Policy Paper 46

Right from the start: build inclusive societies through inclusive early childhood education

Early childhood education has the potential to expand opportunities for disadvantaged children, provided that programmes use inclusion as a guiding principle. While the international community has committed to inclusive education, countries vary in their efforts to extend this goal to early childhood. Universal access is the basis of inclusion, and countries must address barriers related to socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender, language, disability and remoteness. Cooperation among multiple actors to identify special needs early and provide integrated services is needed, as are inclusive curricula that support children's socio-emotional development and identity formation. Finally, educators must be given the knowledge, training, and support to implement inclusive practices and work with families from all backgrounds.

A call for inclusive early childhood education is embedded in the pledge of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to leave no one behind. The international community committed in 2015 to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education' as the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4). Target 4.2 called on countries to 'ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education'. While the target formulation emphasized quality, the Education 2030 Framework for Action referred to inclusion in two of the four indicative strategies for achieving the target: first, in 'inclusive policies and legislation that guarantee the provision of at least one year of free and compulsory pre-primary education, paying special attention to reaching the poorest and most disadvantaged children'; second, in 'inclusive, accessible and integrated programmes,

services and infrastructure of quality for early childhood, covering health, nutrition, protection and education needs, especially for children with disabilities' (UNESCO, 2015, §37).

The Nurturing Care Framework for Early Childhood Development, adopted at the World Health Assembly three years later, included 'opportunities for early learning' as one of its five components. It considered equity, and implicitly inclusion, as a guiding principle. In particular, it made a call for governments to focus their early childhood interventions on 'groups that are excluded, marginalized or vulnerable in other ways' and listed 'children with disabilities' and 'children in humanitarian settings' among them (WHO et al., 2018, p. 26). In the case of education, it called for interventions 'promoting respect and inclusion among children of diverse backgrounds'. It also called

on governments to 'identify vulnerable children and families, through community assessment, dialogues and outreach … embrace children with special needs, and … prepare teachers and administrators to ensure they fully participate' (WHO et al., 2018, p. 38).

The Global Partnership Strategy for Early Childhood has also embraced inclusion. One of its five 'strategies for results' involves scaling up 'access, inclusion, equity and quality' with four strategic priorities: access and engagement, tackling inequity and exclusion from services; childhood intervention services systems; early childhood workforce; and child development, early learning and quality service standards (UNESCO et al., 2021).

Despite rapid progress in the past two decades, the pre-primary gross enrolment ratio still stood at 61.5% in 2019. Disadvantaged children, already disproportionately more likely to suffer from malnutrition and poor health, are also more likely to be unable to access early childhood education services. Ensuring universal access is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for inclusion: Quality standards need to be met as well. A recent definition of inclusive early childhood development programmes envisaged that these 'hold high expectations and intentionally promote participation in all learning and social activities, facilitated by individualized accommodations; and use evidence-based services and supports to foster children's development (cognitive, language, communication, physical, behavioral, and social-emotional), friendships with peers, and sense of belonging' (Vargas-Barón et al., 2019, p. 21).

While this definition focuses on children with disabilities and special educational needs, it also fits the broader conception of inclusion in education as a process that concerns all learners, adopted in the 2020 *Global Education Monitoring Report*. It conceives inclusive practices as those that embrace diversity and build a sense of belonging, rooted in the belief that every person has value and potential and should be respected. Early childhood is a key stage in that process. This policy paper, in support of the Global Partnership Strategy for Early Childhood, summarizes steps countries around the world are taking to make the early childhood education experience inclusive and meaningful for all children, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds and identities.[1]

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION HAS LONG-TERM INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL BENEFITS FOR INCLUSION

Early childhood education, as part of a comprehensive package of interventions, creates the foundations for expanded opportunity and offers a chance to escape poverty. Its absence can lock children into deprivation and marginalization. Research has focused on the short-term individual returns from investing in early childhood education programmes, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The number of studies on medium- and long-term returns to these programmes is relatively limited due to the dearth of documentation for programmes implemented in the past, the difficulty in assessing whether standards were met and how each child benefitted, and the challenge of unpacking the complex relations from interventions to outcomes, especially as successive interventions can build on but also undo the effects of one another.

Research from the United States, which shows positive long-term effects of early childhood education, even spanning generations, has generated a lot of attention. A meta-analysis of 22 experimental and quasi-experimental studies carried out over the course of 50 years found that participation in early childhood education reduced placement in special education, reduced grade retention, and increased secondary school completion by as much as 11 percentage points (McCoy et al., 2017). Evaluation of a 1960s project in Michigan targeting disadvantaged African-American children concluded that they subsequently experienced fewer suspensions in school, had better employment outcomes, and were less likely to receive criminal convictions or to suffer from ill health (Heckman and Karapakula, 2019a, 2019b). Early childhood education programmes' positive impact therefore extends beyond individual outcomes to broader outcomes that support social inclusion.

Evidence on early childhood interventions from developing countries is growing (The Lancet, 2016), although the education content of assessed programmes varies considerably, and studies are mainly limited to short-term effects. In Chile, analysis of grade 4 students showed that those who had attended a public early childhood education programme before entering kindergarten scored higher in reading, mathematics and social sciences than children who had not, with effects higher for poorer children (Cortázar, 2015). In Karnataka, India, 40% of the considerable gain in cognitive development thanks to a preschool scholarship persisted to the end of grade 1 (Dean and Jayachandran, 2020). In Indonesia, an early childhood education intervention

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1   Two background papers have contributed to this policy paper: Deloitte (2021) and Denauw and Loizillon (2021).

in about 3,000 or 4% of villages in the country reduced gaps in language, cognitive development, communication, general knowledge and pro-social behaviour between poorer and richer children (Jung and Hasan, 2015). An early childhood education programme in Kenya, which involved teacher training, classroom instructional support, teaching and learning materials and a health component in four districts, significantly improved school readiness (Ngware et al., 2018).

ACCESS FOR ALL IS A PRECONDITION FOR INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Universal early childhood education can foster inclusion by establishing an expectation that all children can access a minimum level of services, regardless of socio-economic status, ethnicity, language, disability or remoteness. In total, just 51 of 184 countries, or 28%, have made pre-primary education compulsory. Of those, it is compulsory for one year in 29, two years in 13 and three or more years in 9 countries. The proportion of countries that have instituted compulsory pre-primary education ranges from zero in the Arab States to 55% in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNESCO, 2021).

Participation in early childhood education varies considerably by social, economic and cultural factors, notably those related to gender norms. It increases with age, reaching its highest level the year before primary school entry, the focus of SDG global indicator 4.2.2: In this group, participation was 73% in 2019, with shares ranging from 12% in Djibouti to over 99% in countries such as Fiji and the United Arab Emirates. According to administrative data collected by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, some of the fastest progress in the 2010s was observed in Azerbaijan (from 30% in 2010 to 74% in 2019), Burundi (19% to 49%), Kyrgyzstan (54% to 90%), the Lao People's Democratic Republic (36% to 69%) and Palestine (41% to 65%). But there were also notable cases of stagnation, especially in some sub-Saharan African countries, such as Congo (constant at 29%), Niger (from 22% to 23%) and Senegal (from 14% to 16%).

Surveys capture participation in unregistered early childhood education services and highlight disparity in access at the expense of children most in need. Among low- and middle-income countries where fewer than two in three children attend organized learning one year before the official primary entry age, the average participation gap between the richest and the poorest 20% is 48 percentage points. It exceeds 60 percentage points in Benin, Cameroon, Mali, Nigeria and Pakistan, while it reaches the highest level in North Macedonia, where 91% of the richest but just 12% of the poorest benefitted from organized learning opportunities in 2019 (**Figure 1**).

FIGURE 1:

In many low- and middle-income countries too few children benefit from early childhood education – and the poorest suffer from high levels of exclusion

Participation rate in organized learning one year before the official primary entry age, by wealth, selected countries, 2014–2019
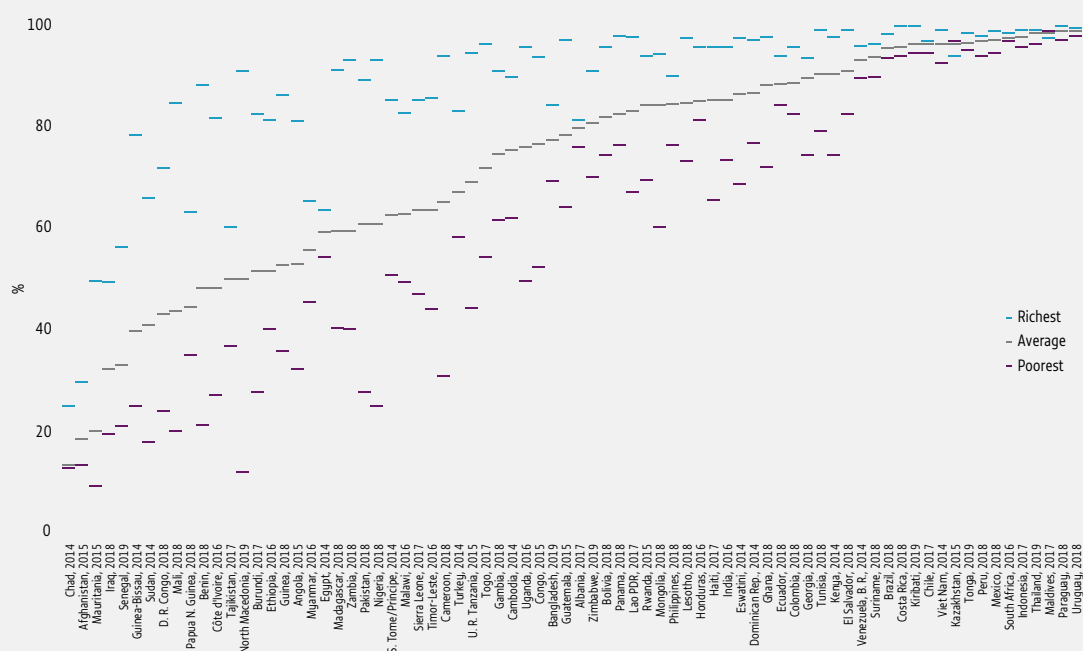
Source: UIS database.

Inequality in access persists in many European countries for children from ethnic minorities or with a migrant or refugee background (Ünver et al., 2016). Roma populations are least likely to access early childhood education. According to the second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey (EU MIDIS II), across nine EU countries, the early childhood education participation rate among the Roma was 53%; in Greece, it was 28% relative to 84% for the general population. UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) also confirm large gaps in early childhood education participation rates between the Roma and the general population in South-eastern Europe, for instance almost 30 percentage points in Montenegro in 2018 (**Figure 2**).

MONITORING ACCESS GAPS REQUIRES APPROPRIATE AND OFTEN COSTLY TOOLS

The monitoring of inclusive early childhood education provision and outcomes based on risk factors such as location, age, gender, ethnicity and language has made progress. However, disaggregation by disability remains more challenging. A study of 51 low- and middle-income countries found that none reported disaggregated enrolment data on children with disabilities in pre-primary education in their education sector plans, compared to 40% for primary (GPE, 2018). Administrative data systems require major investment to provide high-quality data on disability, which relatively few countries can afford. Australia conducts an extensive census every three years (**Box 1**).

Surveys could in principle offer an alternative but are also not without their challenges. The Washington Group on Disability Statistics developed a Short Set of Questions for surveys and censuses, which has been expanded with a Module on Child Functioning to ensure questions are tailored to adequately capture developmental disabilities in children. Two versions of the module refer to 2- to 4-year-olds and to 5- to 17-year-olds. For the first age range, the questionnaire includes questions designed to be answered by the child's primary caregiver and captures domains such as vision, hearing, mobility, communication/comprehension, behaviour and learning, dexterity and playing. Additional questions for the older children cover, for instance, anxiety and depression (Washington Group on Disability Statistics, 2021).

BOX 1.

Australia regularly assesses whether children are developmentally on track

The Australia Early Childhood Development Census (AECD) is a nationwide data collection tool that measures whether young children are developmentally on track when they start school (Boller and Harman-Smith, 2019). It was adapted from Canada's Offord Centre Early Development Instrument, which also informed the development of the new UNICEF MICS Early Childhood Development Index. It has been conducted every three years since 2009. Coverage is universal. In 2015, data were collected for over 300,000 children, or 97% of the target group. Data for every child are collected by teachers but reported at community, state/territory and national levels. The 2018 round cost US$18 million, which included coordination, training and research support in and between data collection years. Funding also covers training for teachers to complete the questionnaire to reduce subjectivity in responses.

The questionnaire expects teachers to respond to 100 questions when children begin primary school, rating their early childhood education experiences during the previous year, as well as different physical, social, emotional, linguistic and vulnerability indicators (Australian Early Development Census, 2019). Children are identified in terms of whether they are indigenous, have special needs, speak a language other than English at home, were born overseas, or live in a small or remote community. Teachers work with a cultural consultant when completing the questionnaire to reflect the capabilities of children from historically marginalized communities.

The 2018 results show that the most disadvantaged children, e.g. those in remote areas, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and those with home languages other than English, are closing the developmental gap in three domains. A 2010 evaluation confirmed the AECD's promise as a tool to inform policy and programme design, improve early childhood development and help evaluate long-term strategies. It identified a need to contract complex aspects of delivery to specialists and strengthen community engagement and capacity. Key actions include intense groundwork to promote use of data in municipal and community decision making, ownership by local community and programme leaders, a uniform measure across communities, and key stakeholder and leader buy-in for scaling.

FIGURE 2:

Roma children in Europe are less likely to participate in early childhood education than their peers
Early childhood education participation rate, Roma children and general population, selected European countries and territories, 2014–2020
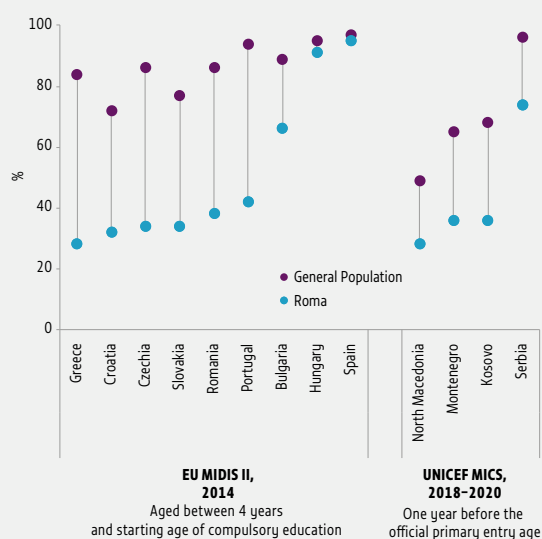
Note: Reference to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).
Source: FRA (2016) for EU countries; UNICEF MICS survey findings reports for South-eastern Europe.

The sixth round of the UNICEF MICS is the first to use the modules with their age-appropriate questions. Yet, while the definition of disability should not change at any given age, the different approaches to disability-related questions have a dramatic effect on estimates of disability prevalence, which in turn can hamper interpretation of education indicators disaggregated by disability. In Iraq, Sierra Leone and Tunisia, disability prevalence rises from under 4% among 4-year-olds to over 22% among 5-year-olds (**Figure 3**). Average education outcomes for those with and without functional difficulties are impossible to interpret if having a functional difficulty is measured differently for individuals in an indicator age group.

LEGISLATION AND POLICIES SUPPORT EQUITABLE ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

In lieu of, or in addition to, making early childhood education free and compulsory, countries also pursue a variety of legislative and policy approaches to expand access. While 45% of countries in Europe have made pre-primary education compulsory, there is variation in the duration and modality. In total, 16 out of 38 countries in Europe guarantee a place in early childhood care and education by age 3 at the latest (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). Many countries also adopt some specific legal provision to facilitate access to disadvantaged groups, on the basis of poverty, disability, migration, displacement or ethnicity. In Norway, 4- to 5-year-old children from poor families in some municipalities are entitled to 20 hours of free pre-primary education per week, while children from the indigenous Sami are supported in early childhood education to develop their indigenous language, knowledge and culture.

In Sweden, all children have the right to early childhood care and education from age 1 and to free services for 15 hours per week from age 3. Children under age 1 with special education needs may start free early childhood care and education for 15 hours per week. Support is offered to the entire preschool class, adjusting the number of staff or children as appropriate (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2016, 2017b; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). In its 2019 Education Act, Sweden strengthened and extended the right to pre-primary education in national minority languages, besides guaranteeing early support for learners in pre-primary and primary school (European Commission, 2021).

Many countries specify support for children with disabilities. In Croatia, kindergartens must include children with disabilities under the Pre-School Education Act of 1997. In France, where all children are entitled to free pre-primary school (recently extended to age 2), classes for children with autism spectrum disorders have opened in preschools, and other children are taught to understand their classmates' needs. Malta's Equal Opportunities Act promotes the inclusion of children with special education needs into mainstream settings from the age of 2 years and 9 months with a resource centre, a child development advisory unit, national school support services, and psychosocial support teams with learning support educators.

FIGURE 3:
Interpreting education disability gaps is difficult when the measure of disability changes at age 5
Prevalence of disability, by age, Iraq, Sierra Leone and Tunisia, 2017–18
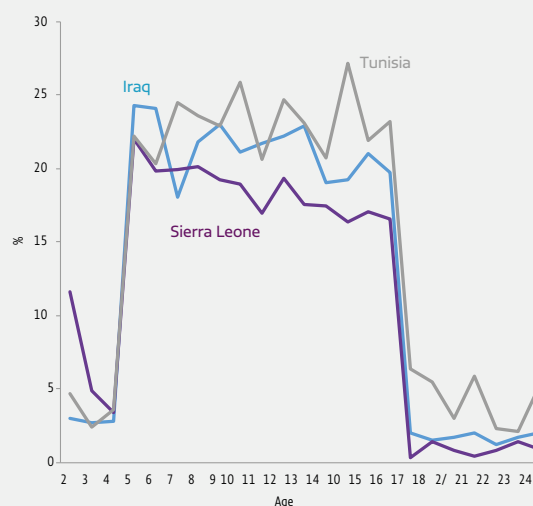
Source: GEM Report team analysis of MICS data.

Some countries also intervene to support Roma children. In North Macedonia, a project of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy focusing on Roma children aged 3 to 6 years to facilitate access to quality services and raise parental awareness of the importance of pre-school education was first introduced in 2016 and has since become public policy. In Slovenia, the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports provides Roma children with further financial support to cover the higher costs for kindergartens that enrol Roma children, in order to increase the number of those enrolling at least two years before entering primary school (European Commission, 2021).

Around the world, governments are making specific legal and policy provisions to promote early childhood education opportunities for vulnerable groups. Cambodia's 2015–18 Multilingual Education National Action Plan enabled learners from ethnic minority groups to receive instruction in preschool and in the first three years of primary school in five languages other than Khmer. The programme is implemented in 5 provinces and 18 districts and has since been expanded to one more language (Ball and Smith, 2019). The government has committed to increasing the number of multilingual teachers by 25% by 2023 (Cambodia Ministry of Education, 2019).

The Cook Islands has set up satellite classes in isolated villages on small islands to offer early childhood and early primary level programmes, while older students attend larger schools in more central locations (Cook Islands Ministry of Education, 2014). In Cuba, children with disabilities are included in mainstream early childhood development programmes. Support is provided to all children, even in rural areas, thanks in part to Educa a tu hijo (Educate your child), which serves more than 5,000 children with disabilities (OHCHR, 2019). Ireland's Community Childcare Subvention Resettlement programme provides free services for refugee children under age 5 to support their integration (Ireland Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth). In Uganda, within the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, the government has introduced policies to increase numbers of certified caregivers and centres providing good-quality integrated early childhood development services (Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports, 2018; UNHCR, 2018a, 2018b).

COORDINATION, COOPERATION AND COLLABORATION ARE NEEDED TO DELIVER INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Ensuring equal education opportunities for those at risk of exclusion is not the sole responsibility of education policy makers. Multiple actors need to mobilize and administrative systems supporting various facets of vulnerable populations' lives need to align (Nores and Fernandez, 2018). Responsibilities for delivering inclusive early childhood education need to be shared horizontally among government departments or government and non-government actors, as well as vertically across education or government levels, taking their respective advantages into account.

EARLY IDENTIFICATION IS CRUCIAL TO RESPOND APPROPRIATELY TO LEARNERS' DIVERSE NEEDS

Early identification of special educational needs is vital for planning appropriate education interventions of good quality, enabling children to reach their full developmental potential and learn alongside other children, and ultimately reducing the level of support needed throughout their schooling trajectory (Braun, 2020).

Detecting risk early can also support inclusion. For instance, undiagnosed dyslexia substantially increases the risk of illiteracy and social exclusion. A longitudinal study in Finland that followed a sample of children from birth to adolescence suggested that

first indications of risk of dyslexia can be observed nearly at birth. Brain event-related potentials measured at three to five days from birth are significantly correlated with reading ability in grade 2 (Lyytinen et al., 2015). Early intervention for deaf or hard-of-hearing children enables access to sign language, reducing the risk of linguistic deprivation, which makes them vulnerable to abuse and can lead to cognitive delays, mental health challenges and post-traumatic stress disorder (Humphries et al., 2012).

Upper-middle- and high-income countries carry out needs assessments in different ways, depending on the availability of resources. For instance, the Early Abilities Based Learning and Education Support (Early ABLES) assessment, an online learning tool in Victoria, Australia, helps educators systematically observe and track learning outcomes for children with disabilities or developmental delay. The tool was developed to align with the province's Early Years Learning and Development Framework to enable educators to report and evaluate against the learning and development outcomes set out in the curriculum (Deloitte, 2021).

Many countries conduct assessments through professional multidisciplinary teams at local, regional or national levels. In Bulgaria, the Ministry of Education and Science and its 28 regional inclusive education centres, in collaboration with UNICEF, have been introducing the WHO International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health into education since 2018. This classification is based on the biopsychosocial model, combining aspects of the social and medical models in disability assessment. It is designed to document not only children's characteristics but also the influence of their environment. The ministry plans to introduce a functional assessment toolkit in at least 400 schools and kindergartens under the Support for Inclusive Education project. About 15 teachers in each school and kindergarten, or about 6,000 teachers in all, will be involved in cascade training on the toolkit's implementation. About 12,000 students, or 30 per education institution, on average, will be covered when functional assessment of special education needs is rolled out by 2021.

Across low- and middle-income countries, however, there are many barriers and bottlenecks to early identification, including the absence of civil registries, poor access to diagnostic services, limited availability of professionals trained in child development and stigma among communities in accessing preventative or curative health care (Graham, 2014; Hayes and Bulat,

2017; WHO and UNICEF, 2012). A review of 21 eastern and southern African countries found that formal identification and screening systems were rare and that it was usually parents who informed schools or school staff about disability (Education Development Trust and UNICEF, 2016).

While there is a large range of assessment tools for developmental screening, not all are applicable or culturally appropriate for all settings or ages (Fiszbein et al., 2016; Gladstone et al., 2010; Sabanathan et al., 2015; World Bank, 2016). Furthermore, very few link to education, or they do so only indirectly. In Djibouti, under the Prise en charge intégrée des maladies de l'enfant et du nouveau-né (Integrated management of childhood and newborn diseases, PCIMEN), trained doctors screen children under 5 for malnutrition and developmental delays, but many children are excluded from screening because they do not go to health centres (Denauw and Loizillon, 2021). In Madhya Pradesh, India, Samarpan is a community-based, early-identification, screening, treatment and rehabilitation system for children under 5 with developmental delays or disability. Assessments are carried out by Anganwadi workers responsible for basic health, childcare and non-formal early childhood education (NITI Aayog and UNDP, 2015).

SECTORS SHOULD OFFER INTEGRATED SERVICES TO ADDRESS CHILDREN'S NEEDS

Disadvantaged young children have additional needs, complementary to education, that require integrated service provision. These in turn require sectors to communicate and share information. Early childhood identification, intervention and prevention strategies are far more cost-effective, in terms of tackling disability, disadvantage, vulnerability and social exclusion, than corrective measures later (European Commission, 2016; UNESCO, 2006). Prevention-oriented strategies facilitate inter-agency cooperation and a greater focus on the family than do correction-oriented strategies (CfBT Education Trust, 2010).

In Nordic countries, identification of risk and needs for specialized support starts before birth. In Finland, maternity and child health clinics reach virtually all expecting mothers, as a medical examination is necessary to receive a maternity grant. Strong emphasis is placed on early identification of children's physical health and mental or behavioural disorders, as well as family well-being. Additional tailored support is provided in coordination with social and health

service providers (Finland National Institute for Health and Welfare, 2019). In the Republic of Korea, Dream Start centres identify vulnerable families based on administrative data records and subsequent letters and home visits (Republic of Korea Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2019).

Some multidisciplinary social programmes that disburse cash benefits conditional on children's use of a range of education and health services determine access to benefits on the basis of household income and means tests. In Colombia, Más Familias en Acción (More Families in Action) is a cash transfer programme conditional on preschool and school attendance and health service use. It serves 2.7 million poor families targeted through two complementary mechanisms. First, three registries are used to certify vulnerability: beneficiaries of the extreme poverty programme Red Unidos (United Network), victims of displacement and those enumerated in the Indigenous Census. Second, the National Planning Department's multidimensional Beneficiary Identification System for Social Programmes index uses proxy characteristics to estimate living standards. The programme's management information system uses information technology to improve operational efficiency and reduce families' participation costs (Medellín and Sánchez Prada, 2015).

Case management and co-location are key in efforts to integrate services for vulnerable children, although the sequencing of services depends on education and child and family welfare structures (OECD, 2015; Sloper, 2004). Where access to child and maternity clinics, early childhood care and education and other specialized services is free and universal, education and health services often act as an entry point for referral to additional, more specialized, multidisciplinary services.

Norway's 0-to-24 Cooperation seeks to bring together four ministries to support all children and young people, recognizing that inclusive service provision is not a child-specific need (UNESCO, 2019). Smoother coordination between education and health authorities is at the heart of a recent white paper on early intervention and inclusive communities, which focuses on students in grades 1 to 4 at risk of falling behind in reading, writing and mathematics (Norway Government, 2019). The aim throughout is to ensure that coordination is not anchored in one specific service but that harmonised regulations between different sectors support individual child plans that describe

their situation, needs and interventions and apply to all services involved (Skog Hansen et al., 2020).

Other initiatives target families at risk of exclusion or disadvantage. The United Kingdom's Sure Start provides education, health and social services focusing on socially deprived areas. It offers co-located, nearby and home-based services to children under age 5 and their families, aiming to prevent intergenerational transmission of disadvantage and improve children's cognitive and language development, education and other outcomes (Bate and Foster, 2017).

In Hungary, the Sure Start Children's Houses programme, which drew on its counterpart in the United Kingdom, supports poor families in ensuring that children not otherwise reached by institutional care can make a smooth transition into pre-primary education at the compulsory age of 3. Introduced in 2003 and expanded with European Union support, it has been co-funded by the government since 2012 and was recognized in the country's 2013 child protection law. Today, 180 Children's Houses serve about 2,500 children per year (Hungary Government, 2020). In addition to day care and skills development, the Children's Houses offer meals, parental education and community events. The programme establishes partnerships among parents, children, and health, social and early childhood care workers, but also with local communities in the most disadvantaged micro-regions and settlements with segregated neighbourhoods and ghettos, often inhabited by Roma (Havasi, 2019). A key challenge was selecting appropriate locations. Some of the Children's Houses were too far from settlements, and the poorest beneficiaries, who had to be transported in buses, would not participate. But when houses were located in settlements, better-off beneficiaries would avoid them (Balás et al., 2016).

VERTICAL COLLABORATION IS CRITICAL FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Vertical integration of governance and financing promotes cooperation and coordination among government or education levels to harmonize standards, share data, ensure full funding of commitments, and improve monitoring and evaluation of student outcomes. Local governments need support to provide inclusive education. A common criticism of centralized governance systems is that, through one-size-fits-all policies and limited autonomy at lower levels, they are less likely to promote local ownership. In principle, decentralization aligns needs

with preferences and improves accountability. However, decentralization can exacerbate inequality when local governments have an uneven capacity for mobilizing resources, a concern that applies across social spending commitments.

An analysis of early childhood to primary education transition policies in 30 high-income countries found growing attention to this issue in strategy and policy documents. Early childhood education responsibilities are increasingly integrated within education ministries to facilitate collaboration, including for inclusive education (OECD, 2017). In Belgium, Italy, Slovenia and the United Kingdom, fostering continuity across education settings through pedagogical continuity, continuity with the home environment and community, professional continuity and structural continuity enhanced achievement and socio-emotional development, especially for children at risk of exclusion (Van Laere et al., 2019).

Austria developed a national strategy on transition, recognizing that its decentralized context meant several early childhood centres were not coordinating well with primary schools. Japan uses a five-level scale to evaluate collaboration quality among municipal stakeholders, assigning the top score when reviews have been undertaken to improve transition. Schools use self-evaluation and develop plans for collaboration and exchange at the beginning of each school year. In the Netherlands, the Ministry of Education developed agreements with the 37 largest municipalities to track and fund their efforts on targeted programmes to support disadvantaged children's transition from kindergarten and preschool to primary school (OECD, 2017).

In some cases, local governments act on their own initiative. In Tundzha, Bulgaria, where 76% of the children attending early childhood care and education centres are Roma, the municipality supports participation with a range of services for children and parents including free public transport. A network of education mediators supports the transition between home, early childhood and school education (Vandekerckhove et al., 2019).

Considerable progress in service integration has been made in Latin America. In a 2016 presidential decree, Brazil initiated Criança Feliz (Happy Childhood) to promote comprehensive child development in

the early years through home visits and inter-sector collaboration. By January 2018, 25 of 27 federal units had joined the programme (Girade, 2018). Colombia's De Cero a Siempre (From Zero to Forever), initiated in 2011 and passed into legislation in 2016, is based on an integrated package of services that each child should receive from birth to age 6. It integrates services horizontally among government departments and vertically between the national and subnational government levels (Santos Calderón, 2018).

QUALITY STANDARDS ARE NEEDED TO CLOSE GAPS

When developing and implementing integrated service delivery, clear definition of standards and objectives is key to ensuring their effectiveness and quality. Well-defined, measurable standards outline actors' responsibilities, the desired outcomes of integration and the dimensions in which policies will be evaluated. Lack of clearly defined standards and framework is a major impediment to integrating education and health services (Lawrence and Thorne, 2016). This is needed especially where the share of private provision of services is high.

Many high-income countries have implemented minimum standards for quality in early childhood care and education, such as child-to-staff ratios, staff qualifications, and norms for indoor and outdoor spaces available to children. For instance, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, an independent authority, which helps administer the National Quality Framework for early childhood care and education, carries out several activities to enhance the way services meet the minimum requirements of the framework (Deloitte, 2021). Other examples of common frameworks that follow children up to compulsory education age include Hesse in Germany (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017a), the 2012 National Curriculum Framework and 2015 Learning Outcomes Framework in Malta (European Commission, 2021) and the Decree on Basic Conditions for Quality Preschool Education in the Netherlands (Deloitte, 2021).

Chile Crece Contigo (Chile Grows with You) is a comprehensive early childhood programme covering prenatal to age 4. Through strong political will and consensus-based policy development, it provides coordinated services across all relevant sectors.

Municipalities coordinate education, health and social teams. A coordinating body at the Ministry of Social Development and a 2009 law that institutionalized the programme and provided a permanent budget line facilitated national expansion. Resources were allocated to the health and education ministries through transfer agreements and to municipalities through direct transfer agreements. The agreements specified technical standards for institutions, providing a quality control mechanism. The programme is part of the social protection system, which includes psychosocial support for extremely poor families. Successful expansion was also a result of incremental improvements to existing systems, which promoted collaboration among the health, social protection and education sectors and built on municipal social protection programmes. Local health and education teams' skills and competences have increased. Progress is inter-sectoral and participatory, indicating continuous feedback to the local level (Milman et al., 2018).

Since 1995, the Early Head Start and Head Start programmes in the United States, which provide comprehensive early education, health and social services to disadvantaged children and youth, have included performance standards mandating service providers to work towards improving coordination and communication among them and to record their efforts. The programmes have been effective in promoting cooperation and establishing partnerships among local providers, ensuring access to a variety of services to help families be self-sufficient, including families of children with disabilities (Vogel and Xue, 2018).

Normative frameworks and guidelines aim to set minimum standards not only for outcomes but also for the physical safety of children. The design and features of an inclusive infrastructure consider the abilities of all children, enabling their capacity to play and avoiding stigma or exclusion. In low-resource settings, minimum standards for inclusive infrastructure enacted within an early childhood education legal framework and its enabling decrees help set expectations and norms, even if these are not necessarily met (Neuman and Devercelli, 2013; Sayre et al., 2015). In high-resource settings, there are more explicit examples of moves to adopt universal design principles. In 2019, Ireland published the Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings, in collaboration with the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design at the National Disability Authority, Early Childhood Ireland, and TrinityHaus architects. The guidelines aim to ensure that 'early learning and care settings are accessible, understandable and easy-to-use for all children, staff, families and visitors' and their implementation was expected to begin in 2021 (Ring et al., 2019).

GOVERNMENTS SHOULD TAKE ON EFFECTIVE AND SUSTAINABLE NON-GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

In many low- and middle-income countries, civil society and non-government organizations lead the delivery of services for marginalized groups. While in some cases they work in partnership with governments, more efforts are needed to embed such services into government systems.

Displaced children are among the vulnerable populations reached by non-government organizations. In Armenia, with support from Save the Children, Syrian refugee children attended four-hour classes in two general education preschools in Yerevan (Armenia Government, 2016). In the Central African Republic, UNICEF and Plan International worked with the government to expand early childhood programmes in areas affected by the civil war and reach orphan and internally displaced children (Shah, 2016). In an early childhood education programme in South Sudanese refugee camps in Uganda led by Plan International, caregivers sang songs and played games about health and hygiene, promoted literacy and numeracy and participated in weekly peer-to-peer parent support groups (Shah, 2017, 2019). The International Rescue Committee's Sesame Workshop has worked in 150 countries over 50 years to create research-based educational content tailored to children's needs (Westin, 2019). Children on the Edge provides early-years education for over 600 internally displaced Kachin children in hard-to-reach areas along the Myanmar–China border (Children on the Edge, 2017).

Children with disabilities are also targeted by non-government organizations. In France, Ebullescence launched a network of inclusive nursery schools in 2020 to support the special needs of 18-month- to 6-year-old children with neurodevelopmental disorders whose families have difficulties finding a place in traditional settings. The Toy for Inclusion project piloted in eight countries, including Croatia, the Netherlands and Turkey, is a non-formal initiative that focuses on children least likely to attend formal services, such as those from migrant backgrounds and ethnic minorities (European Commission, 2021).

INCLUSIVE CURRICULA ARE DESIGNED FOR ALL LEARNERS

An inclusive early childhood education curriculum that reflects all children's abilities, identities, languages and worldviews can help them feel they belong. Ensuring that learning is relevant and meaningful can in turn enhance learning and development outcomes (Chan, 2019). This means that programmes need to address not only children's cognitive but also their socio-emotional development and identity formation. Inclusive early childhood education curricula – combined with policies that prevent segregated classrooms – can set the foundations for better mutual understanding of different communities (Park and Vandekerckhove, 2016).

An important element of an inclusive curriculum is the mainstreaming of diverse groups of learners. In New Zealand, Te Whāriki, the national early childhood curriculum, adopts a bicultural framing to encourage the inclusion of Indigenous learners as well as learners of migrant backgrounds in mainstream settings. It was first published in 1996 and revised in 2017 to strengthen its alignment to the primary school curriculum and the practicing teacher guidelines (McLachlan, 2017). Its standards and requirements are not prescriptive but rather support inclusive local curricula within a high-level framework of expectations for service providers and practitioners (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2017). It encompasses other aspects of inclusivity, such as 'gender and ethnicity, diversity of ability and learning needs, family structure and values, socio-economic status and religion'. In that context, it is complemented by a national framework for the provision of individual plans for children with special education needs (Deloitte, 2021).

Various other European countries have made reforms in recent years to their early childhood education curricula for 3- to 6-year-olds. In Cyprus, the 2016 curriculum addresses 'each child as a person with a different biography, a specific learning profile, level of readiness, educational preferences and interests', leading to diversified teaching strategies. In Slovakia, the 2015 curriculum for kindergartens established inclusion principles and criteria. It was piloted in more than 300 kindergartens in cooperation with the National Institute for Education to strengthen its implementation (European Commission, 2021). By contrast, one third of education systems in Europe do not provide standardised curricula for children under 3 (European Commission, 2019).

Two factors are central for inclusive early childhood education curricula: flexibility (**Box 2**) and play (**Box 3**).

In addition, learning materials (including toys, books, images and instruments) need to follow universal design principles, be age-appropriate, and promote exploration, play and creativity as well as early literacy and numeracy development in order to stimulate the developmental needs of all children. A minimum set of diverse learning materials is necessary, many of which can be made at a low cost with locally available supplies. For example, the development of different elements with cultural and linguistic relevance for indigenous groups improved the quality of learning materials in early childhood education programmes in Mexico (Sayre et al., 2015).

BOX 2.

Flexibility is the answer to early childhood education for nomadic people in the Russian Federation and Uzbekistan

The education of nomadic populations presents challenges. In the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, a federal subject of the Russian Federation, children of nomadic families had no preschool education opportunities in the early 2010s. The local government and some public agencies amended the regional education law in 2013 to recognize parents' right to select a nomadic form of education. The Nomadic School project, developed as part of a support programme for indigenous populations, aims at providing preschool and primary education along traditional nomadic routes, taking into account the way of life and traditions of northern ethnic minority communities. For instance, a school preparedness activity every summer offers intensive preschool training in nomadic camps (Mercator, 2016; University of the Arctic, 2015; Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug Education Department, 2017). Overall, the share of children from indigenous northern ethnic minorities ready for school was 64% in 2018 (Russian Academy of Education, 2018).

In Uzbekistan, the pilot project Aklvoy, in 12 of the 15 districts of the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan, has two components. First, it is designed to increase preschool education coverage in remote rural areas through mobile groups. It has reached about 2,000 preschool-age children not previously covered by preschool education. Classes are held outdoors and on a bus equipped with teaching aids (cards, posters, workbooks, didactic games, education toys, children's literature, sports equipment, magnetic boards, construction sets, educational photos and videos). Second, the Ministry of Preschool Education has developed a cycle of television programmes and online classes, master classes and experiences for 3- to 7-year-olds with the technical support of the National Television and Radio Company. Over 200,000 preschool-age children follow the cycle. All programmes are accompanied by sign language interpretation.

BOX 3.

Low- and middle-income countries are exploring learning through play as a route to inclusion

Shifting from teaching strategies that risk not engaging children to ones that better align with children's interests is key to building inclusive learning. Learning through play can help develop skills and capabilities, improve interactions with peers and foster cooperation to solve problems.

While the concept is mainstreamed in high-income countries, most attempts to introduce play in low- and middle-income countries' curricula remain peripheral and tend to benefit from support of multilateral organizations and foundations. Serbia adopted the Years of Ascent preschool curriculum framework in 2018. Designed for ages 6 months to 6.5 years, it is child centred and uses a pedagogy based on play that engages children, families and schools (UNICEF, 2019).

In Viet Nam, in line with the 2005 education law's call for preschools to 'help children develop holistically by organising play activities', the 2009 early childhood education curriculum emphasized holistic development. With the support of VVOB, a Belgian non-profit organization, the Ministry of Education and Training developed a two-module training programme for preschool teachers which supports them in monitoring children's well-being and involvement and in identifying children at risk of not learning. Teachers found higher well-being and involvement during play activities than during teacher-led academic learning (VVOB, 2019).

Interventions are small scale in most countries and run by non-government organizations. Kidogo in Kenya targets children under age 6 living in slums. Emphasizing learning through play, problem solving and social-emotional skills, using the national curriculum, it facilitates holistic care in child-friendly environments with trained and certified caregivers, nutritious meals and parental engagement (Jordan et al., 2015). In Nicaragua, the Fabretto foundation provides education services for children aged 2 to 6 in more than 80 public schools in underserved rural communities. It trains teachers, focusing on play-based learning strategies inspired by holistic education approaches adapted to meet student needs (Center for Education Innovations, 2018).

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS ARE RARELY PREPARED FOR INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

An inclusive curriculum needs to be delivered by appropriately selected and prepared early childhood educators. Yet, this is often not the case; educators may have negative beliefs towards inclusion, may not adapt pedagogical strategies and relationships, or may lack more specialized skills such as the use of assistive technologies or the implementation of individualized education plans (Bruns and Mogharreban, 2007). A review of 32 inclusive early childhood education programmes in Europe identified active participation as the overarching objective to ensure children learn and develop a sense of belonging. Positive interaction with adults and peers, involvement in play and other daily activities, a child-centred approach, personalized learning assessment, and accommodation, adaptation and support are essential components (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2016).

At the most basic level, initial teacher education programmes in poor countries often do not recognize sufficiently that the appropriate methods for young children are not the same as for older ones – or may instil limited notions of inclusion. In Comoros, just 40 out of more than 3,400 hours of teacher training are devoted to preschool, divided into 10 hours of lectures and 30 hours of tutorials, with no internship as part of the training. Moreover, trainers may have never worked with young children (IFERE, 2018).

Malawi has a network of mostly public community-based childcare centres for 3- to 5-year olds (Munthali et al., 2014; World Bank, 2015). A survey of 127 caregivers from 48 centres found that only one in three had completed secondary school. One in three had not received any education certificate or qualification. Only 14% had received training to work at the centre (even then, for no more than two weeks) and 10% had received training in special educational needs, in most cases through non-government organizations (Murphy et al., 2017). An assessment of a two-week training programme based on the National Caregiver Training Programme, with additional modules on disability-inclusive education, showed that trained caregivers were more likely to encourage positive interactions between children and help them to develop appropriate social behaviour with peers (50% vs 14%), spend at least one hour directly interacting with the children (82% vs 50%), demonstrate good

communication practices with the children (such as listening attentively or making eye contact) (36% vs 9%) and ensure that all children were engaged (41% vs 18%) (Jolley et al., 2019).

In Zimbabwe, pre-primary classes tend to be attached to primary schools and teachers tend to have higher qualifications. As part of a core course on early childhood development theory, commonly available across teacher colleges, preschool educators learn about inclusion but only narrowly and abstractly, covering disability categories and inclusion policies. They are not taught how to support learners with disabilities in practice. A review found that they lacked effective classroom management strategies or pedagogical strategies for children experiencing learning difficulties (Majoko, 2016, 2018).

In Nicaragua, the pedagogical model for initial teacher education does not include training in inclusive education. However, inclusive education teachers help guide the education community as part of the education inclusion programme. Psycho-pedagogical support teams, consisting of municipal special education pedagogical advisers, teachers from Education Centres for Attention to Diversity (CREADs), education counsellors and others, are established to identify and recommend support for students with special education needs in early childhood, basic, secondary and special education centres, regardless of disability status (Nicaragua Minsitry of Education, 2012). CREADs also provide education materials and training opportunities for teachers to support the education of people with disabilities (Pförtner and Fonseca, 2020).

In a review of policies of 13 countries in Asia and the Pacific, only Viet Nam included principles of inclusion in its national training policy at the pre-primary and primary level (Sharma et al., 2013). The Higher Diploma in Early Childhood Education (Inclusive Education) offered by the Hong Kong College of Technology responds to the needs of those who wish to work as kindergarten teachers, childcare workers, childcare supervisors or special childcare workers (Deloitte, 2021). The focus on inclusive education includes encouraging respect for diverse needs and the importance of early intervention for children with signs of special education needs. The programme also includes a focus on cultural inclusivity supports, such as programmes and models to help non-Chinese-speaking children (Hong Kong College of Technology, 2021).

Early childhood educators need a range of qualifications and tools to implement inclusive practices. In Colombia, the Ministry of National Education does not require teachers to learn the language of the community in which they teach. This poses difficulties for the youngest students, as many do not speak Spanish (Corbetta et al., 2020; García and Jutinico, 2013). The Bilingual Intercultural Education Programme for the Amazon (EIBAMAZ) was begun in 2005 by the governments, indigenous organizations and universities of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru to strengthen teacher training. In Ecuador, EIBAMAZ aided the Higher Pedagogical Institutes of Intercultural Bilingual Education in an early childhood and community education training programme (UNICEF, 2012).

In-service training is necessary especially as teachers are exposed to different challenges during their careers. In Argentina, the National Institute of Teacher Training offers online courses on pedagogical challenges that focus on practising teachers' daily work, with a focus on diversity as a value in a heterogeneous classroom. For instance, one course focuses on early childhood detection of atypical signs in student development, offering school intervention strategies and communication with school guidance teams and families (Lehtomäki et al., 2020).

Results from the Multicultural Early Childhood Education+ project, which surveyed almost 500 educators and pedagogical coordinators in early childhood care and education services in Tuscany (Italy), Budapest (Hungary) and Catalonia (Spain), suggested some gaps. In Tuscany, about 60% reported lack of familiarity with the conditions of immigrant, refugee, and Roma students. (SEEPRO-R, 2017; Silva et al., 2020).

In New Brunswick, Canada, a pioneer in promoting inclusive education for three decades, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development created the Autism Learning Partnership in 2012. A training course consisting of online introductory and advanced learning programmes and continued education opportunities, it is supported by a team of behaviour analysts, psychologists, researchers and educators. About 25% of all education personnel, including education assistants and behaviour interventionists, completed the course. Advanced training was offered in 49% of schools and was completed by one in three resource teachers. As part of continuing education opportunities, 30 teachers were supported to certify as

behaviour analysts. Trained staff work with all children in the preschool autism programme. Preliminary research found that introductory learning programme participants had increased confidence in their ability to understand how autism characteristics affect learning, provide support to students with autism spectrum disorders, and recognize adaptation and response strategies to help students (New Brunswick Government, 2019).

In Ireland, two training programmes are at the core of the Access and Inclusion Model. The Leadership for Inclusion (LINC) programme, introduced in 2016, supports the participation of children with disabilities in the universal pre-school programme. It can be accessed at no cost and trains up to 900 practitioners per year to become inclusion coordinators, now present in at least 60% of settings. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion is a universal training initiative aiming to foster awareness on equality, diversity and inclusion of young children among early childhood education practitioners (European Commission, 2021).

Peer learning activities are also important. Croatia, Czechia, Hungary and Slovenia have used the Wanda method to enhance early childhood education practitioners' inclusive practices and critical thinking on pedagogies by creating a learning community (VBJK et al., 2019).

A key skill that early childhood educators need is an ability to work with families, especially those from marginalized communities (Nikoloudaki et al., 2018). They need to possess cultural competencies and deploy 'strategies to welcome diversity, respect different family backgrounds, values, and beliefs, understand first and second language development processes, reach out to hard-to-reach communities, build trusting relationships based on mutual respect, and cooperate in full partnership with other organizations, services, and parents' (Park and Vandekerckhove, 2016). A review of 426 inclusive early childhood development and early childhood intervention programmes in 121 countries found that two-thirds involved parents in service delivery (Vargas-Barón et al., 2019). In Latvia, Chinese immigrant parents spend time with children and teachers during the first month of preschool before children are left with teachers for increasing lengths of time (UNESCO, 2020). In New Zealand, as part of a three-year teaching programme, early childhood educators benefit from two family-related courses: family from a sociological perspective (first year)

and working with parents as partners (second year). Still, educators, especially those at the beginning of their careers, can struggle to build relationships, get parents involved and avoid confrontation (Mahmood, 2013).

Finally, two other dimensions of inclusion should not be neglected. First, support structures are needed. In Singapore, all pre-schools will have an inclusion coordinator from the second half of 2023. They will help identify children who have developmental needs, from physical conditions such as muscular dystrophy, sensory issues such as vision or hearing loss, and various neurodevelopmental disorders and intellectual disabilities in addition to language developmental delays (Co, 2021). Second, inclusivity can also be fostered by supporting diversity within the workforce. In Australia, the Remote Aboriginal Teacher Education programme is designed to provide pathways for residents of remote communities to pursue a career in teaching and early childcare. It enables them to study teaching, while working in remote childcare centres, with the possibility of then proceeding to further education. The pilot programme is due to commence in 2021 (Northern Territory Department of Education, 2020).

CONCLUSION

It is well established that an early start in education can narrow the divide in future opportunities for marginalized children. However, not any type of education will close the gap. In many cases, early childhood education opportunities do not sufficiently make up for disadvantage on account of young children's abilities, backgrounds and identities. By committing to achieve SDG 4 and the pledge to inclusive education, governments need to overcome a range of barriers in order for a culture of inclusion to permeate early childhood education.

- *Equitable access is a precondition for inclusion.* One in four children are not in education during the year before the official entry to primary school. Four in ten are not in education by the time countries expect them to be in school. Just 3 in 10 countries have set at least one year of pre-primary education as compulsory. There are vast disparities in access between the poorest and the richest, as well as between majority and minority groups. Countries need to fulfil their commitment to at least one year of compulsory pre-primary education – and where necessary accompany such general legislative approaches with specific policies that target groups that need extra support, whether in the form of proximity, service flexibility or financial support.

- *Inclusion in early childhood education is but a subset of social inclusion.* Marginalized children and their families do not just lack access to education. Their disadvantages intersect and require support in different aspects of their lives. Therefore, government services in health care and social protection, but also in other sectors, must be inter-operable, sharing information, designing programmes jointly, integrating services, developing the capacities of local governments, setting equity and quality standards that are monitored, and embedding effective and sustainable initiatives of non-government organizations into government systems.

- *Early identification of needs is a necessary investment.* Many countries rely on parents to inform educators and other school staff on their children's learning difficulties. Setting up early identification systems is costly in terms of technical and coordination inputs but is a necessary investment to save future costs. Governments need to set up the civil registries, diagnostic services, professional capacity development programmes, multidisciplinary teams and parent education initiatives to help parents, especially those more disadvantaged, improve their knowledge and access the services they need for their children.

- *Curricula need to respond to all children's needs.* The content of education needs to make all children feel they are valued and instil in them a clear sense of belonging to help them form and develop their identity. Play is a key element in that direction. It also needs to be relevant and meaningful, responding to not only children's cognitive but also their socio-emotional development needs. Depending on their context, countries and communities need to increase their responsiveness to diverse cultures and languages. Ultimately, flexibility, embedded in the concept of universal design for learning, will be the linchpin of an inclusive curriculum.

- *Educators' competences, knowledge and attitudes need to respond to all children's needs.* It may sound trivial to say that early childhood educators need to be selected and prepared appropriately. In fact, this is often not the case, especially in low-resource settings, where early childhood educators without specialized knowledge are often left to their own devices. Particular attention is needed to help educators manage their relationships with parents and guardians, to ensure their maximum engagement. They also need advice to seek out expert support but also to improve their capacity to arrange their classroom environments, adapt their pedagogical strategies and implement individualized education plans.