early Childhood Education Landscape within Aotearoa New Zealand

The contemporary early childhood education (ECE) landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand has its origins in Te Tiriti o Wāitangi, signed in 1840 between Māori and the Crown. This foundational agreement affirms the country's dual heritage and underpins its bicultural and bilingual approach to education.

Pre-primary education, known as early childhood education (ECE) or early years learning, serves children aged 0–6 years and follows a socio-cultural, play-based pedagogy.

Although ECE is not compulsory, participation is high. Over 95% of children attend an ECE service in the year before they start school. Children may begin school at age five and must begin by age six, positioning early childhood education (ECE) as a critical foundation for lifelong learning.

A Day in ECE in Aotearoa NZ contexts

A typical early childhood education (ECE) day balances free play, guided exploration, kai and rest times, and group experiences such as waiata, storytelling, and outdoor learning. Kaiako follow the child's lead, supporting curiosity, relationships, and connection to place.

In Kōhanga Reo, the rhythm of the day is grounded in te reo me nga tikanga Māori, with collective care, whanaungatanga, and intergenerational relationships central to daily practice.

Curriculum and Guidelines

Te Whāriki: He whāriki matauranga ma nga mokopuna o Aotearoa (Ministry of Education, 2017) provides the national framework for learning and development across all early years settings. Alongside this sits Te Whāriki a te Kōhanga Reo, which articulates Māori aspirations for mokopuna within te reo Māori immersion contexts.

Together, these curricula weave principles, strands, and learning outcomes that promote holistic, inclusive, and culturally grounded education.

Te Whāriki was the world's first bicultural early childhood curriculum and remains a taonga admired internationally for its holistic, child-centred approach.

Refreshed in 2017, it guides kaiako across diverse settings from teacher-led centres to home-based care to design local curricula that reflect each child's identity, language, culture, and community aspirations.



Recreating a waka (canoe).



Child sawing. Glendene Playcentre.



NEW ZEALAND

OMEP Aotearoa

Fleur Hohaia-Rollinson, Ngaroma M. Williams, Diti Hill-Denee, Charlotte Robertson, Marianne Kayes. omepaotearoa@gmail.com



Nature kindy programme - tree climbing.

The intent of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is embedded throughout, supporting tamariki to become confident thinkers and decision-makers.

Te Whāriki a Kōhanga Reo is a distinct Kaupapa Māori curriculum, written entirely in te reo Māori and grounded in te ao Maori.

It is not a translation of Te Whāriki but stands in its own right, reflecting the philosophy of the Kōhanga Reo movement, where language, culture, and whakapapa are interwoven to support the holistic development of mokopuna as Māori.

Unique Features of Early Childhood Education in Aotearoa New Zealand:

Early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand is distinguished by its dual curriculum framework, strong commitment to Te Tiriti o Wāitangi, and bicultural practice that affirms and protects te reo Māori, Maoritanga, and tikanga Māori.

Pedagogy is holistic and play-based, recognising spiritual, physical, emotional, and social wellbeing, and is underpinned by strong partnerships with whānau and communities.



Nature kindy programme - beach trip. Play and Learn Nature Kindergarten.



Toddler exploring the read-aloud-book.

The system offers a diverse range of government funded services, including teacher-led centres such as kindergartens, childcare services, Kōhanga Reo, Puna Reo, Pacific bilingual and immersion centres, parent-led services such as Playcentre.

Services also include distance ECE through Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu, hospital-based services, and settings reflecting specific philosophies such as nature-based education, Reggio Emilia, Steiner, Montessori, and faith or language-based approaches.

Aotearoa NZ commitment to upholding the rights of children.

Aotearoa New Zealand upholds children's rights through its commitment to both the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

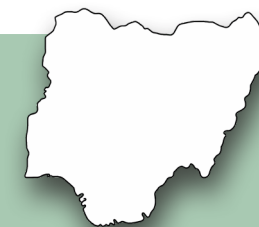
Across ECE, these commitments are enacted through Te Tiriti o Wāitangi and Te Whāriki, nurturing kōtahitanga (unity), collaboration, and collective responsibility, and ensuring that children's rights and Māori worldviews remain central to early learning.



Older child nurturing younger child.



NIGERIA



A group of preschool pupils in a government school.

Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Nigeria has deep cultural roots. Informal systems of care and education have long existed within communities, where child-rearing was a shared responsibility. Mothers, as primary caregivers, were supported by elders and community members who provided cultural, moral, and practical instruction. Children learned through folklore, games, and traditional practices that transmitted knowledge, values, and life skills.

The transition to formal ECE occurred across three periods: pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial. In the pre-colonial era, learning was entirely informal.

The colonial period introduced formal education, though access remained limited. Since independence, Nigeria's education system has continued to evolve, shaping policies and structures for early childhood education.

ECE policies and development

As formal education expanded, primary and secondary schooling became compulsory, while ECE remained optional and largely unregulated. Provision has been dominated by private providers, resulting in varied service types: crèches, nursery schools, kindergartens, preschools, and playgroups, often without consistent standards in curriculum or age groupings.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, government attention to ECE increased through policies and initiatives such as the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme and the National Policy on Education.

These frameworks aim to provide quality early learning for children aged 3–5 years and prepare them for primary school. Despite these intentions, implementation remains uneven. ECE continues to be underfunded, inconsistently managed, and marked by regional disparities, while provision for children under three years remains largely outside formal systems.

Accessibility and quality assurance

Access to ECE in Nigeria remains limited and uneven. National enrolment for children aged 3–5 is below 40%, leaving many children without early learning opportunities. Regional disparities are significant: in some northern areas, participation falls below 20%, while literacy readiness is extremely low and compounded by high levels of child malnutrition.

Urban centres such as Lagos and Abuja show higher enrolment rates, largely due to the concentration of private providers, though these are often unaffordable for low-income families. In contrast, some southwestern regions achieve participation rates above 60%, supported by stronger local investment.

In many northern communities, Qur'anic schools serve as early learning environments but do not typically provide structured ECE, contributing to gaps in school readiness.

Nationally, only about half of public primary schools have functional ECE centres, highlighting a persistent gap between policy and practice. These developments indicate gradual progress, though sustained investment is needed to build a qualified and stable workforce capable of delivering quality early learning.

Teacher training

Workforce capacity remains a critical issue. Fewer than 30% of early childhood educators have formal training in early childhood pedagogy. However, awareness of professional preparation is increasing, with universities and colleges offering three- and four- year programmes, alongside in-service training delivered both online and in person.



Playing outdoors at faith based preschool.



Global Handwashing Day.



NIGERIA

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Lulu and other children engaged in finger painting.

Challenges facing ECE

ECE in Nigeria faces multiple challenges. Inadequate funding affects infrastructure, learning materials, and overall quality. Monitoring and regulatory oversight remain weak, with greater emphasis placed on primary and secondary education.

There is also a shortage of trained educators with specialised knowledge of early childhood development.

The sector is largely privately driven, making access dependent on families' ability to pay and reinforcing inequalities. In addition, ECE is often overlooked in national planning, limiting coordinated investment and long-term development.

Addressing these issues requires stronger policy implementation, improved funding, and sustained focus on workforce development.

OMEP Nigeria and advocacy

OMEP Nigeria was established in 1980 to promote a more structured and inclusive approach to early childhood education, particularly for children from birth to eight years.

The organisation has played a significant role in advancing ECE through advocacy, policy engagement, research, and professional development.

OMEP Nigeria collaborates with national and international partners, including the Ministry of Education and academic institutions, to strengthen early childhood systems.

A key achievement has been the revival of its academic journal, supporting knowledge sharing and extending the organisation's reach. The organisation also delivers webinars, caregiver and

educator workshops, parent workshops, and training programmes that strengthen collaboration among families.

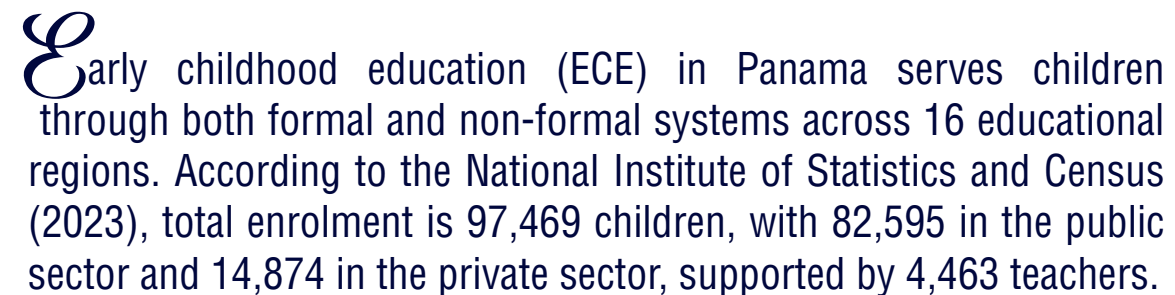
Through these efforts, OMEP Nigeria continues to advocate for improved access, quality, and equity, working toward a more inclusive and effective early childhood education system for all Nigerian children.



Four boys playing indoor games of LUDO.



Lulu, arriving at school full of excitement.



In the non-formal subsystem, early childhood education is organised into three developmental stages: birth to two years, two to four years, and four to five years. These stages are coordinated by the National Directorate of Early Childhood Education in collaboration with the Directorate of General Basic Education, ensuring continuity across the system.

“For a child, play is not a break from learning; it is learning.”



Although resources may be limited in some settings, access and coverage remain priorities.





PANAMA

Dr. Ulina Mapp, OMEP Panama, UNICYT University



Trainee teachers participating in multicultural learning.

Private preschools also follow the national curriculum but often incorporate additional methodologies such as Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and bilingual education. They typically offer greater flexibility in curriculum innovation, technology integration, and extracurricular activities.

Teaching and Learning Practices

Teachers receive ongoing professional development that emphasises play-based learning and the use of hands-on materials.

Through play, children develop essential social, emotional, and cognitive skills. Teaching is organised through integrated projects that connect multiple learning areas around themes meaningful to children, encouraging active participation and contextualised learning.

Common projects include promoting early literacy, healthy eating, cultural identity, environmental awareness, inclusion for children with special educational needs, and family participation. These initiatives support holistic development while strengthening connections between learning, culture, and everyday life.

Community-Based Early Childhood Programmes

Panama has developed innovative community-based models to extend access, particularly in rural and underserved areas.



Outdoor garden and science activities area at the Walter Reitz CEFACEI.

CEFACEI (Family and Community Early Childhood Education Centers) serve children aged four to five, focusing on communities with limited access to formal services. These centres emphasise parental involvement, community participation, and the development of values, language, and socio-emotional skills, supporting children's transition to formal schooling.

CAIPI (Comprehensive Early Childhood Care Centers) target children under four years of age. These centres provide integrated services, including early education,

health and nutrition support, identity registration, and parenting guidance. They aim to promote holistic development and strengthen relationships between children, families, and communities.

Both models operate under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and involve collaboration with community organisations, ensuring culturally responsive and accessible early childhood provision.

Early childhood education in Panama reflects a strong commitment to holistic development, play-based learning, and community engagement.



A classroom at the Walter Reitz CEFACEI.

Through a combination of formal systems and community-based initiatives, the country continues to expand access and strengthen quality, ensuring that young children are supported in their development, identity, and lifelong learning.



SCOTLAND

“Education never ends, Watson. It is a series of lessons, with the greatest for the last.”

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Scottish author.



A den in the middle of the woods.

In 1816, Robert Owen, an affluent mill owner, opened the UK’s first nursery school on record in New Lanark, Scotland. There, the children of his workers were permitted to attend from the age of three and no child under the age of ten was allowed to work in the mill. Later, the introduction of The Education (Scotland) Act in 1872 revolutionised education in the country by offering mandatory school attendance for all children aged five to thirteen and implementing measures, such as assistance with school fees to eliminate poverty as a barrier to education.

From there, the education sector in Scotland has continued to evolve. Presently, Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) settings offer care and education for children up to the school starting age.

Daily routines, learning environments and support for parents:

Nurseries in Scotland are a mixture of private and public, with some that are not-for-profit, meaning they do not earn profit for their owners. Moreover, a typical day in a nursery in Scotland can depend on the provider. Routines include mealtimes, rest periods and activities such as playing games and singing songs, and outdoor play.



A mud kitchen in the woods.

In Scotland, parents can access childcare that is funded by the Scottish Government. Parents can receive a maximum of 1,140 hours of funding each year if they have a child who is three or four years old, with some two year-olds eligible if they are subject to particular situations such as if the child is under the care of a local authority.

Curriculum, quality, and assessment:

Scotland’s curriculum, Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), aims to provide learners aged from three to eighteen years of age with a coherent curriculum where the learner sits at the heart of education and is offered opportunities to develop skills for life, work, and learning as well as the chance to enhance their potential.



A cooking area outdoors.

There are eight curriculum areas:

1. Social studies.
2. Sciences.
3. Technologies.
4. Religious and moral education.
5. Mathematics.
6. Health and wellbeing.
7. Languages (including Gàidhlig, the Scottish Gaelic language).
8. Expressive arts

Working in pre-primary education in Scotland:

To become a teacher in the early years sector in Scotland, an individual must obtain a teaching qualification with early years teacher status (EYTS) to teach. The following routes may be taken by an individual in order to obtain a teaching qualification:

- Undertake an undergraduate degree, such as a degree in Primary Education.
- Undertake a Professional Graduate Diploma in Education.



Using a saw to cut into a plank of wood.



SCOTLAND

Megan McGee, OMEP UK. meganwritesuk@outlook.com



An outdoor play area with wood and tires.

However, not all Scottish nurseries have teachers. More commonly, those who work in Scottish nurseries include practitioners who possess a HNC (Higher National Certificate) in Childhood Practice, SCQF (Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework) Level 7 or a SVQ (Scottish Vocational Qualification) in Social Services (Children and Young People).

Support workers in Scottish nurseries usually hold a NC (National Certificate) in Early Education and Childcare (SCQF Level 6) or SVQ Social Services (Children and Young People).

It should be noted that an individual can obtain a job in childcare and early learning without any childcare-related formal qualifications. However, it is expected that qualifications are gained once the individual begins work.

What makes pre-primary education in Scotland unique?

During their training, trainee primary teachers in Scotland are provided with some level of training in nursery education. Following this, they may choose to work with children in the early years sector,



An outdoor play area with rocks and wooden ornaments.

with some electing to undertake professional development opportunities and additional qualifications in relation to early education. However, it is suggested that the number of qualified teachers employed in Scotland is below the number needed to meet the Scottish government's policy commitment that all three-to five-year-olds in the country have access to a teacher.

Further to this, in a time where higher education institutions are facing harsh financial cuts, the number of teachers qualifying in the early years sector is at risk.



Playing close to the edge of a body of water.



Beekeeper explains the process of beekeeping.



SINGAPORE



Children read books together in small group.

Preschool education in Singapore serves children from birth to six years old, preparing them for primary school while supporting holistic development. It fosters cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth, reflecting Singapore's belief that the early years are crucial for lifelong learning and wellbeing.

Singapore's early childhood landscape has evolved from a primarily childcare-focused model into a comprehensive system emphasising school readiness, character, values, and inclusive access. Historically, preschools supported working families and promoted English and mother-tongue proficiency. Today, sustained government investment aims to ensure that children, regardless of background, can access affordable, quality preschool education.

Governance and regulation

The Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA), established in 2013, oversees early childhood programmes for children below seven. It is jointly administered by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social and Family Development. ECDA sets standards, provides funding, implements policy, and supports quality, accessibility, and affordability across the sector.



Children work in small group on an art project.

All preschools must comply with the Early Childhood Development Centres Act 2017, which regulates teacher qualifications, curriculum delivery, environmental safety, and operational management. Licensing and assessment processes help maintain consistent standards.

Structure and diversity of preschool providers

Singapore's preschool system includes government-supported and private providers. The Anchor Operator and Partner Operator schemes provide public funding to selected large and mid-sized operators so they can offer affordable, quality services.

MOE Kindergartens, located in primary school premises, provide programmes for children aged four to six.

Private preschools offer additional choice, with varied philosophies including bilingual, play-based, inquiry-based, and project-based approaches. Programmes include infant care, full-day or half-day childcare, kindergarten, and playgroups, allowing families to select arrangements suited to children's developmental stages and family needs.

National curriculum framework

Singapore's preschool curriculum is guided by two key frameworks. The Nurturing Early Learners (NEL) Framework supports children aged four to six through inquiry-based and play-centred learning across language and literacy, numeracy, discovery of the world, aesthetics and creative expression, health, safety and motor skills, values, social-emotional competencies, and learning dispositions.



Daily circle time is a must.



Children encourage to individual painting.



SINGAPORE

Contributors: *Alfred Chong, Imeelia Ismail Tan, Dr. Lily Wong, Kok Xiu Wen*



Time for individual discovery.

The Early Years Development Framework (EYDF)

Guides educators working with children from birth to three, emphasising secure attachments, responsive relationships, holistic development, and rich learning environments. Together, these frameworks promote children's confidence, curiosity, communication, care and respect for others, physical coordination, healthy habits, and love for family, community, and learning.



Outdoor learning in pairs.

Pedagogical approaches

Singapore's preschool pedagogy emphasises active learning, meaningful experiences, and individualised support. Play-based learning is central, with teachers facilitating exploration, asking open-ended questions, and observing children's needs. Inquiry based and project based approaches encourage children to investigate, experiment, collaborate, and construct knowledge. Constructivist and socio-cultural principles are evident, recognising that children learn through hands-on experiences and interaction with others.



Group activities indoor.

Accessibility, quality, and workforce development

Singapore supports affordability through a subsidy framework. Basic subsidies are available to Singaporean children in licensed childcare centres, while additional subsidies support lower- and middle-income families. Enhancements introduced in 2020 expanded support for more families.

Quality assurance is strengthened through the Singapore Pre-school Accreditation Framework (SPARK), which assesses leadership, planning, curriculum, and learning environments. Workforce development is supported through structured teacher preparation and continuing professional learning. The National Institute of Early Childhood Development (NIEC) plays a central role in training educators and strengthening professional standards.



Field trip for the whole school.

Enrolment and future directions

As of 2023, Singapore had approximately 2,814 preschools, including infant care centres, childcare centres, and kindergartens, serving about 187,000 children. Enrolment exceeds 99% for children aged five to six.

Current priorities include expanding MOE Kindergartens, improving educator salaries, strengthening inclusive support for children with additional needs, and enhancing bilingual and STEM learning. Initiatives such as KidSTART support vulnerable families and help reduce social gaps from the earliest years.

Singapore's preschool system reflects a coordinated national commitment to quality, equity, affordability, and holistic development, ensuring young children receive a strong foundation for lifelong learning.



Inclusive water play.



SLOVAKIA



Traditional Slovak folk costume.



The Slovak Republic is a landlocked country in Central Europe with an area of 49,035 km² and a population of approximately 5.4 million (2024). Its capital is Bratislava. Slovakia is ethnically diverse: around 83% of the population are Slovaks, with significant Hungarian (8%) and Roma (2–3%) minorities, alongside smaller Czech, Ruthenian, Ukrainian, German, and Polish communities. Slovak is the official language.

Pre-Primary Education in Slovakia

Kindergarten (materská škola) supports children's holistic development across social-emotional, cognitive, physical, moral, and aesthetic domains. It fosters key abilities and skills while laying foundations for lifelong learning and social participation, respecting children's individual and developmental needs.

Kindergartens serve children aged 3 to 6. Since 2021, the final year (ages 5–6) has been compulsory and free of charge. Children under 3 may attend nurseries. Public, church, and private kindergartens operate across the country, offering half-day or full-day programmes.

Slovakia is gradually expanding compulsory pre-primary education. From September 2027, attendance will be compulsory from age 4, and from September 2028 from age 3. By 2033, the state aims to guarantee the right to kindergarten placement for children from age 2, representing a major commitment to early access and equity.

Institutional Models and Curriculum

Kindergartens function either as independent institutions or as part of primary schools. Education follows the State Educational Program, in effect since 2022, which is organised around seven educational areas:

- Language and Communication.
- Mathematics and Information Work.
- Human and Nature; Human and Society.

- Human and the World of Work.
- Art and Culture.
- Health and Movement.

Teacher practice emphasises individualisation and differentiation based on children's interests and needs.

Each kindergarten develops its own School Educational Program, adapted to local conditions and community contexts. Many schools enrich their curricula through projects promoting healthy lifestyles, environmental awareness, financial and technical literacy, and sustainability.





SLOVAKIA

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Autumn playtime.

Equity, Inclusion, and Current Challenges

Generational poverty remains a significant challenge. Despite ongoing reforms, segregation persists, particularly affecting Roma children, who are often educated in homogeneous groups with limited opportunities for social integration. Many regions face shortages of professional support staff, including psychologists and special education teachers.

Since 2022, kindergartens have also welcomed children fleeing the war in Ukraine. While teachers demonstrate strong commitment and empathy, many lack training in trauma-informed education, language support, and inclusive practices. Strengthening inclusion has therefore become a growing priority within the system.

Teachers and Professional Practice

Qualification requirements vary by age group: a 200-hour course is sufficient for work with children under 3; a secondary vocational qualification is required for teaching children aged 3–5; and a bachelor's degree is required for compulsory pre-primary education. From 2029, every kindergarten must employ at least one teacher with a bachelor's degree.

Typically, two teachers work in each class, caring for 21–25 children in morning or afternoon shifts. However, mentoring systems and structured opportunities for professional reflection remain limited.

Daily Routine and Cultural Context

Daily routines are structured and predictable, combining free play, guided activities, outdoor time, meals, and rest.

Teaching is led by the classroom teacher, sometimes with support from a teaching assistant. Many kindergartens participate in programmes focused on cultural heritage, health promotion, mental wellbeing, environmental literacy, and physical development.

Although most kindergartens operate in culturally and linguistically homogeneous settings, diversity and multicultural perspectives are gradually being integrated.

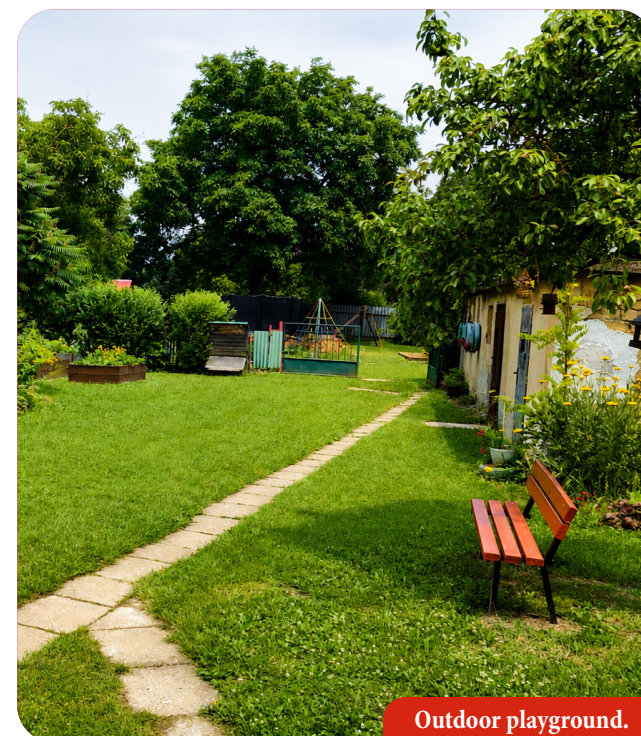
Folk traditions remain an important element of identity, and Kindergarten Day, celebrated annually on November 4, highlights the social value of pre-primary education.



Boy playing in sandpit.

Reform Directions

In 2024, responsibility for kindergarten financing shifted to the Ministry of Education. Through the Recovery and Resilience Plan, nearly €180 million has been invested to expand capacity, creating over 8,100 new kindergarten places. Long-term priorities focus on improving quality, equity, inclusion, teacher competence, and supporting green and digital transformation in education.



Outdoor playground.



Journey around the world.



SWEDEN

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Outdoors playing rain or sunshine.

Early childhood education (ECE) in Sweden should lay the foundations for lifelong learning. It should be enjoyable, secure, and rich in learning for all children. Education is based on a holistic view of the child and children's needs, where play, care, development, and learning form an integrated whole.

Children aged 1–5 years have a legal right to ECE, with a maximum waiting time of four months. Almost all children from the age of two attend an ECE setting, with enrolment rates of approximately 90% among two-year-olds and 95% among five-year-olds. Preschools are generally open 10–12 hours per day, all weekdays, throughout the year. From the age of three, all children are entitled to 15 hours per week of free ECE (525 hours per year) during school terms.

Family policy and Collaboration with the homes

Sweden's strong family policy supports children's early development and family wellbeing. Parents are entitled by law to 16 months of paid parental leave, with approximately 80% salary compensation. These days may be shared between parents, with a minimum of 90 days reserved for each, promoting gender equality and shared caregiving. Around 70% of preschools are run by municipalities and 30% by independent providers.

All ECE settings are publicly funded through taxation and a low, flat parental fee. Collaboration with children's homes is a core professional responsibility. ECE staff are obliged to establish caring, trusting relationships with families, ensuring continuity between home and preschool and creating a secure environment in which children can thrive.

The staff

ECE staff work 40 hours per week. Approximately 40% are ECE teachers with a university degree, 30% are child minders with secondary education, and around 30% have no formal pedagogical training.

Men represent about 4% of the workforce. Regardless of qualification, all staff share responsibility for children's care, learning, and wellbeing, and teamwork is essential for creating inclusive and supportive environments.



Artwork outdoors.



Battery box, recycling and dots. Saga, 5 years old.



SWEDEN



Key national policy documents

According to the Education Act (2010), ECE is part of the Swedish school system and rests firmly on democratic values. Its purpose is to ensure that children develop both knowledge and values, including respect for human rights and fundamental democratic principles.

The national curriculum for ECE, first introduced in 1998, states that everyone working in preschool should promote respect for the inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, equality between all people, gender equality, and solidarity.

It also states that no child should be subjected to discrimination based on gender, gender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or belief, disability, sexual orientation, or age. All discriminatory tendencies must be actively counteracted.

Respect for the intrinsic value of every person and a commitment to sustainable development are central principles. Since 2020, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has been incorporated into Swedish law, requiring education to be based on the child's best interests and guaranteeing children's right to participation and awareness of their rights.

Play and learning

Play is the foundation of children's development, learning, and well-being and is valued as an activity in its own right. Teachers are responsible for ensuring a balance between child-initiated play, adult-initiated play, and more structured learning, recognising that playing and teaching are intertwined processes rather than separate activities.

Special features of Swedish Preschools

Education for Sustainability (EfS). Education should lay the foundation for children's growing interest in and responsibility for sustainable development in its social, environmental, and economic

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Atelier for indoor creativity.

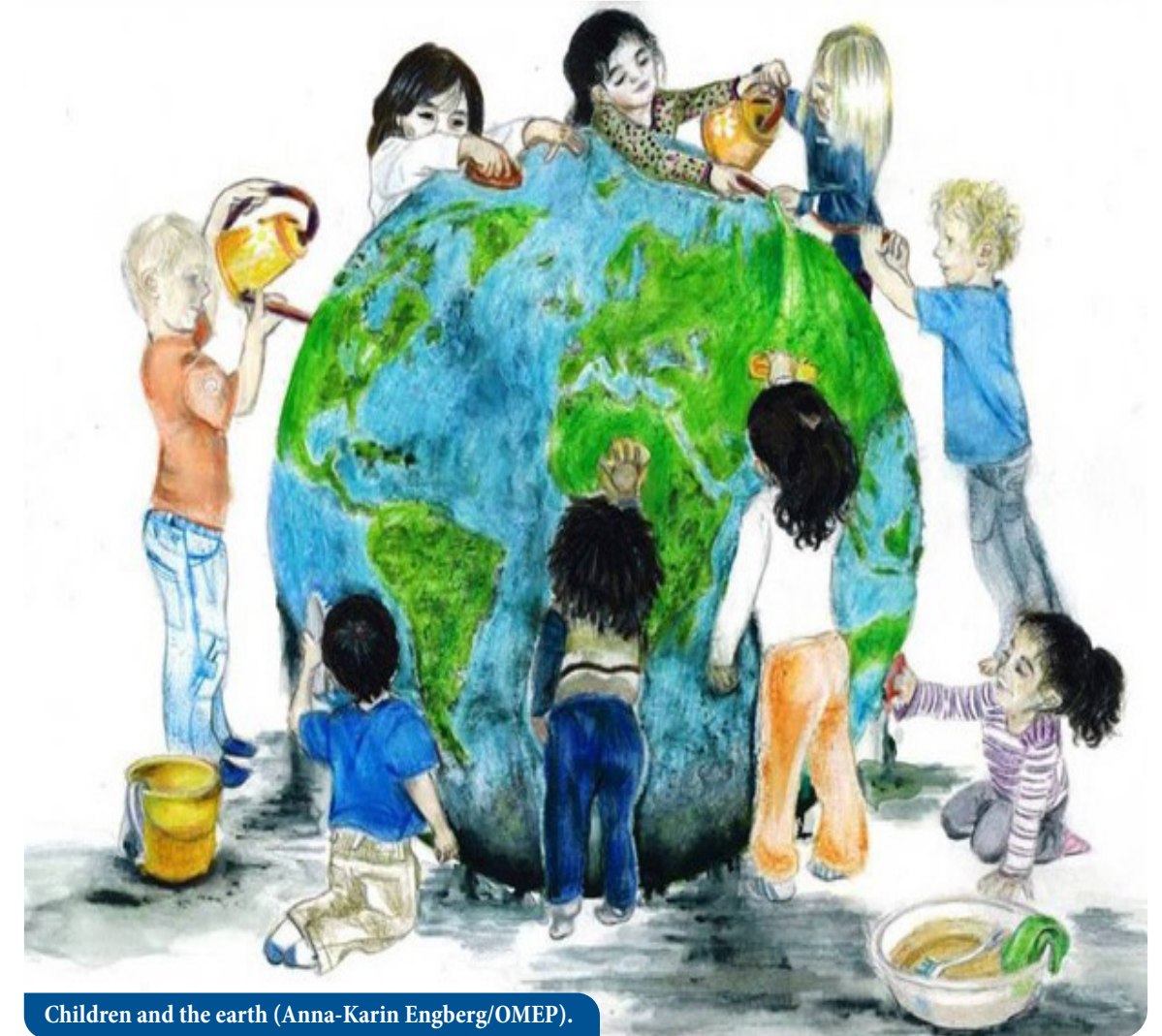


Preschool children celebrate children's rights.

dimensions. Children are supported in understanding relationships and cycles in nature and how everyday choices contribute to a sustainable society.

Child Participation

Children are regarded as citizens and agents of change, with the right to participate, influence, and actively engage in matters that affect them. Their verbally and non-verbally expressed interests and perspectives form the foundation for shaping the ECE environment and educational practice.



Children and the earth (Anna-Karin Engberg/OMEP).



TÜRKİYE



A teacher and a group of children making flour in the traditional way.



An overview of a typical kindergarten.

Early childhood education (ECE) in Türkiye serves children aged 0–68 months and aims to support holistic development, prepare children for primary school, and promote equal opportunities from an early age.

Although ECE is not compulsory under the Basic Law of National Education, national policy targets universal access to at least one year of preschool education, with enrolment priority given to five-year-olds in public institutions.

ECE provision in Türkiye is organised through both institutional and non-institutional services, overseen by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) and the Ministry of Family and Social

Services (MoFSS). Care and education for children aged 0–36 months fall under the responsibility of MoFSS, while education for children aged 36–68 months is jointly managed by both ministries.

Under MoNE, public and private kindergartens, nursery classes, and practice classes operate, while MoFSS supervises crèches, daycare centres, and children's clubs run by private legal entities.

In addition to these services, preschool education is offered in municipal childcare centres, institutions governed by the Civil Servants Law, workplaces regulated under the Labour Law, and courses organised by the Directorate of Religious Affairs.

To ensure access for children in disadvantaged or hard-to-reach contexts, MoNE has developed flexible delivery models such as transport-based kindergartens, mobile classrooms, summer programmes, and education initiatives for children of seasonal agricultural workers and nomadic or semi-nomadic families.

These models are required to provide a minimum of 200 hours of education per year, with at least three hours per day.

Preschool teacher preparation in Türkiye is delivered through four-year undergraduate Early Childhood Education programmes offered by faculties of education.

These programs combine strong theoretical foundations with sustained practicum experiences, aiming to prepare professionally competent teachers skilled in child development, curriculum implementation, classroom management, and assessment.



An outdoor area of a typical kindergarten.



TÜRKİYE

Mehmet Mart.

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A teacher presenting a puppet show during an indoor activity.

ECE financing is based on a mixed public-private model. Education for children aged 36–68 months in public preschools is free of charge, although small contributions may be requested to cover basic needs; children of martyrs, veterans, and families experiencing financial hardship are exempt. Private ECE institutions charge monthly fees.

In the 2023–2024 academic year, enrolment rates reached 84.3% for five year-olds, 64% for four- and five-year-olds, and 51.9% for children aged three to five. MoNE is responsible for curriculum development, quality assurance, inspection, staffing, and budgeting. Preschool education follows nationally developed curricula that have been revised periodically since 1953. The Türkiye Century Maarif Model Preschool Education Curriculum, introduced in 2024, adopts a competency-based, holistic approach and represents the first stage of a skills framework extending through upper secondary education.

Daily educational flow includes routines for starting and ending the day, play in learning centres, meals, and structured activity times, with play-based learning as a central component.

Recent national and international initiatives have expanded access and improved quality, particularly for disadvantaged children and earthquake-affected regions.

Turkish pre-primary education is distinguished by its strong cultural orientation, emphasis on family involvement, and a hybrid pedagogical model that combines play-based learning with teacher-guided activities.

Ongoing policy efforts continue to reinforce Türkiye's commitment to equitable, inclusive, and high-quality early childhood education.

- | | |
|----------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Literacy Centre | 2. Block Centre |
| 3. Early Math Centre | 4. Science Centre |
| 5. Art Centre | 6. Dramatic Play Centre |

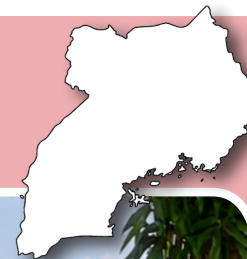


An Erasmus project exhibition promoting intercultural understanding.





UGANDA



Children playing outside.

Pre-primary education in Uganda is a critical foundation for children's learning journey. The government has made efforts to increase access to quality early childhood education, recognising its impact on future academic success. With a focus on holistic development, pre-primary education caters to children aged 3-5 years, preparing them for primary school. Enrolment rates have improved, but challenges persist, particularly in rural areas.

Service Models and Curriculum

Uganda's pre-primary education employs various service models, including community-based and private centres. The curriculum emphasises play-based learning, focusing on life skills, literacy, and numeracy.

Mother-tongue instruction is encouraged, promoting cultural identity. The National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) guides the curriculum, ensuring alignment with national standards.



Children playing outside.

Daily Routines and Learning Environments

A typical pre-primary day in Uganda includes playtime, story sessions, and creative activities. Classrooms are designed to be engaging, with learning corners and play materials.

Outdoor activities promote physical development and exploration. Teachers use interactive methods, encouraging children to participate and learn through play.

Special Features of Pre-Primary Education in Uganda

Uganda's pre-primary education has unique features, such as integrating local languages and cultures. Co-curricular activities like music, dance, and drama enhance creativity.

The government emphasizes teacher training and community involvement, ensuring quality education.



Children practicing writing.



Teacher encouraging children to learn through play.



UGANDA

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A school kitchen.

Despite these developments, significant challenges remain in expanding equitable access and quality across the country.

- Access to pre-primary education: fewer than 1 in 10 Ugandan children aged 3-5 are enrolled in a registered and licensed pre-primary school with 60% attending no school at all until they reach primary school.
- Enrollment Rates: in 2016, the gross enrolment ratio for pre-primary education was 12.99% with female students at 13.24% and male students at 12.74%.
- Geographical disparities: 60% of early childhood development centres are concentrated in the central and eastern regions, excluding over 80% of the rural population living in poverty.
- Pupil-teacher ratio: the pupil-teacher ratio in pre-primary education was 21.39 in 2016.
- Trained Teachers: only 9.87% of pre-primary teachers were trained in 2015.
- Population of official age: approximately 4,434,842 children in Uganda were of official pre-primary school age in 2019.



Children eating outdoor.



Pre-primary classroom lesson.



URUGUAY



Public Early Childhood Education and Care center infrastructure.

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) It is understood as part of a comprehensive system from birth to 6 years of age. The 2008 General Education Law recognizes education as a fundamental human right from the beginning of life and conceives it as a public good and a responsibility of the State.

Early Childhood Education in Uruguay (ANEP) is delivered through three management modalities:

1. Direct state services

The Uruguayan Institute for Children and Adolescents (INAU): Early childhood education and care centers (for children from 0 to 3 years). The General Directorate of Initial and Primary Education (DGEIP ANEP): kindergartens and schools for 3-to-5 year-olds in urban and rural contexts.

2. Services through state–civil society partnerships

INAU with civil society organizations, managed with state funding, regulation, and supervision: Child and Family Care Centers (CAIF), Community Early Education Centers (CCEI), and initiatives linked to the National Integrated Care System (SNIC), such as community care homes or educational spaces for the children of students, workers, and trade union members.

3. Privately run services

(0–3 or 0–5 years), mainly funded by families. Authorization, supervision, and pedagogical guidance are provided by INAU (early childhood centres) or by DGEIP (private kindergartens and schools).

The early childhood field:

It is characterized by a dense network of public services, state–civil society partnerships and private centres.

They share a National Curriculum Framework for ages 0 to 5, which guarantees pedagogical coherence and has been developed inter-institutionally by ANEP, INAU, the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Ministry of Public Health, the National Integrated Care System, and Uruguay Crece Contigo.

Key features of the Framework:

- Recognizes girls and boys as rights-holders, active and competent.
- Promotes continuity of experiences and educational transitions.

- Places play at the center, together with everyday life experiences, language, affective bonds, and cultural participation.
- Includes independent curriculum designs for each sub-stage, from birth to 3 years and from 3 to 6 years.

Quality assessment indicators (IEC) have been developed to guide self-evaluation and continuous improvement processes across the different types of services.

Professionalization, Quality, and Evaluation

Quality is conceived as the result of collective work, training, and ongoing reflection on practice.



Architectural and space design tailored for early childhood.



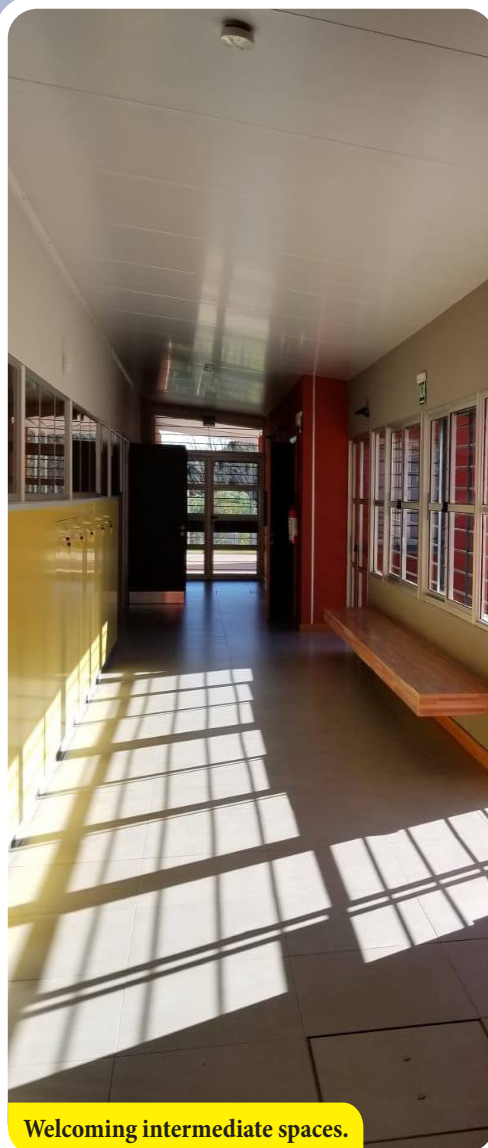
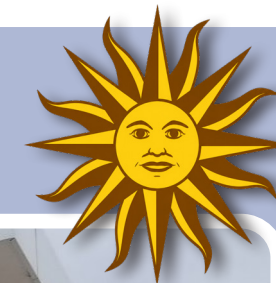
Everyday play activities.



URUGUAY

Javier Alliaume Gabriela Etchebehere

Design: Ma Eugenia Gómez



Welcoming intermediate spaces.

Three main training paths:

- Basic Training for Early Childhood Educators (504 hours). Centre for Training and Studies (CENFORES-INAU).
- Technical Degree in Early Childhood Education (two years, tertiary level, at CENFORES-INAU).
- Early Childhood Teacher degree (four years, tertiary level) – Teacher Training Council (CFE-ANEP)

In the last fifteen years:

Inter-institutional policies have been strengthened. Educational and care provision for children from 0 to 6 years has expanded, bringing together education, health, nutrition, and support for families.

Challenges:

- High enrollment does not always translate into regular attendance or equal conditions.
- Persistent child poverty, food insecurity, and various forms of violence that affect the lives of girls, boys, and their families.
- The need to sustain and deepen inter-institutional coordination. There is a need to strengthen working conditions and recognition of staff.
- Ensuring that high coverage translates into meaningful, caring, and enjoyable educational experiences.

Particularities of the Uruguayan approach

- Rights-based perspective and life course approach.
- Early childhood is defined as 0–6 years, recognising education as a right from birth and integrating the 0–3 and 3–6 age groups into a single curriculum framework.
- Inter-institutional cooperation.
- The Coordinating Council for Early Childhood Education (CCEPI) brings together ANEP, INAU, the MEC, the MSP, the SNIC, and other stakeholders, designing and implementing shared policies and joint programs.
- Mixed and territorially based network of services: public schools, INAU centres, the CAIF network, CCEI, private services, and community organizations reaching diverse contexts.
- Near-universal enrolment for 4-and 5-year-olds and a strong increase in coverage for 3-year-olds.



Children engaging with books and early literacy experiences.



Inter-institutional commitment to children's rights.



UNITED STATES



Lego play outside on an outdoor carpet.

Service models and curriculum

Preschool in the United States is delivered through public schools, private centres, faith-based organisations, and federally funded programmes such as Head Start and Early Head Start. Curriculum frameworks vary across settings and may include HighScope, Creative Curriculum, Bank Street, Frog Street, Waldorf, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and play-based approaches. Many programmes align with the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF) and state early learning standards.

These frameworks emphasise holistic development, including cognitive, social-emotional, language, and physical growth, while supporting creativity, exploration, and active learning. Programmes aim to promote school readiness alongside children's wellbeing and family engagement.

Early learning programs overview

Early learning programs operate under a combination of federal, state, and local regulations. Head Start and Early Head Start are federally funded programmes serving children from birth to age five in income-eligible families. These programs provide education, health, nutrition, and family support services.

At least 10% of enrolled children must qualify for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) or an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP). Priority is also given to children experiencing homelessness, those in foster care,

and families receiving public assistance. Early Head Start additionally supports infants, toddlers, and pregnant mothers.

Programs operate in centre-based, home-based, or family childcare settings. Health and safety regulations including immunisation requirements, staff child ratios, and nutrition standards vary by state and service model.

Equity and access issues

Access to affordable, high-quality ECE differs greatly across the United States. Funding disparities, geographic location, and workforce shortages contribute to unequal opportunities for children and families. Equity initiatives focus particularly on children with disabilities, dual language learners, and families experiencing poverty or homelessness.



Outdoor play.

Some states have expanded access through universal pre-kindergarten programmes, while others rely heavily on federal funding streams. Despite extensive research demonstrating the importance of early learning, national spending for children birth to five remains significantly lower than investment in K-12 education.

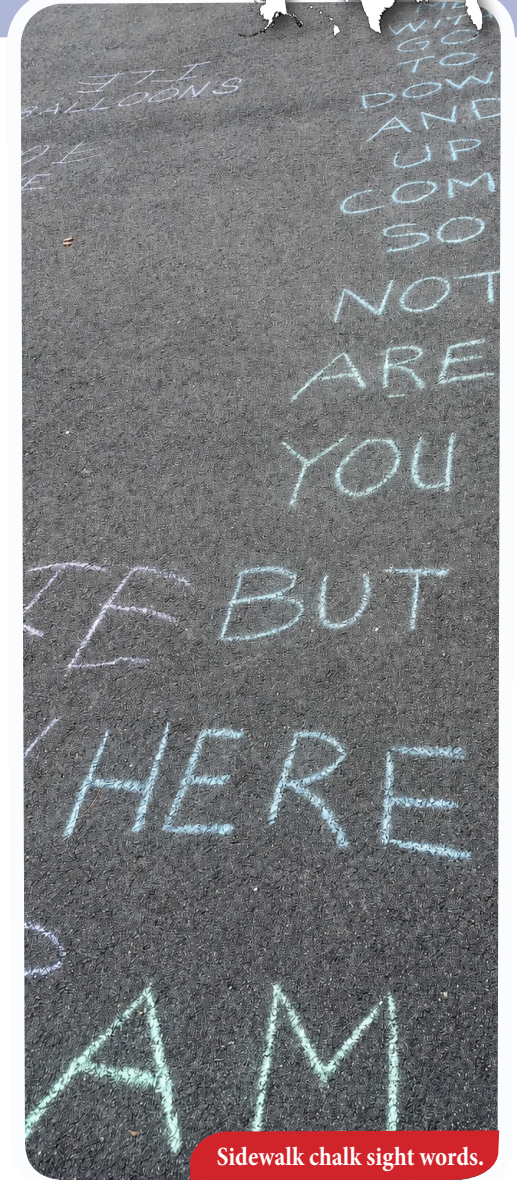
Qualifications, and professional standards

The early childhood workforce faces ongoing challenges related to wages, staffing shortages, and professional recognition. Preschool educators typically hold an associate or bachelor's degree in early childhood education, while many also obtain the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, the most widely recognised credential in the field.

The Unifying Framework for the Early Childhood Education Profession outlines standards for preparation, professional roles, and compensation for educators working with children from birth through age eight.



Readers sight word bingo paint activity.



Sidewalk chalk sight words.

Preschool education in the United States encompasses a wide range of service models, curriculum frameworks, and policy approaches. While early childhood education (ECE) broadly includes children from birth to age eight, access, funding, and delivery vary significantly across states. Federal initiatives such as Head Start and Early Head Start play a major role in promoting equity and access for underserved communities. However, many families who do not qualify for subsidized programmes continue to face challenges finding affordable, high-quality childcare.



UNITED STATES

Ebony C. Cray. President, OMEP-USA



Child playing with transportation vehicles on a carpet.

The framework promotes aligned preparation pathways, professional recognition, and compensation comparable to public school salaries, while emphasising equity and accountability across the sector.

Daily routines and learning environments

Preschool routines in the United States emphasise play-based learning, structured group activities, and individualised instruction.



Readers highlighting sight words.

Daily schedules commonly include free-choice time, outdoor play, meals, rest, and transitions supporting children's independence and social development.

Learning environments encourage exploration, creativity, and interaction. Indoor areas often include reading corners, dramatic play spaces, STEM activities, art centres, and sensory materials.

Outdoor environments may feature climbing equipment, sand play, gardens, and nature-based learning experiences.



Artwork with natural materials at the outdoor table.

Inclusive practices and cultural representation are increasingly prioritised within curriculum design and classroom environments.

Programs are encouraged to participate in quality improvement and accreditation systems such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and Quality Rating initiatives, although smaller or privately funded programmes may face financial challenges in meeting these standards.



Magnetic letters spelling words on tray.

The U.S. early childhood system reflects both innovation and complexity. While approaches vary widely across states and providers, there is growing recognition that high-quality early childhood education is essential for children's development, family well-being, and long-term social and economic outcomes.



Infant and toddler classroom learning materials.



Children playing on outdoor stage.



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New Zealand.

Glossary:
Kai - food
Kaiako - teacher/s, educator/s, other adults including parents in parent-led services
Kaupapa Māori - Māori language, customs, practices, principles, values
Mokopuna - grandchildren, intergenerational connectedness
Māori - indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand
Māoritanga - Māori culture, practices, way of life
Ngā tikanga Māori - Māori ways of doing, practices, customs Tamariki - children
Te reo Māori - Māori language
Te ao Māori - the Māori world
Waiata - Māori songs, chants
Whānau - family
Whakapapa - genealogy, lineage
Whanaungatanga - relationships, collective belonging, mutual support

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