Early Childhood Care and Education in South-East Asia:

Working for Access, Quality and Inclusion in Thailand, the Philippines and Viet Nam

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNESCO Bangkok
Early Childhood Care and Education in South-East Asia:

Working for Access, Quality and Inclusion in Thailand, the Philippines and Viet Nam

by Feny de Los Angeles-Bantista


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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Association of South East Asian Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>CG</td>
<td>Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECCD</td>
<td>Early Childhood Care and Development</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ECCE</td>
<td>Early Childhood Care and Education</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ECD</td>
<td>Early Childhood Development</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>EFA</td>
<td>Education For All</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children’s Fund</td>
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<td>UNCRC</td>
<td>United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child</td>
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### Thailand

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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CDD</td>
<td>Community Development Department (MOI)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DNFE</td>
<td>Department of Non-Formal Education (MOE)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOAE</td>
<td>Department of Agriculture Extension (MOAC)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOH</td>
<td>Department of Health (MOPH)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOLA</td>
<td>Department of Local Administration (MOI)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPW</td>
<td>Department of Public Welfare (Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eight Plan</td>
<td>Eight National Economic and Social Development Plan</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>FDP</td>
<td>Family Development Program</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>FSCC</td>
<td>Foundation for Slum Childcare</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY</td>
<td>Fiscal Year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFBECDD</td>
<td>Integrated Family-Based Early Childhood Development Program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMPECT</td>
<td>Inter-Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand Association</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>MCH</td>
<td>Maternal and Child Health</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>MOAC</td>
<td>Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>MOE</td>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>MOI</td>
<td>Ministry of Interior</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>MOPH</td>
<td>Ministry of Public Health</td>
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<tr>
<td>MUA</td>
<td>Ministry of University Affairs</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>NESDB</td>
<td>National Economic and Social Development Board</td>
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<tr>
<td>NICFD</td>
<td>National Institute for Child and Family Development</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ONPEC</td>
<td>Office of National Primary Education Commission (MOE)</td>
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<tr>
<td>POAE</td>
<td>Provincial Office of Agricultural Extension</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>POCOD</td>
<td>Provincial Office of Community Development</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>PONFE</td>
<td>Provincial Office of Non-Formal Education</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>POPEC</td>
<td>Provincial Office of Primary Education Commission</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POPH</td>
<td>Provincial Office of Public Health</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>RTG</td>
<td>Royal Thai Government</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Save the Children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWA</td>
<td>Subcommittee for Women’s Affairs (DOLA)</td>
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<tr>
<td>TAO</td>
<td>Tambon Administrative Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>VMDC</td>
<td>Village Women’s Development Committee (CDD)</td>
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## Philippines

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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACEI</td>
<td>Association for Early Childhood Education International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADB</td>
<td>Asian Development Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARMM</td>
<td>Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLF</td>
<td>Community of Learners Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>Council for the Welfare of Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dep Ed</td>
<td>Department of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOH</td>
<td>Department of Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DSWD</td>
<td>Department of Social Welfare and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GNP</td>
<td>Gross National Product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEC</td>
<td>Information, Education and Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGU</td>
<td>Local Government Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEDA</td>
<td>National Economic Development Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OMEP</td>
<td>Organization Mondial Prêşcolaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R.A.</td>
<td>Republic Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>WB</td>
<td>World Bank</td>
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## Viet Nam

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CBR</td>
<td>Community Based Rehabilitation</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPFC</td>
<td>Committee for Population, Family and Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPC</td>
<td>Commune People’s Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDS</td>
<td>Education Development Strategy Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GNI</td>
<td>Gross National Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDI</td>
<td>Human Development Index</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDR</td>
<td>Human Development Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IE</td>
<td>Inclusive Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>MoET</td>
<td>Ministry of Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOH</td>
<td>Ministry of Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOLISA</td>
<td>Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>PEDP</td>
<td>National Primary Education Development Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPC</td>
<td>Provincial People’s Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCSE</td>
<td>Research Centre for Special Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCS</td>
<td>Save the Children, Sweden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC/US</td>
<td>Save the Children, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USD</td>
<td>US dollar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VND</td>
<td>Vietnamese Dong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WU</td>
<td>Women’s Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>WB</td>
<td>World Bank</td>
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Foreword

“Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children” is goal 1 of the Dakar Framework for Action, approved in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000. The Jomtien Declaration, written in 1990, states that “Learning begins at birth…” Both declarations recognize that stimulation of physical, psycho-social, emotional, cognitive and linguistic development throughout a child’s first six years of life is crucial if the child is to reach its fullest potential.

This study has been commissioned to take a closer look at current Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programmes and policies in three countries in the Asia Pacific region: Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam. Specifically, the study attempts to achieve two objectives: to give an account of the extent to which a holistic view of child development has been translated into learner-centred curricula that includes health and nutritional needs of young children. The study further addresses gender issues and the inclusion of children at risk of experiencing marginalization or exclusion. “Good practices” identified by government officials and practitioners are described to celebrate the small, innovative steps, as well as the effective, giant strides, that governments, civil society, communities and families are making in trying to provide all young children with a “fair start” through ECCE programmes.

All three countries demonstrate good examples of cutting-edge, innovative practices applied in public, non-profit, private or civil society ECCE programmes, including those targeting marginalized children at risk of being excluded. There are interesting examples of high-quality programmes intended for children of poor urban and rural communities and of indigenous and tribal communities. These programmes provide culturally relevant and innovative learning experiences for children despite very limited resources.

The replication of these “good practices” is a critical part of improving access and quality. As the importance of ECCE is gradually being recognized, it is both necessary and timely to promote the principles of quality ECCE, which include child-friendly learning and developmentally appropriate programming and practices that benefit all children. In doing so, we will be able to ensure that ECCE programmes yields expected results. Quality does matter: It is not just a question of expanding access. Rather it is a question of whether young children are provided with the quality of care, teaching and learning experiences that will contribute to their continuing development.

In pluralistic societies it is impossible to unilaterally impose only one particular approach to ECCE. UNESCO promotes those practices which serve the best interests of young learners in their own social context and that help them make the most of their active learning capacity by accommodating their diverse needs. However, “good practices” should be promoted as bottom-up strategies rather than policies mandating everyone to adopt certain approaches and methods.

We would like to express our thanks to all who collaborated in conducting this study and we hope it will be instrumental in supporting efforts to expand and improve ECCE. ECCE programmes help prepare children for school and have proven to be effective in decreasing repetition and drop-out rates in primary schools in many parts of the world. Therefore, investing in quality ECCE programmes that focus on children who are at risk of being excluded or repeat or drop-out from primary school can be an effective approach in reaching Education for All.

Sheldon Shaeffer
Director, UNESCO Bangkok
Asia Pacific Regional Bureau for Education
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the World Conference on Education for All in 1990, UNESCO and its partners have been at the forefront of global advocacy efforts for increased attention to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), with a special emphasis on the millions of young children who are born, grow up and develop in difficult and challenging circumstances. They are often unable to gain access to ECCE programmes which could mitigate the negative impact of poverty and other social factors that put them at risk.

The expansion of ECCE programmes was one of the major goals agreed upon at the conclusion of the first Education for All (EFA) World Conference in Jomtien. Since then, it has been more widely acknowledged that children’s participation in ECCE programmes is integral to the fulfilment of their right to development. At the same time, ECCE was recognized as a requisite to achieving the goals of EFA based on overwhelming evidence that children who have access to ECCE programmes are more likely to stay in school, finish their studies, learn what is taught more effectively, and accomplish what is expected in terms of school performance.

Participation in ECCE programmes clearly yielded significant benefits for many young children in South-East Asia by improving their nutritional and health status and promoting their growth and development through service provision and parent education. In addition, these programmes enhanced the active learning capacities of young children, making them “ready to learn” and helping them adjust to formal primary school.

Thailand

Despite the widespread exposure of virtually every part of Thai society to foreign (chiefly western) influences and lifestyles today, the family remains the dominant caregiver in the early years of childhood, and therefore local and indigenous culture are embedded in a child’s development from a very early age.

That is not to suggest, however, that the modernizing process taking place in the country as a whole has not had a significant impact on early childhood in Thailand; indeed, young children’s experiences, in terms of domestic relationships and the kinds of care they receive, differ in several ways from the childhood of their parents.

Two important changes within the Thai family have been particularly significant for children today: a reduction in the number of children per household; and the emergence of the nuclear family. In four decades, the number of children per family has fallen from an average of around six in the 1960s to one in the case of many urban families today. Clearly, this has important repercussions on the child’s socialization process: however any financial benefit that may be expected for parents with fewer children to feed and clothe may be negligible in the case of poorer families trying to make a living in the many urban slum communities or among hill tribes.

The nuclear family, in contrast to the traditional family with its network of relatives living nearby one another or even sharing the same house, is largely a result of mass migration to urban centres as people move in search of greater employment opportunities, and has also forced families to rethink early childhood care. However, it is not always possible for the whole family to relocate to the cities when one of the parents finds work; women especially are in demand in many urban-based industries, and very often mothers are forced to leave their children behind with relatives in rural villages. One more factor affecting the Thai family unit concerns the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS, which has
left many children without one or both parents. Combined with the aforementioned break-down of the extended family, these children are often deprived of relatives who can look after them.

Thailand has taken great strides towards providing co-ordinated and regulated early childcare and education, with the Office of the Private Education Commission and the Non-Formal Education Department, both under the Ministry of Education, and the Public Welfare Department under the Ministry of Labour and Employment organizing training courses required of all caregivers.

The government also introduced the Family Development Programme (FDP) in 1996, in collaboration with UNICEF and various other stakeholders, which included establishing childcare centres in nearly all the country’s provinces, principally for custodial care aimed at parents lacking the family network to look after their children while they were working.

Originally conceived of as home-based childcare provision, a review of the FDP revealed the greater popularity of the centre-based programmes that had grown as the custodial centres evolved to provide more informal ECCE services.

There is a wide range of both public- and privately-sponsored childcare centres in Thailand, stretching from urban slum communities operated in the main by private foundations and NGOs, to publicly-run child development centres aimed at remote hill-tribe villages. The variety of childcare providers has, however, led to a perceived gap in the level of staffing qualifications, especially between childcare centre staff and kindergarten teachers.

For this reason, the National Education Commission developed standards for all caregivers, and there is now a number of graduated courses in early childcare, from the 126-hour Standard Training Course on Childcare for 0-3 Year Olds, through 420-hour and 840-hour advanced courses to a three-year Occupational Certificate Course.

However, there remain deep divisions between the qualifications of childcare givers, on the one hand, and kindergarten staff on the other, which tend to lead to a distinction between custodial care and educational programmes, respectively. There is a real need, therefore, to develop adequate in-service training programmes to help turn the large community-led human resource base working in early childcare and education into a well-qualified, knowledgeable cadre of ECCE providers who can meet the goals set by educational policy-makers and stakeholders.

In addition to the various government ministries responsible for the implementation of ECCE programmes, a number of NGOs are also involved, along with the National Institute for Child and Family Development at Mahidol University, which also offers a Master of Science degree with a strong emphasis on ECCE. There is no single curriculum for early childhood education in Thailand; rather, different ministries have developed their own curricula, for example, the Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education for three- to five-year-olds developed by the Ministry of Education. These generally provide guidelines for developing suitable approaches and strategies, outline educational goals and objectives, and recommend the scope and coverage of curriculum content. These curricula are organized and designed to promote learning experiences that support the physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive development of Thai children.

Understood within the context of education reform efforts, the policy directives and guidelines outlined by the relevant ministries can be seen to explicitly acknowledge the validity of learner-centred processes, culturally and socially relevant content, and active learning approaches, including an emphasis on play and social interaction in early childhood curriculum and programme activities. All these are held to be indispensable for young children given their stages of development, capacities, interests and needs.
Experts in Thailand have noted several cultural factors, including perceived norms and inherited beliefs, which inhibit attitudes towards early childhood education, many of which perpetuate deeply-ingrained misconceptions about the nature of children’s development: the view that children are passive and dependent learners, who need to be subjected to parental control, and should not distract or disrupt adult activities; substituting material goods for parental attention and love; and the mistaken belief that young children are not yet responsive to learning programmes, hence the absence of efforts to support their learning and development.

For this reason, policy documents developed since 1997 have emphasized the need for educating parents and young married couples on early childhood development, and Thailand’s national policy reaffirms the role of parents as the primary caregivers of young children. However, at the same time it acknowledges the responsibility of the government to support parents to enable them to fulfil those responsibilities. Education legislation also emphasizes the duty of parents to ensure their children’s access to educational opportunities and reiterates the importance of parental involvement in children’s learning. This is an appropriate balance of accountability and responsibility shared by families and the state, in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In brief, the policy documents paving the way for reform throughout Thailand’s education system target: decentralization, to combat overlapping efforts and to encourage greater community participation; higher standards of teaching focusing on student-centred approaches to learning; and greater equality in terms of access to quality ECCE programmes.

**Philippines**

The Filipino family typically comprises a broad network of relatives, a network which in the modern climate of greater migration is often recreated among neighbours, province-mates and new friends; the nuclear family is very unusual among Filipinos. As a result of the broad support network available to young parents, and the widespread preference for some kind of home-based early childhood programmes for toddlers, the demand for centre-based early childhood care and education is generally limited to the three-and-a-half to six years age group. In the Philippines, the term used is Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD). Since the advent of early childhood programmes, the emphasis has been on preparation for primary school (which began at seven until the 1990s), and thus it was during the two years directly prior to entry to school that most families considered ECCD important.

Since the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 and complementary child-focused national legislation, the Philippines has seen a proliferation of day-care centres, both at the village level and also in government offices and private businesses. Predominantly public-run, these centres offer a range of health and supervisory services, while the educational content can vary from basic literacy and numeracy activities to the unstructured passive learning exercises of centres that are often under-equipped and lack suitable resources for play and/or learning.

There are also ECCD programmes run by various religious institutions, as well as the “supervised neighbourhood playgroup” that developed in conjunction with the Parent Effectiveness Service (PES), since the presence of children at these meetings was anticipated.

Workers are generally recruited from the local community, and are required to be at least high-school graduates. However, while many meet these minimum requirements, very little is offered in the way of in-service training. Since prior experience is far from the norm, most day-care workers must learn literally on the job. In contrast, staff at kindergarten teachers are required to have a Bachelor of Science degree in an ECCD-related course, and to have some experience working with children.
The Department of Social Welfare and Development, recognizing the role of parents in a child’s early development, initiated the PES as a national parent education programme. Although the PES is designed for all parents, it has been implemented mainly in selected rural villages or low-income urban communities, since the local social welfare office is responsible for the programme and they consider these their priority areas.

Various innovative strategies have been pilot-tested over the last two decades to reach more parents through various forms of media, many with support from UNICEF. Two of these involved the use of radio, which has broad national reach in the Philippines and entails relatively lower production and dissemination costs. In both cases, these efforts involved a partnership between the Department of Social Welfare and Development (at the national and local level), UNICEF, the Philippine Children’s Television Foundation, and national and local broadcast or community radio networks.

The government has also targeted improving inter-agency, inter-ministry and multi-sectoral co-ordination for policy development and overall management of national ECCD programmes. Certain unhelpful distinctions between various aspects of ECCD were removed with the Early Childhood Care and Development Act, while the difference in emphasis between the “socialization” function of the day-care programme and the “educational” function of the pre-school or kindergarten was maintained, and programme management responsibilities were shared between the Department of Education and the Department of Social Welfare and Development, the former responsible for all kindergarten or pre-school programmes, the latter for day-care initiatives.

The conception of day care and kindergartens as parallel but distinct rather than complementary and part of a developmental continuum has significant implications for children’s access to and participation in these ECCD programmes. At the village level, particularly, these parallel systems have sometimes resulted in competition among service providers and unnecessary confusion among parents regarding the nature of the day-care and kindergarten programmes and the implications of each form of ECCD on their children’s entry into primary school.

In many of these villages, in fact, there are signs of a sharp decline in enrolment of five-year-olds in day care. On the one hand, this trend can be viewed within the context of the current low participation rates in day care among this age group nationwide, especially if some five-year-olds have been transferring to kindergarten classes, that opens up more space for three- and four-year-olds in day-care centres. This is not, however, the way that day-care workers and their supervisors interpret the figures. For them, this trend stems from the effects of the aggressive recruitment of five-year-olds by kindergarten classes or pre-school programmes. Where this has occurred, all the service providers and their supervisors share the sentiment that one or the other group is encroaching on their respective bureaucratic turf.

In terms of curricula, most private ECCD programmes in the Philippines can be described as eclectic in their approach to philosophy, conceptual frameworks and curriculum design. However, while the theories that influence their development may be rather similar to one another, the specifics of the curricula are a more accurate indicator of these programmes’ orientation. These curricula can be broadly classified into the following three categories:

The first type of curriculum is geared towards the traditional primary school, which is organized in terms of subject matter and focuses mainly on cognitive, literacy and numeracy skills. The second type is informal, play-based and activity-oriented that allows children to explore a variety of topics in a comparatively random fashion. The third type follows a similarly diverse and comprehensive pattern, to respond to all dimensions of child development. However, a more integrated and well-balanced curriculum that shows careful attention to content is achieved by organizing activities around well-selected themes or topics of study. These programmes are more learner-centred and
emphasize children’s active participation

Public ECCD centres tend to be a blend of the second and third of these models. Kindergarten teachers are provided with a “Pre-school Handbook” which describes the instructional objectives and concepts or content to be covered, recommended classroom activities and learning materials. The daily schedule and some guidelines for classroom management are also included.

Ultimately, then, increasing access to ECCD has to centre on the parents and the important decisions they make as their children’s primary caregivers. Parents – whether rich or poor – know what they want for their children and have their own conceptions of quality care and education. The challenge is to find ways of engaging them in that dialogue and motivating them to support their children’s participation in organized forms of ECCD and to extend that support for nurturing their active learning capacity at home through interaction with their children.

Viet Nam

Viet Nam’s longstanding status as a predominantly agrarian society has meant that traditionally, all able family members have shared an equal responsibility for farm work. For this reason, even before major changes in the economy had taken place and urban centres developed, Vietnamese women in rural villages have needed some form of childcare support, a need which was most often met by grandparents and other elder relatives.

Figures show that 87 per cent of children under three years old are cared for at home; poor families have no other option. Those who can afford to prefer to hire full-time caregivers or household help in their own homes. There is then a major shift towards outside childcare starting at three-and-a-half to four years old. It is reported that only 45 per cent of three- to six-year-olds are cared for at home.

Current forms of provision for early childcare and education include: creches, community childcare centres and day-care centres (for infants up to three years); home-based childcare (for groups of five to 15 infants up to two years); and kindergartens and pre-schools (for three- to six-year-olds).

As a matter of official policy, there is a deliberate effort to de-emphasize or remove the distinction between the childcare centres and kindergartens and to promote all of these as ECCE services that are part of one developmental continuum. Kindergartens have always been defined in terms of both education and childcare while the day-care programme is also expected to provide early learning experiences.

Significant changes in the Vietnamese economy in the early 1990s greatly affected day care participation rates, which decreased from 27 per cent during the period 1986-87 to 13 per cent in 1991-92. Children could be cared for at home since many of the parents were unemployed during the early stages of implementing economic reform measures, and many who had work could not afford the costs of childcare services. To address this decline in day-care enrolment, the government decided to maintain only existing day-care centres and did not establish new ones.

At the same time, the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) promoted the enrolment of as many five-year-olds as possible in the kindergartens, which were also full-day programmes. This is why figures show that state-run childcare centres account for only 30-35 per cent of total ECCE service provision.

As of 2000, there were over 48,000 teachers registered in day-care centres. Most of these had received some form of basic training (31 per cent), participated in short-term courses (31 per cent) or been enrolled in three- to six-month professional development programmes (21 per cent); 15 per cent had completed a two- to three-year training programme in ECCE. There were only 225 day-care teachers with university or college degrees, which points to a real shortage of qualified teachers, especially for early childcare.
Among kindergarten staff, meanwhile, 51 percent have attended two-year pre-service education programmes, while only 3 percent are graduates of three- or four-year ECCE programmes. Twenty-five percent attended nine-month training programmes, 8 percent had only three to six months of training, while 12 percent have had no pre-service training at all.

The rate of expansion due to the increased demand for ECCE programmes has far outpaced the supply of teachers. This is really the more challenging issue that the MoET and all other agencies involved in ECCE have to deal with at present. It is hard to imagine how quality targets will be met if teachers do not receive in-service professional development to compensate for the shortage, or even absence, of any kind of pre-service training.

In addition, other important factors to address are the poor working conditions, instability of employment status and very low remuneration of teachers. The majority of ECCE staff are based in rural areas and work in non-state-run programmes, and more than half (around 86,000) are forced to divide their time between teaching and farming.

Given the decentralized system within which ECCE in Viet Nam is implemented, the management of both state-run and non-state kindergarten programmes requires effective co-ordination and communication among the various levels of ECCE management, and this involves the lead agencies at both the central and the provincial, city and village levels. The MoET-ECCE department works directly with its local counterparts, and the provincial and district departments also work closely together, with the district offices directly responsible for supervision of kindergartens, day-care centres and pre-schools. The same offices are also responsible for monitoring non-state ECCE programmes.

Improved co-ordination at the central level among the main stakeholders in ECCE is imperative so that effective leadership and support can be provided for the supervisors and programme managers among local departments (provincial and district). Since teachers and other caregivers are far beyond the reach of the ECCE national programme managers, the logical step would be for investment in capacity building for effective local supervision and management.

Greater capacity building for programme managers needs to be combined with the creation of an improved and highly functional monitoring system that serves the immediate purposes of programme planning as well as periodic evaluation of programme status and impact. This information needs to be made available to all stakeholders in order to maximize data collected through this monitoring system in their respective contexts. Data that is not returned to those who are directly involved in ECCE programme implementation may fulfil bureaucratic requirements but will bear little or no impact on the quality of ECCE initiatives.

In the past decade, the government has prioritized curriculum reform. Instead of simply focusing on expanding access, the commitment to improving the quality of the national curriculum “on paper” as well as in actual implementation is evident. Implementation of the new curriculum began in 2003, initially among five-year-olds in kindergartens. The revised curriculum applies the thematic approach to organizing content so that children are able to explore their everyday world more meaningfully and in greater depth.

The commitment to a child-centred approach that emphasizes play as an integral part of the ECCE curriculum is visible in the classrooms where the reforms are being implemented. The daily schedule is structured to provide opportunities for whole/large group activities, small-group interaction, as well as individual activities. An increasing number of classrooms in Viet Nam now feature distinct learning corners that contain learning materials for a particular curriculum content area e.g. language, arts, mathematics and science.

There are two issues that pertain to curriculum and programming that merit serious attention and more careful study if the government wants to successfully provide ECCE programmes to those who are currently neglected. First, efforts must target those groups of children whose circumstances contribute to their being marginalized, not just from ECCE but from education in general and, in some cases, community participation. They are the children of ethnic minorities,
children who are disabled and children who live in remote villages without schools (who may not be ethnic minorities or disabled).

The second important challenge is to ensure that the process for curriculum development will be meaningful, based on sound theoretical foundations, and is truly participatory. There has been some preliminary work focused on marginalized children, and case studies exist for both these issues to be addressed effectively.

National ECCE policies in Viet Nam are lodged within two related frameworks: the first is within national education policy, and the second, children’s rights; Viet Nam ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child shortly after it was passed by the UN General Assembly in 1990. Both national plans, therefore, related to these frameworks that were developed on the basis of the state’s legal commitments include early childhood care and education.

Article 35 of the 1992 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam stipulates that “Education is the first priority in the national policy”. The Education Law of 1998 re-defined Viet Nam’s education sector, and it is here that there is explicit reference to early childhood care and education as a part of the broader education system. However, ECCE is not compulsory nor a pre-requisite for entry into primary school. Rather, the government tries to create demand among parents and promotes children’s participation in ECCE through the parent education programmes and the use of various media for raising awareness.

The Education Development Strategic Plan for 2001-2010 serves as the operational framework for current educational programmes and reform initiatives. This plan defines the goals, targets to be met by mid- and end-decade and identifies indicators of progress. It builds on lessons learned from experiences and from a critical situational analysis of the educational system. This national plan was developed in order to fulfil the commitments renewed during the World Conference on Education for All held in Dakar, April 2000.

Now that the government has decided that poor families and children from ethnic communities in remote, mountain areas are the priority groups, it is necessary to establish a clear implementation process.

To this end, it would be helpful to identify and adopt tools that can be used to define specific indicators for family poverty, and at the same time define risk factors for child development. This will enable the local ECCE programme managers within the government to systematically locate, identify and screen these children and families, and determine who and where they are. After most of the families within the villages have been identified the perfect entry point would be the parent education programme through its home visiting component.

Within the parent education programme, the possibility of introducing a culturally-sensitive and reliable but user-friendly developmental screening tool should be seriously considered. If the government has any intention of doing this, this early stage in the 10-year period would seem timely.

Viet Nam is well-placed as far as ECCE is concerned. First, there is a long and diverse experience base to draw upon that informs the current efforts to expand access and broaden quality. Second, there are enough examples of successful programmes and effective practices that can be promoted and disseminated among service providers and programme managers. Third, there is a cadre of ECCE specialists and the potential for more effective inter-agency and multi-sectoral collaboration is great. Furthermore, the international donors are firmly committed to ECCE and are solidly behind the government. It is probably one of the few countries where international donors have taken the initiative to organize themselves into a “working group for ECCE” and defined the basis for their collaboration. Aside from achieving more efficient programme management and cost-effective approaches to using funds from foreign donors, this also strengthens the policy and programming base on which continuing efforts can be anchored. Beyond the financial resources, international donors can also contribute their institutional experience and expertise in ECCE. This will enrich the programming and policy development process that seems certain to continue to be led by the Vietnamese.
There are always multiple perspectives and viewpoints involved in defining and identifying what is "best practice" and what constitutes quality in ECCE. There are also reference points and perspectives on what is "best". Best practice requires the establishment of clear targets and objectives in relation to what the programme is aiming to achieve. These aims and objectives need to be openly and regularly discussed with all involved in the programme. All the stakeholders must be regularly engaged in opportunities to shape, clarify and modify these objectives and to define outcomes.

A range of ECCE programmes and services as well as numerous advocacy efforts to support young children and their families are underway in these three countries. Evidence from the experiences of effective programmes point to the fact that ECCE programmes must be conceptualized within the context of providing family support. These effective projects are committed to the notion that to help children, we have to provide education and support for their parents as well. Parent education can involve highly interactive approaches like home visiting, parent workshops or discussion groups, the use of various forms of media in conjunction with these interpersonal activities or with service delivery as well as stand-alone mass dissemination.

The experiences of these three countries show that there are a wide range of options to consider in order to reach out to families with young children to ensure that those who would otherwise be excluded will be able to experience quality care and education in their early childhood years. ECCE practitioners in Thailand, the Philippines and Viet Nam apply these complementary strategies and approaches for working directly with young children who are at risk or are made vulnerable by difficult life conditions brought about or exacerbated by social, economic, political and cultural factors.

The principles of best practice are clearly operational only when there is a firm commitment on the part of the duty bearers to provide the resources, the policies, and administrative and technical support. It is when the caregivers’ and teachers’ commitment and competence converge with the political will of the state and the public civil servants responsible for basic education programmes and social service delivery that one can expect these best practices to flourish.

There are important recurrent themes that emerge from the experiences of the three countries:

First, there is much to build on in terms of public and private ECCE services, and there exists a broad human resource base for quality early childcare at the grassroots level, among the members of civil society and the various levels of local and national government. However, the main challenge remains: there is a real need to develop these human resources and expand their outreach.

There is also a need to carefully assess and improve the quality of ECCE services in order to ensure that they will lead to qualitative improvements in the lives of the children, rather than simply provide them access for the sake of meeting targets. Thus, one of the tasks at hand is to review then develop or revise policies, so that an enabling environment can be created for the expansion and improvement of the ECCE human resource base in the parts of the country where staff are most needed. The preparation of national plans and programmes of action, such as the National Education for All Action Plans, backed-up by complementary or supportive national and local policies, presents an excellent opportunity to redirect and amplify the importance of expanding access to quality early childhood education programmes and investing in the people who will teach and take care of young children.
Second, there are enough examples of how to translate principles of inclusive developmentally- and culturally-appropriate practices for replication across a number of contexts. Sharing information through various forms of media, organizing capacity-building programmes and training in a way that facilitates interaction among ECCE practitioners, and organizing networks to sustain their working relationships beyond these shared educational experiences are important and strategic investments that can and must be made.

It has been shown through the experiences in these three countries that a multidisciplinary, multi-sectoral approach to ECCE is possible and can be achieved through collaborative planning, research, programming and policy development. By keeping the focus on the young child as a whole human being and the family as the context for care giving and teaching, borders can be crossed and obstacles to such collaboration can be dismantled.

Third, social and cultural diversity, gender sensitivity and equality, and a commitment to inclusion based on respect for and acceptance of human diversity can all be addressed meaningfully and constructively through early childhood programmes and curricula. ECCE programmes not only establish a strong foundation for literacy and for learning through the experiences that are provided, as well as through the spontaneous opportunities that arise for learning language and cognitive skills, they also provide the opportunities to explore freely and build relationships with other children and with adults. This helps them learn to live as responsible and caring members of a community of learners, and to establish a strong foundation for the kind of human interaction that teaches and helps children internalize respect, tolerance and compassion that will in turn prepare them to be creative and critical thinkers, problem solvers and peace-builders.

The collective care-giving and teaching efforts that are made daily by thousands of teachers, day-care workers, childcare givers and millions of parents in these three countries is probably one of the most valuable, albeit less visible, investments for the future that is currently being made. There will come a time when the best practices described here, as well as more that will be identified over time, will be considered as typical rather than exceptional. Then we can be sure that no Thai, Filipino or Vietnamese child will be excluded from the learning process, and they all shall have access to quality ECCE programmes.

This synthesis does not intend to promote the idea that there is “one best” approach to ECCE, or even a few good ones; rather, it is designed to promote plurality and diversity in approach, based on principles that are conceptually sound, coherent, consistent and complementary.

The richness of the knowledge and experience base in the field of ECCE that constitutes best practice should continue to benefit all young children – whether they are in a Montessori school in a residential village of Metro Manila, a demonstration kindergarten in the province of Chiang Mai, a kindergarten in Hanoi or a home-based playgroup in a town in Nueva Ecija province in the Philippines. UNESCO promotes these practices as well as others that help young children develop their active learning capacity, enabling them to adapt within their own social context, as well as adjust to novelty and cope with change. In doing so, these practices serve young children’s best interests as growing, developing human beings.

Finally, the study does not suggest that these practices completely reflect all the standards of excellence that most ECCE practitioners strive for. Many of the programmes cited as examples should be considered as “works in progress”, always striving for improvement. Nevertheless, they clearly demonstrate the essentials of good-quality care, facilitating appropriate learning experiences that result in positive outcomes for the children.

These are the small yet innovative and effective steps, as well as some significant giant strides, that governments, civil society, communities and families are making because, each in their own way, they are committed to giving young children a fair start, not just as future school children and workers, but as learners on a lifelong journey.
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Introduction

Background and Rationale for the Study

This paper on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) was commissioned by the UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education in Bangkok. It describes ECCE programmes within the Asia-Pacific region that reflect good practices in early childhood care and education, and the enabling policies that facilitate the development and implementation of these practices. The study is based on observations and documentation of current work as well as years of prior programming experience in three South-East Asian countries: the Philippines, Thailand and VietNam.

Since the World Conference on Education for All in 1990, UNESCO and its partners have been at the forefront of global advocacy efforts for increased attention to Early Childhood Care and Education, with a special emphasis on the millions of young children who are born, grow up and develop in difficult and challenging circumstances. They are often unable to gain access to ECCE programmes which could mitigate the negative impact of poverty and other social factors that put them at risk.

The expansion of ECCE programmes was one of the major goals agreed upon at the conclusion of the first Education for All (EFA) World Conference in Jomtien. Since then, it has been more widely acknowledged that children’s participation in ECCE programmes is integral to the fulfilment of their right to development. At the same time, ECCE was recognized as a requisite to achieving the goals of EFA based on overwhelming evidence that children who have access to ECCE programmes are more likely to stay in school, finish their studies, learn what is taught more effectively, and accomplish what is expected in terms of school performance.

Thus, many countries in different regions took notice and began to establish ECCE programmes, or else renewed their commitment to expanding existing ECCE services. The achievements of many South-East Asian countries with regards to expanding access and improving the quality of ECCE programmes were one of the most encouraging trends highlighted in the regional synthesis of the end-of-decade EFA progress assessment. According to the UNESCO Regional Director at that time:

“The most dramatic achievement, at least from a quantitative point of view, is in the area of Early Childhood Care and Education. Kindergartens, nurseries, day care centres have literally bloomed in the region in dramatic numbers. We have an increase of almost 50 per cent in the last 10 years. Gains have been registered in many of the countries of South-East Asia. What is interesting is not just the numbers, but the financing formulae. Unlike primary schooling, early childhood depends on community support, on NGOs, on the private sector and that is a source of great inspiration for the neighbouring countries as well as for the other sectors of education for all.”

Among the outcomes of these intensified efforts by some of the Member States in South-East Asia are significant improvements in school participation rates and achievement levels within the EFA decade. Participation in ECCE programmes clearly yielded significant benefits for many young children in South-East Asia by improving their nutritional and health status and promoting their growth and development through service provision and parent education. In addition, these programmes enhanced the active learning capacities of young children, making them “ready to learn” and helping them adjust to formal primary school.

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1 Successes and Continuing Problems, Dr Victor Ordonez, UNESCO Proap, Education for All Assessment 2000
Since 1990, UNESCO, together with various international development organizations, has contributed to the documentation of the ECCE “knowledge base,” as well as the wealth of programming experiences in developing countries and applications of scientific research for programme and policy development. The dissemination of all these experiences and the exchange of information across countries and regions particularly about the positive outcomes of these intensified efforts for ECCE have helped governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to address the wide range of issues which affect programming and development of policies in ECCE. This study is a part of these efforts to communicate with and educate practitioners and policy makers about what works in facilitating young children’s learning. It is hoped that it will also assist them as they strive to achieve the goals of expanding access for all children and improving the quality of ECCE programmes.

UNESCO undertakes these information and education activities within the framework of continuing collaboration and support for its Member States. It is a concrete way of encouraging Member States, their civil society partners and the families they serve to further intensify their efforts to promote the rights of all young children so that they may survive, learn, thrive and develop to their full potential. This is the only way to lay a solid foundation for their active participation as members of their families and communities, and as citizens of their own countries and of a world badly in need of peace-building and healing.

**Approach to the Study: Country Studies on ECCE and a Synthesis of Best Practices**

The two-part study aims to assess the state of formal early childhood (pre-school) programmes in Thailand, Viet Nam and the Philippines; the three country papers comprise the first part of the study. Each of the three country papers will provide an overview of the status of ECCE programmes in that country: access and participation of children, description of programmes and service providers, costs and financing, policies and regulatory frameworks that exist, and indicators of quality.

The terms of reference for this study require an assessment of ECCE programmes in respect of specific criteria/elements which indicate attention to the holistic development of the child: 1) the programme interventions; whether these have features that support all the dimensions of child growth and development e.g. health and nutrition, early learning; 2) the curriculum; whether it is child-centred, encourages interaction with people and materials in the child’s environment, and promotes active learning through play; 3) the nature and levels of participation in the life of the programme of parents, families and communities; 4) social and cultural relevance of curriculum content and approaches, and design of the programme and related activities. Some of these criteria will be addressed in the country papers, others in the synthesis that makes up section two.

The consultant undertook field visits to observe programmes in action in each of the three countries included in this report. In addition, she has been privileged to participate in more than a decade of collaborative learning about ECCE programmes and policies within Asian countries. These observations, as well as continuing interaction with ECCE practitioners and policy makers from the three countries described here, provide a concrete basis for understanding the current state of Early Childhood Care and Education programmes in the region.

The study is also informed by discussions and consultations with key resource persons from the concerned government ministries, local government authorities, academe, ECCE specialists and health professionals, school officials, programme officers of intergovernmental organizations, like UNICEF and UNESCO, and representatives of national and international NGOs which are involved in ECCE. These resource persons also provided valuable data and policy documents that served as important references for this study.
The three country papers provide a foundation for the second part of the UNESCO study, which synthesizes the programme experiences and describes “good or effective practices” which account for good quality ECCE programmes. These practices will be identified within programmes which are accessible and relatively low cost, and which are drawn from the three countries where there are still many children living in poverty.

In the second part of the study recommendations will be made regarding strategies and interventions to facilitate the broader application of such effective practices in formal ECCE systems. These recommendations will also be included in programme guidelines and regulatory frameworks for ECCE service providers in the public and private sector. There is also special emphasis on whether and how gender issues are addressed within ECCE programmes and what concrete efforts exist to ensure that those children who are at risk of being marginalized or excluded from ECCE programmes are identified and given equal access opportunities. Gender stereotyping and the imposing of restrictions on children’s activities because of gender, as well as the exclusion of young children from ECCE programmes for reasons that include poverty, disability and illness, are among the many obstacles inhibiting the fulfilment of young children’s rights to nondiscrimination.

Finally, recommendations will be made that aim to establish an environment that supports the formulation of ECCE-oriented policies and the development of quality ECCE programmes.

In accordance with its role within the United Nations system as the agency most committed to education, and as such working in collaboration with the education ministries of Member States, UNESCO has adopted the term Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). Other international agencies use Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) or Early Childhood Development (ECD). Since this paper involves three country studies, the term that is most widely used by the ECCE community in each country and that is also promoted by the relevant government through its national programme will be used as appropriate, and ECCE and ECCD will therefore be used interchangeably in keeping with the preference of both UNESCO and the individual Member State under discussion.
Childcare in Thailand today – whether in the bustling urban centres, the southern coastal regions or upland rural communities of the north and northeast – reflects the country’s heterogeneous history, containing an interesting blend of deeply-rooted, indigenous child-rearing practices and influences from other cultures. The Thai family is clearly still the primary caregiver during the early childhood years and many adhere to age-old traditions and local child-rearing practices. Thus, indigenous Thai culture is firmly embedded within the socialization processes of young children and as a nation they have been able to retain their cultural identity.

So even if the elite and their children have been freely exposed to, even immersed in, foreign cultures, either western or within the region through travel or in the pursuit of higher education abroad, they have retained their sense of nationhood and have always learned and valued their own language. Today, almost every Thai, whether rich or poor, young or old, is exposed to much that is foreign, largely because in the last two decades Thailand has become one of the region’s most popular tourist destinations. At the same time, the growing economy and favourable investment opportunities have also attracted many foreign multinationals, which continue to add to the already fairly large expatriate community. However, despite the intensity of their exposure to “foreign” influences, particularly western (i.e. North American and European) cultures and lifestyles, Thai culture remains a solid influence within family life and early childhood.

This can, in part, be explained by the fact that Thailand is the only South-East Asian nation to have avoided colonization, and has retained its independence since the first free Thai city was founded in 1238, which led to the early Thai Kingdom of Sukhothai. Thus, the people of Thailand have been able to develop and preserve their own social, political and economic systems that have deep and rich cultural and historical roots.

In terms of ethnicity and religion, Thailand is relatively homogeneous: 80 per cent of the population are ethnic Thai and 95 per cent are Theravada Buddhist. Ten per cent of Thais are of Chinese descent, including some of the hill tribe groups. There are 10 major hill tribes living in the northeastern provinces, most of whom are Thais of Lao origin. There are then Malay and Muslim communities who live mainly in the southernmost states, and thus there remain a number of minority cultural influences within Thailand.

From birth, Thai children are still much more deeply immersed in Thai culture than they are exposed to foreign influences, despite the fast-paced changes that have been affecting the daily lives of every Thai family. It is true that a young Thai child in Bangkok has access to the same fixtures and props
of contemporary childhood that his or her peers in many other highly-developed urban centres can also take for granted. However, his or her immediate and sustained immersion in Thai culture – the language, daily personal routines (from mealtimes to clothing to hygiene), relaxation, play, use of media, prayer rituals, family dynamics and social activities, as well as experiences in childcare centres, nurseries or kindergartens – ensures that these early childhood years serve as truly fertile ground for nurturing a very strong sense of cultural and national identity as a Thai.

Nonetheless, despite the deep and stable cultural and religious influences in their lives, there are significant changes in the lifestyles of Thai families that make a young Thai’s childhood today very different from that of their parents. First, the Thai family is now much smaller compared even to the 1960s, when there was an average of six children to each family. Today, in a typical rural family, there are two children, while in Bangkok one child per household is the norm. In close to four decades, population growth rates have decreased from 3.2 per cent to 1.1 per cent.

As is often the case, there are both pros and cons to this decrease in child numbers per household when assessing the implications for early childhood development. One obvious disadvantage is that today’s “only child” will not experience the same benefits as her parents, who were able to learn from the lessons and challenges that only multiple-sibling interaction and relationships can provide. Many others growing up with either one brother or sister will benefit to a degree, but they will still only experience some of those aspects of life with siblings that contribute to an individual’s learning and development, and influence a child’s personality and interests. The only child will surely engage in some forms of peer interaction, for example with cousins, neighbours, family friends or other children in childcare centres. However, this cannot match the depth and intensity of the lifelong bond between siblings that can begin to take root during the years of early childhood.

A possible advantage, meanwhile, is that a child with no siblings is likely to enjoy more of everything – more parental attention, more food, more clothes, more toys, a greater likelihood of quality health care, better schooling, as well as extra perks like family holidays and more recreational opportunities. This is often expected to result in a marked qualitative difference, an improvement in their lives that gives them a decided advantage as far as achieving healthy growth and optimum development is concerned. And this sufficiency – possibly even abundance – is indeed a stabilizing factor and can even act as a protective cushion, especially in times of crisis like the economic downturn in 1997, which dealt a particularly devastating blow to Thailand’s booming economy.

However, this is not the case for the children of about 1.5 million families in the slums of Bangkok and other urban centres, or children of hill tribes who live in the northern and north-eastern mountains. This supposed economic advantage cannot be seen to extend to the children of refugees or those who belong to the so-called “border population”, or to children whose lives have been affected by HIV/AIDS, either as orphans or who are themselves afflicted. These are the young children of marginalized groups, for whom there was no safety net when Thailand’s economic boom and rapid urban development collapsed after 1997. Contrary to widely-held assumptions, the fruits of the perceived progress in every sphere of Thai society somehow did not trickle down to them.

In addition to fewer children per family, there has also been another, equally influential development in the makeup of the Thai household, especially among rural communities: the emergence of the nuclear family. While the self-contained family unit has for some time been the model for most households in urban centres, families in rural areas have long been considered a paragon of the traditional Thai family, in which large numbers of relatives, across various generations, shared the same house or lived in close proximity to one another. This was, in part, because an agricultural lifestyle required tightly interwoven kinship patterns based on strong economic and social ties. However, just as paddy fields, which for generations were cultivated for rice, have been filled in and turned into roads or industrial zones, so too the rural family has been uprooted and reoriented by the demands of an industrial society.
There are various reasons for this upheaval, foremost among which is the dramatic increase in rural to urban migration as former farming families have gone in search of employment opportunities. Almost half of all migrants flock to Bangkok. Significantly, a large number of these migrants are women, who are in great demand either as factory workers or from the tourism industry. As a result, so many young children have been separated from their mothers and left behind in the care of grandparents or other relatives. At the same time, there has also been an increase in households headed by women, in cases where husbands and older male children have gone in search of work.

There is one more critical factor in the break-up of the traditional Thai family unit, in addition to the rural-to-urban dispersal for economic reasons. The rapid spread of HIV/AIDS has also left huge numbers of orphaned children, for whom until recently there might at least have been the safety net of grandparents or other relatives to look after them. However, as we have seen, nuclear families are now becoming the norm and the unforeseen tragedy is that for an increasing number of children such a safety net no longer exists.

There are also entire families who, having migrated to urban centres, settled in slum communities, some of whom are forced to live on the streets. In such situations, two-parent families have had to devise their own ways of coping to provide adequate childcare. For example, fathers may assume major childcare responsibilities as women often have greater employment opportunities. Alternatively, parents may work out a system whereby they rotate work schedules to ensure one or other is always free to look after the children. Another pattern is for children to be sent back to the family’s rural village to be cared for by grandparents.

Some children, meanwhile, grow up without any sense of home at all. These are the children of itinerant families, who move from place to place in search of whatever jobs their limited skills may qualify them for. Such children are especially vulnerable to malnutrition and illness, as well as exposure to various forms of abuse and neglect, and are often unable to access basic social services including ECCE programmes and primary-level schooling.

Children of urban and rural poverty in circumstances such as those outlined above are at the greatest risk of being denied adequate care and educational opportunities. There is an urgent need for more outside interventions to support the families and communities of these children, and ECCE programmes are considered among the most important and effective supportive initiatives. For these Thai children, ECCE programmes could literally be a lifesaver.

**Supporting Families through ECCE Services**

It is assumed that most Thai children below the age of five are still cared for at home. Responsibility for childcare varies depending upon where the family lives, the social and economic status which affect family resources and lifestyles, and the options available for childcare support services. In Thailand, mothers were traditionally considered the primary caregivers. But, as earlier noted, this is no longer the case for an increasing number of families.

Fortunately, as is the case in most Asian societies, Thai mothers in rural communities can still count on members of their families e.g. grandparents, uncles and aunts, as well as older siblings, to help share or take over childcare responsibilities when needed. Those mothers who remain in their village and run their household single-handedly especially have to rely on this kind of support system, since they take on the triple burdens of childcare, household chores and farm work.

Those who do not have such a support system often are forced to bring their children to the fields where they work. Women in urban centres typically rely on alternative caregivers when they work outside the home. Factory workers or those from the informal service sector, e.g. street vendors, develop patchwork arrangements with spouses, relatives or neighbours. In the case of middle and upper class families, indispensable full-time, live-in domestic helpers fulfil the role of baby-sitters and surrogate caregivers.
Over time, families have developed among themselves other informal provisions for childcare, which they have often adapted from the traditional network of extended family that they used to rely on. These other forms of childcare include: family day care which involves group childcare in a private home within the neighbourhood or community; a seasonal or interim village childcare service, which is a communal approach to providing childcare support in rural villages when some mothers must leave their children with neighbours to be able to work on the farms; “volunteer” caregivers from among village residents who look after children and receive fees for their services; and then in some villages, childcare in the form of the above examples may be supplemented by monks, who provide instruction at the local temples and monasteries.

Given the changing circumstances and lifestyles of Thai families in recent years, it is not surprising that the types of childcare provision available have also been increasing, as has the number of community-based nurseries and childcare centres, even in rural areas. These centres have become a vital lifeline for working parents with infants and very young children, but due to very limited resources their childcare services are minimal. Fortunately, full-day kindergarten classes in the public school system in Thailand are available, and actually serve as the most affordable alternative childcare support system for most four- and five-year olds. In 1994, only 65 per cent of three- to five year-old children in Thailand attended some form of early childhood programme. By 2000, 96 per cent of the same age group were receiving some form of early education, either at kindergarten, pre-primary or pre-school classes, or a childcare centre.²

Some people like to make a distinction between the primary purpose of these various ECCE programmes, differentiating between the limited care-giving function of the childcare centres and the dual purpose of the kindergarten that aims for both early childhood care and education.³ Kindergartens or pre-school classes are seen as important preparatory programmes for children’s entry into primary school and are thus more closely associated with Early Childhood Care and Education, but there are those who consider even informal childcare programmes as provisions for ECCE:

“Development of children in pre-primary classes is undertaken both in formal and non-formal schooling through various methods by the family and community with participation from the society. Buddhist temples, mosques, child development centres all provide activities for pre-primary schooling, a feeding programme (lunch and milk). Mothers in some villages take turns to do the cooking and caring for the children at childcare centres. Activities for children range from playing, physical exercise, intelligence development training and self-adjustment in learning how to be with other people. All of these activities are organized with the aim to build up social development for children at the pre-primary stage.”

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² Country Report on the Follow-up to the World Summit for Children, National Youth Bureau and UNICEF

³ From Country Paper on ECCE in Thailand presented by Sappaporn Tangsakul at the KEDI-UNESCO Bangkok Joint Seminar and Study Tour on Early Childhood Care and Education

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² Education in Thailand, National Education Commission, 2000
³ From Country Paper on ECCE in Thailand presented by Sappaporn Tangsakul at the KEDI-UNESCO Bangkok Joint Seminar and Study Tour on Early Childhood Care and Education
Child care centres and the kindergarten, therefore, are generally considered as the primary forms of provision for pre-primary or early childhood care and education. Indeed, there are significant differences in programme features that affect accessibility and the quality of care and education. These are clearly being addressed by the government. This study provides information on both types of settings for Early Childhood Care and Education in Thailand.

1.1 Childcare Centres

Patterns of Operation

The terms childcare centres and nurseries are generally used to describe providers of childcare for any group of six or more children aged up to three years old, although some childcare centres in rural villages may cater to five- and even six-year-olds. Both public and private childcare centres are generally open from Monday to Friday, 12 months of the year. Most centres are open from 7 a.m. up to 4.30 or 5 p.m., while some private childcare centres are more flexible in order to accommodate parents’ work schedules, remaining open as late as 6 p.m.

Services Provided

The goals, functions and standards for childcare centres are now clearly defined and disseminated in a generally systematic way. Childcare centres and nurseries are expected to provide the following services: 1) food and nutrition; 2) health (growth monitoring, first aid and immediate treatment for sick children in cases of emergency; monitoring and advice for parents regarding e.g. immunization); 3) physical care and attention to personal hygiene (hand-washing, bathing, dressing-up, ensuring adequate rest e.g. afternoon nap); and 4) support for holistic child development (love and care; space, toys and opportunities for physical movement; development of senses through exploration of their environment; a variety of learning experiences that allow for individual choices driven by their own interests; opportunities to observe, investigate, problem solve, invent, explore different media, express themselves, interact fully with peers and adults and learn social skills and acquire self-discipline).

Health care is provided by the nearest community health facility. The childcare centre staff will mainly refer children either for specific treatment or a routine physical check-up, while immunization is usually made available on-site in co-operation with local health authorities. All childcare centres are expected to maintain complete health, growth and child development records for individual children. Some centres, particularly those serving the more disadvantaged communities, emphasize health and nutrition and are supervised by the Department of Health. Except for the Child Development Centre at the National Institute for Child and Family Development at Mahidol University, childcare centres do not provide services such as on-site therapy (physical, speech, play, or family counselling) for children with disabilities or other special needs. If there is a need for these kinds of services for children attending the centre, the child and family are referred to specialized institutions which are able to provide quality care.

Staffing, Service Provider Characteristics

The caregivers work directly with the children on a daily basis and as service providers are primarily responsible for their welfare. Staffing patterns naturally vary according to the location of the centre, the organization behind it, and, perhaps most tellingly, the level of funding available. Many childcare centres are minimally staffed, with caregivers attending to practically all the necessary tasks, from direct care-giving and food preparation, to record-keeping and some administrative duties, to maintenance. This is the case in most village childcare centres and public centres in poorer urban communities. Private, adequately-funded childcare centres, however, generally have a full complement of staff: an administrator (often a director who may also assume teaching responsibilities), childcare givers, assistants and cooks, as well as maintenance staff. The administrators (usually centre directors) are responsible for the overall management of the centre’s programme, the supervision of staff and coordination of activities with parents and community leaders or government authorities.
Candidates must meet specific requirements before they are able to qualify as a childcare giver. These mostly concern the individual’s physical and mental health and stability, and moral integrity; he or she must also demonstrate a positive attitude towards children and their development. Most of the childcare givers now working in childcare centres have completed nine to 12 years of schooling (part to full secondary education). Minimum requirements are that they are over 18 years old and have completed the nine years of compulsory education. The findings from the IEA Pre-Primary Study (Phase 2), which were based on data gathered from childcare centres between October 1991 and June 1992, indicated that many caregivers had twelve years of education but lacked formal teaching qualifications.

A UNICEF-commissioned evaluation of the Family Development Programme, which was conducted in 1996-97, emphasized the need for intensified training and technical support for childcare givers. Some parents who were interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of care provided in some centres. It was noted that these were usually centres staffed by young adolescents.

It was also observed that the standard qualifications for childcare givers had not yet been clarified or strictly enforced: some centres required caregivers to be high school graduates, while others accepted or recruited staff who had completed fewer than nine years of basic education. However, all nursery and childcare centre staff were required to undergo some amount of training, albeit somewhat varied in scope, approach and length. For example, training programmes ranged from three days to one week, and may or may not have included a practicum at the provincial kindergarten, where the new staff could be supervised by an experienced kindergarten teacher. As expected, almost all the childcare workers in the participating provinces expressed a need for more training, particularly in the preparation of learning materials and use of equipment.

Much has changed since 1997. The government has since invested in training programmes for upgrading the qualifications of childcare givers, which are offered through various government agencies. National standards for childcare centres now require all caregivers to undergo a six-week training course, which is based on a standard core curriculum, either before staff are hired or within
three months of their employment. The government agencies authorized to organize these childcare training courses are the Office of the Private Education Commission (OPEC) and the Non-Formal Education Department, both under the Ministry of Education, and the Public Welfare Department under the Ministry of Labour and Employment.

**Coverage, Access, Group Size and Adult-Child Ratios**

The majority of childcare centres are found in urban communities, where there are more women working full-time who lack the extended family for home-based care, or who cannot afford to hire their own baby sitters or household helpers. The average group size in these urban centres is 25 to 30 children, with one caregiver. This is the case in most public childcare centres, and the single caregiver is responsible for the entire running of the centre.

However, some well-managed, not-for-profit centres do exist in slum communities, which care for children up to five years old and which are able to maintain appropriate child-staff ratios. So even though groups may still be large, for example with 30 children aged between three and four years old, there might be at least two caregivers and an aide, resulting in an adult-child ratio of 1:10/15. For infants up to one-and-a-half years old, the better funded childcare centres have an even lower ratio of between 1:3 and 1:5. These levels are about ideal, especially as there are often additional staff members, such as a nurse, assistant or other helpers, whose duties include cleaning the rooms and assisting with bathing or bathroom routines, as well as kitchen staff in charge of food preparation and service.

There are now many more childcare centres in rural villages compared to a decade ago, when the extended family childcare network was still intact. These childcare centres originally provided mainly custodial care, and then evolved into informal Early Childhood Care and Education programmes. Many of these centres were established as part of the Family Development Programme (FDP), introduced by the government in 1996 in 75 provinces. The FDP was a collaborative undertaking, initially involving several government ministries, local government authorities, a specialist from Mahidol University’s Paediatrics and Child Development department, and UNICEF, with other international NGOs such as Save the Children (US) and Christian Children’s Fund joining at a later stage.

The FDP was the scaled-up version of a pilot project called Integrated Family-Based Early Childhood Development (IFBECED), which was introduced in 16 provinces from between 1990 and 1996. One of the tasks of the Community Development Department (CDD) within this programme was the identification and training of volunteers to enhance home or centre-based childcare programmes. The Family Development Programme also supported village committees in building capacity to manage village child development centres. Childcare centres with 25 or more children could also apply for CDD subsidies in the form of salaries for caregivers. Group sizes ranged from six to 10 children with one caregiver at one end of the scale, to up to 30 children and one childcare worker, usually assisted by several volunteers, at the other.

When the FDP programme was reviewed in 1997, one unexpected development was noted: the apparent popularity of centre-based approaches to childcare despite the fact that the FDP and its predecessor, the IFBECED, were originally designed as a home-based model for ECCE. This was attributed to the parents’ realization that their families could benefit much more from childcare centres which functioned as full-day child minding centres. Having a safe and secure childcare option enabled them to explore more job options and work longer hours in order to earn enough and provide for their families’ needs. At that time, it was also observed that most caregivers focused on providing physical and custodial care for children aged two to four years old, ensuring the children were safe rather than on facilitating play and other recreational activities.

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Some childcare workers conducted home visits and were able to use the information materials that had been designed for parents and apply what they learned during their training. They encouraged parents to read stories to their children, and mothers were motivated to bring their children to the centre. Mothers tended to express satisfaction that their children were learning for example drawing and painting, and appreciated the fact that their children were becoming more independent, more sociable and, in general, were showing signs of developing well.

However, some parents considered the childcare centres as inferior to family or home-based care, where children could be better attended to on a one-to-one basis. Still others did not appreciate centres as learning environments as their children were not being taught the alphabet or numeracy skills which figured prominently in their definition of learning. There is some irony here, in that in the process of scaling up a successful pilot programme designed to apply integrated, family-focused and mainly home-based approaches to ECCE programming in rural villages, the impetus was provided for the evolution of the childcare centre from an informal communal child-minding arrangement to a village childcare service and finally a child development centre which provides an Early Childhood Care and Education programme.

Childcare centres in urban areas tend to be much better equipped than their rural counterparts, with materials and tools for learning and recreational play, and adequate supplies for children’s nutrition and personal hygiene needs. As would be expected, they also tend to be more able to comply with standards in regard to provision of services, resources and physical requirements. Teachers are also generally better qualified, with a higher percentage having received pre- and in-service training. This is because, in addition to higher rates of school participation and completion in urban areas that results in a greater pool of human resources, there is also heavier public and private funding. Local government authorities in urban centres tend to have more resources at their disposal, thus more external funds can be tapped by service providers for the children and families they have identified as in need of support. There are also more non-profit and philanthropic groups who implement or actively support ECCE programmes in urban centres compared to the number of NGOs working in childcare in rural areas, particularly the more distant and remote villages. According to UNICEF, in 1997 there were 109 day care centres, 61 nurseries, and five child development centres in the slum areas of Bangkok.5

**Sponsoring Organizations and Financing**

Public childcare centres are sponsored by the government, i.e. they operate with public funds. These funds generally cover salaries and running costs, while the facility is usually either constructed on public land or housed in a public building. In rural areas, the Tambon Administrative Organization is responsible for allocating funds for childcare centres and disbursing these crucial resources. Parents give a small monthly contribution (ranging from the equivalent of US$0.20 to US$1), with the amount varying depending on the resources of both the community and the individual parents. In rural villages and some urban poor communities where community participation in ECCE programmes is effectively mobilized, there are village committees who are actively involved in managing the childcare centre. Public childcare centres may also receive donations from private foundations, individuals or corporate donors.

Centres which are sponsored by private philanthropic organizations or local NGOs may or may not expect parents to contribute the small amounts required by other, publicly-funded centres. In most cases, though, the time volunteered by parents is considered sufficient. In some instances, however, parents are expected to make a regular monthly contribution which the centre administrators or sponsoring organization deposit in an educational trust fund for each child. So the parents’ contribution is not actually spent for the operations of the childcare centre but will benefit the child after he or she leaves to begin primary school. This system is one way of ensuring that the child will

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be able to complete his or her basic education. Private childcare centres which cater to middle-income families rely mainly on the monthly or semi-annual fees that are paid by parents. The childcare centres in poorer slum communities are operated by private foundations and NGOs. Among these are: the YWCA; the Foundation for Slum Childcare under the Patronage of her Royal Highness Princess Galyani Vadhana Krom Luang Naradhiwas Rajanagarindra Foundation for Child Development; C.C.F. Thailand; National Council for Child and Youth Development (NYCD); UNICEF; Save the Children US; National Council on Women of Thailand under the Royal Patronage of Her Majesty the Queen; Holt Sahathai Foundation; and Duang Prateep Foundation. These organizations established early childhood development programmes precisely to respond to the needs of children at risk of malnutrition or illness, those suffering from late development or disabilities, or who suffer abuse or neglect from parents or as a result of their family circumstances.

The Department of Public Welfare and the Department of Community Development have established 96 child development centres in remote mountain villages for hill-tribe children. In some cases, childcare centres have also been set up on the initiative of parents or a teacher who actively sought the mandate and funds from their Tambon Administrative Organization, to cover at least the teacher’s salary and construction materials. One such example can be found in a Karen village some three hours outside Chiang Mai. In this village, like others where community members are actively involved in childcare, parents and other volunteers contributed their time and effort to construct the centre. They also continue to help by, for example, telling stories or teaching about their own cultural practices, which includes language and music, or by preparing materials or cooking food for the children. The village leaders and parents who were interviewed evidently felt a strong sense of ownership for the childcare centre, and spoke about its value for them and their children, particularly as preparation for primary school. They take pride in the fact that many of their children are now able to go to school. The childcare centre is open all day, but usually only four- to six-year olds stay this long; two- and three-year old children generally attend for only half the day. At this centre there is only one teacher, who continues to take responsibility for working with the children on a daily basis and for organizing the centre’s activities in coordination with the tribal leaders and parents.

Support for curriculum development, teacher training and learning materials was provided by the Inter-Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand Association (IMPECT), an NGO composed entirely of indigenous and tribal people engaged in development work among six tribal groups living in the highlands of northern Thailand, namely: the Karen, Hmong, Mien, Lisu, Lahu and Akha tribes. They collaborate with one another to promote the rights of indigenous peoples and engage in educational processes to ensure the inter-generational transmission of their own cultures, traditions and customs. They also promote self-help initiatives for the continuing development of their own indigenous communities, emphasizing self-determination and empowerment. IMPECT has received grants from UNICEF for curriculum development and other international NGOs that support early childhood development programmes.

The childcare centre for Karen tribe children referred to above is in an IMPECT partner village as part of a project called Footholds in the Hills, which promotes and supports ECCE programmes in the mountain villages that stimulate “a community-based learning process.” They encourage the participation of the tribes’ traditional elders and teachers, parents and community leaders in these learning processes. The aim is also to strengthen the children’s cultural identity and sense of belonging to their own tribe during the years before they enter primary school where they will begin to learn the Thai language and become immersed in Thai culture. This project is supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation (BVLF), a pioneering ECCE–focused NGO based in the Netherlands. BVLF is one of the most active supporters of NGOs in Thailand devoted to working with hill-tribe and “border” children in the northeast.

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6 This is a practice of the Foundation for Slum Childcare (FSCC) as explained by Sriliada Katewong, Manager of FSCC.
**Licensing and Supervision**

Responsibility for the supervision of childcare centres (public or private) lies with the Department of Public Welfare and the Department of Community Development, as well as the local Tambon Administrative Organizations for the centres under their particular jurisdiction. These bodies issue permits to operate the centres, and monitor compliance with prescribed guidelines for establishing childcare centres and nurseries. For the Bangkok area, anyone interested in setting up a childcare centre submits applications to the Department of Public Welfare, while in the provinces the provincial public welfare office receives applications.

**Standards for Childcare Centres**

The Office of National Primary Education Commission (ONPEC) under the Office of the Prime Minister developed and now promotes “Childcare Standards for the 0-3 Age Group”, which consists of four sets of standards pertaining to: 1) qualifications, attributes and responsibilities of childcare providers; 2) nurseries; 3) training institutions for childcare providers, both public and private; and 4) prescribed training courses for childcare providers. These guidelines are concise but comprehensive enough to cover all relevant aspects of early childhood care and development programmes for children up to the age of three years. Although a more detailed curriculum for this age group (i.e. with objectives, suggested learning experiences and materials) is not elaborated upon in this document, it is made explicit in various sections of the standards that nurseries and childcare providers are expected to “meet the basic requirements of the children in various aspects – physical, mental, emotional, social and intellectual.”

The childcare standards further identify the following roles and responsibilities of childcare providers: 1) to prepare the daily schedule of children’s activities to “ensure their growth and development in all aspects and in age-appropriate ways.” 2) to encourage child development through an integrated and creative approach, giving children opportunities to learn from objects and persons through sensory perception, movement, play and activities; 3) to observe and document children’s growth and development in all dimensions in order to effectively identify, monitor and respond to emerging problems; 4) to provide a safe, clean and age-appropriate physical environment; 5) to facilitate parent-child interaction and communicate closely with parents of the children; 6) to work on continuing self-development by engaging in professional and personal development activities.

To help childcare centres and caregivers comply with these standards, national government agencies, universities and authorized NGOs or private institutions provide technical assistance and training for childcare workers and centre administrators. There are also private kindergarten owners and retired public kindergarten teachers who work with childcare centres in disadvantaged communities either as consultants for curriculum design or as volunteer resource persons to assist with staff development.

Standards for service providers were developed by the National Education Commission. Service providers are encouraged to seek support such as information and guidance in programme implementation from various community agencies, for example health stations and public health service centres; hospitals; nurseries in various communities; district and provincial public welfare offices (Department of Public Welfare); village public welfare centres (Office of the Permanent Secretary for Labour and Social Welfare); local administration organizations; pre-school and child development centres based in monasteries (Department of Religious Affairs); village child development centres, district and provincial community development offices (Department of Community Development ONPEC media centres); welfare centres for young children, and community child development centres under the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration. There are also many teachers and civil servants either currently in education or who have retired from government service who work as volunteers in public childcare centres and train childcare centre staff.
The 126-hour Standard Training Course on Childcare for 0-3 Year Olds covers the following topics: 1) the role of childcare providers in child development; 2) communication skills and collaboration with parents and communities; 3) principles and skills in childcare; 4) child growth and development, observation methods in child development; 5) provision of learning experiences through a learner-centred approach; 6) care for children’s mental and physical health; 7) child nutrition; 8) safety and emergency measures; and 9) relevant laws and the UN Convention on the Rights on the Child. Eighty-four hours of practical training in childcare centres or nurseries and study visits are also required. Those who complete this short course are provided with a Certificate of Standard Training for the 0-3 Age Group. They have the option to pursue further training and work towards other certificate courses (the 420-hour course on Care for Young Children, and an 840-hour course on Early Childhood Development) or a minimum three-year Occupational Certificate Course with the Ministry of Education (Non-formal Education). The Ministry of Health also offers a six-week training course on childcare for children up to the age of three years. Licensed private educational institutions may be authorized to offer training courses if they meet the requirements and can ensure that quality standards will be enforced.

The difference in academic qualifications between childcare givers and kindergarten teachers appears to be the basis for distinguishing between custodial care on the one hand, and educational programmes on the other. Like other countries in the region, in Thailand there is an important difference between the professional and paraprofessional in childcare provision. The IEA Pre-Primary data gathered in 1994 showed that in comparison to five other developing countries, Thailand’s childcare givers had the fewest years of education, with a median of 10.3 years. There were even people working in childcare in Thailand who reported that they had only four years of education. The average length of formal education for teachers in all other types of early childhood settings in 15 countries ranged from 12.6 to 16.7 years, a group which includes kindergarten teachers in Thailand whose education varies from 10 to 18 years, with a median of 14.9 years.

Thus, from the point of view of formal preparation, childcare givers are less qualified than kindergarten teachers. Findings of the IEA Pre-Primary study further showed that only 9 per cent of childcare staff had any form of training and none of the Thai respondents were certified as it was not a requirement. It is not surprising, therefore, that such distinctions between childcare givers and kindergarten teachers persist, given this combination of incomplete, even minimal, formal basic education, the glaring lack of pre-service and in-service training, and the lack of certification requirements.

That was 10 years ago, however, and since 1997 there has been substantial investment in upgrading the qualifications of childcare givers. That said, while there are visible improvements in the qualifications of caregivers as a result of these reforms, which include serious in-service capacity-building efforts, the gap between kindergarten teachers and childcare workers’ qualifications remains, largely because at the same time there have also been intensive parallel efforts to support the professional development of kindergarten teachers to improve the quality of ECCE programmes and more stringent requirements for certification were introduced, such as a four-year bachelor’s degree as the minimum academic qualification. This compelled teachers to either complete their undergraduate degree or pursue further studies. Thus, in some cases and from a certain point of view, the gap has actually widened.

This points to the need for serious decision-making regarding policy directions that will have an impact on this fairly large and still increasing cadre of childcare givers vis-à-vis standards and licensing requirements for quality early childhood care and development programmes. Thailand and other countries in the region have built the basic institutional childcare support system largely on local-community human resources. In many cases, these evolved from a voluntary arrangement among neighbours to a paid worker status. It would be inconceivable to dismiss the potential of a rapidly growing human resource base such as this network of childcare workers for ECCE programmes.
What is needed now is a career development plan matched by sufficient resources for in-service capacity-building, supervision and continuing professional development. There are positive signs that this can be achieved fairly soon. Thailand’s national policies and education reform efforts focused on early childhood development have moved in the direction of upgrading the qualifications and enhancing the competencies of both childcare givers and teachers. This is crucial to achieving the quality standards for education that have been set by Thai stakeholders and policy makers. But these comprise only a small percentage of the funds for ECCE. These can be in the form of equipment such as computers, audio-visual equipment, as well as books and learning materials. Parents also actively help to raise funds and organize activities to support the schools’ efforts to improve their ECCE programmes.

The Foundation for Slum Childcare (FSCC) is an NGO which provides comprehensive, full-day childcare for 200 infants up to five years old in several slum communities in Bangkok. The FSCC aims to establish 30 day-care centres that will serve 20 communities. Two of their centres for children were visited for this study. One is the Klong Toey Centre, which is also where their main office is located; the other is one of four houses or smaller centres, Ban Sri-Nagarindra in the Nong Kham garbage dumpsite. They are well-run, well-equipped childcare centres where the quality of care that is provided for the children is in sharp contrast with the inadequate attention, even neglect, that some of these children experience in their own homes. The children are healthy and alert, playful and evidently comfortable in the centre and with their caregivers. In the group of three-year-olds there were only a few who appeared to be suffering from malnutrition and were evidently small and underweight for their age; but judging from the sparkle in their eyes, their high energy levels and playfulness, they were also on the road to recovery. This is not surprising because five days a week they are fed three tasty and nutritious meals and are given milk and vitamins. They are bathed and dressed in clean clothes, cleaned up after toiletry routines and their hands are washed before eating. During nap-times they lie down on their own cots laid out side-by-side on the linoleum covered floors, in clean and comfortable rooms. It is not just the physical care that is helping them to recover – it is also to do with the fact that they experience a stable daily routine in the childcare centre and have enough time to play and explore, to interact fully and freely with their peers and their caregivers who are gentle and attentive.

Upon arrival and throughout most of the morning, the children play indoors or outdoors, on their own or with peers and the adult caregivers. There are more than enough play and learning materials suitable for infants, toddlers and three- to five-year-olds in the two childcare centres of the FSCC. Most of these, however, were store-bought toys and learning materials. There are toys and materials for pulling, pushing, exploring sounds; for manipulating and building; for pretend play, creating or expressing their thoughts and feelings; and those that help them develop important thinking skills like matching, sorting and sequencing. There are many children’s books with colourful illustrations and a wide range of topics that are of interest to young children. FSCC is well-equipped with educational materials, such as books and playthings because, in addition to the childcare centre, they also maintain a mobile toy and book library that regularly visits children in their own communities.

In the childcare centre in Klong Toey, after some children who have not been fed at home have eaten breakfast, the two- to four-year-olds engage in small and whole-group activities – singing action songs, dancing, marching, walking on tiptoe and trying out other movements that help them develop their larger muscles and co-ordinate their gross and fine motor movements. After the first block of time for activities, they drink milk and then return to more play activities. The activity-filled mornings end with preparations for lunch. After washing their hands, they settle down in small groups at the tables where they always eat their meals. The toddlers are encouraged to feed themselves with only a little help from the caregivers who move around the tables to encourage them to eat, cut up their food into bite-sized pieces, offer second servings, and help scoop up the rice with their spoons. The three- and four-year-olds can manage very well on their own. After lunch, they go to the clean wash areas where their caregivers are ready to give them a bath. The midday bath is clearly refreshing and soothing, a perfect prelude to a nap on a warm sunny afternoon. For almost an hour and a half, silence reigns in rooms that had previously been bustling with activity.

Upon waking, some lie down quietly observing and warming up, others play on their own or in pairs or threes while still on their mats, choosing from among the playthings on the shelves. There may also be adult-initiated, quiet activities indoors for the older four- and five-year-olds, and for all the children this is the time to let loose outdoors in a small garden enjoyed by each of the centres. There they climb, hang on to the monkey bars, slide, and enjoy the outdoors where there are plants and trees providing shade for the playground equipment. Their day ends with a late afternoon meal which is actually dinner for these children. They are fetched by parents who come directly from the workplace.

Thus, these childcare centres provide a stable and stimulating care and learning environment where their needs as children are met. The adults in the centre are calm and confident, visibly attentive and caring in their interaction with the children who look really comfortable with them. The children touch them, snuggle up to them, and approach them to ask something or call their attention. There are enough staff in each of the centres to care for the number of children in each group – infants, one- and two-year-olds, and three- and four-year-olds. These young children come from families struggling to survive by working in factories or in other low-paying jobs. There is no certainty for families like these living in the slums of Bangkok so parents are always pressured and stressed, and when they are anxious for one reason or another, this is surely felt by their young children. Thus, the sense of security that the childcare centres provide these children for the years that they are able to attend surely makes a tremendous difference to the quality of their lives.
1.2 Kindergarten and Pre-Primary Classes

Patterns of Operation

Kindergartens have a long history in Thailand, having first been introduced in the 1940s, and have since established a firm foothold in Thai society. Therefore, even if kindergarten is not considered part of the 12-year compulsory basic education programme and attendance is not a pre-requisite for entry into primary school, nonetheless almost all Thai children (97 per cent) attend one or two years of kindergarten before the first grade. Kindergartens generally serve children aged between four and six, but some have classes for two- and three-year-olds as well. A few also provide inclusive education programmes so children with disabilities who may be older than five or six can also attend.

For a long time, kindergartens or pre-school classes have been considered the primary form of ECCE service provision. Kindergartens operate five days a week, 10 months a year. They are open the whole day from 8 a.m. up to 3.30 p.m. or 4 p.m. This complements the full-day work schedules of some parents, and means kindergartens offer the most comprehensive childcare and education programme for the majority of Thai children in this age group.

Services Provided

The Ministry of Education through ONPEC collaborates with the Ministry of Health in implementing a school health care programme which includes pre-school or kindergarten classes. This includes health care education for children and their parents, routine health check-ups, provision of first aid or basic medicines as needed, and attention to the sanitation and hygiene conditions of the school and its surroundings.

A school lunch programme is now a permanent feature of public kindergartens. This was the result of an ONPEC-led campaign for subsidized school lunches for all primary schools which led to an 11-year period of government funding. These were designed as seed funds and were supplemented by school-based agricultural activities and products. Schools could apply for additional seed funds as needed. At the time the programme was introduced, not all schools offered lunches five days a week. This changed in 1992 after the Primary School Lunch Fund Act was passed by Parliament. The nationwide “five days a week” programme is now made possible with a fund of 500 million baht allocated annually by the government, with a supplementary fund of 50 million baht. In addition to lunch, free milk is provided in the mornings in public kindergarten classes up to the fourth grade in all primary schools throughout Thailand.

This large-scale implementation of health and nutrition interventions in public kindergartens and pre-schools is a concrete manifestation of the government’s commitment to programming with attention to holistic child growth and development. By offering these health and nutrition components which are often considered as beyond – but complementary to – the educational programme, kindergartens are better able to provide for the children’s well-being and promote their optimum growth and development as well as maximize the synergistic effects of health, nutrition, psychosocial development and learning. Most kindergartens provide other on-site health services such as screening (development, hearing, vision) immunization, and dental check-ups. However, very few have additional on-site support services for children with disabilities who are usually referred to other professionals or institutions.

Coverage, Access, Group Size and Adult-Child Ratios

Within the government-funded public school system, the number of years that children attend kindergarten differs depending on whether they live in urban centres or rural villages. Children aged between three and five who have access to public schools in urban areas attend kindergarten for
two or three years. These classes are typically offered in independent facilities or self-contained buildings that share a compound with the primary school. In rural areas, children (often five years old) attend a one-year pre-school class in the village primary school.

After the 1990 World Conference on Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien, Thailand, the host country launched serious reform efforts which put Early Childhood Care and Education on top of the list of measures that the government resolved to implement. The decision to prioritize Early Childhood Care and Education in the public school system was based on convincing evidence from research including national studies – such as one which involved 11,442 Thai third graders – to demonstrate how Early Childhood Care and Education gave children a clear advantage in school performance. The study showed that compared to their peers of the same age, sex and socio-economic status who did not attend kindergarten, those who did scored much higher on achievement-based tests.

Thus, even if it was not incorporated into the 12-year compulsory education programme, the Thai government made it explicit in all policy documents that the expansion of access to ECCE programmes was crucial to achieving EFA goals, as is exemplified by the investment in expanding and improving the quality of Early Childhood Care and Education programmes in Thailand.

ONPEC, under the Ministry of Education, concentrated its efforts on expanding access to kindergartens in rural areas where access and participation rates are lower compared to urban centres. By 2001, ONPEC had established a total of 67,200 pre-school classes in 29,410 rural primary schools. These classes serve almost 1.4 million children each year. The pre-primary classes are financed with a 37,675,000-baht annual budget. Public school kindergartens are much more affordable and accessible to most families because the kindergarten is supported through several financing sources led by the government. The provision of public funds has provided the centres with stability and fuels continuing progress for the kindergarten programme.

In Bangkok and other large cities, where there are more private kindergartens that cater to middle- and upper-income families who can afford to pay the tuition and other fees, children are usually enrolled for three years (starting at age three). These private kindergartens are supervised by the office of the Private Education Commission. Their statistics for the academic year 2000-2001 showed that children in private kindergartens account for 28 per cent (547,411 children) of the total enrolment figure for pre-primary classes. The average class size in private pre-schools is 30 children for each class of three-year-olds and 31 in each class of four- and five-year olds. In 2000, the average student-teacher ratio in private schools across all levels was between 24 and 25 children to one teacher.

In the 1994 country data for the IEA Pre-Primary Study (IEA/PP), Thailand, along with other participating countries in Asia (China, Hong Kong and Indonesia), reported very high adult-child ratios (1 to 30-40) in some early childhood settings, both public and private. Some classes in the kindergartens that were visited for this study had even larger group sizes with ratios of 1 to 30-35. In Chiang Mai Kindergarten, the class of 36 four- and five-year-olds were evidently comfortable shifting from small-group to whole-group activities and back. In either group situation, the children remained focused on the activity at hand in the various areas of the classroom, while the experienced teacher was relaxed and remained alert and responsive to each individual child’s needs, for example a child needing attention to a cut or asking about the toys they were playing with.

However, in another rural kindergarten where there was an equally large number of children with only one teacher, some children seemed lost or barely able to sustain any interest in playing; there

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7 These are called: Kindergarten 1 for three-year-olds, Kindergarten 2 for four-year-olds and Kindergarten 3 for five-year-olds.
8 Raudenbush, et al 1992
9 Information Development Group, Records Division, Office of the Private Education Commission, Ministry of Education
were not enough things to play with or materials in the classroom, and while the teacher was pleasant and kind, she seemed timid and quite passive, even somewhat overwhelmed. These large group sizes have always been the exception, however, even in 1994 when the IEA/PP data was gathered. The country data for the IEA/PP showed that on average, staff-child ratios in Thailand and other Asian countries were generally smaller and well within recommended standards.

**Access to and Participation in Kindergarten or Pre-primary Programmes**

“The percentage of pre-school children (3-5 years old) who have received pre-schooling [sic] preparedness increased from 39 per cent in 1990 to 85 per cent in 1996 (beyond the goal of 59 percent) and 87 per cent in 1999. It is expected that the goal of 90 per cent will be realized in 2001. Boys have a slight edge over girls: about 96-98 per cent in pre-primary and primary age groups.”

--- Country Report on the Follow-up to the World Summit for Children, National Youth Bureau and UNICEF

Indeed, the expectations that the country report above mentions have been met: Thailand achieved its goal of pre-school education for 90 per cent of three- to five-year-olds. Almost all children in Thailand are now enrolled in an ECCE programme by age three. There has been a steady increase in participation rates among this age group, from 73.7 per cent in 1995, to 90.8 per cent in 1997 up to 96.9 per cent in 1999. This is an impressive accomplishment considering the serious challenges to political and economic stability within the country during that same period, especially after the regional economic downturn in 1997.

One plausible explanation for Thailand’s success is a combination of factors from a variety of sectors within Thai society: flexibility and political will on the part of the nation’s political and educational leaders; determination of committed public civil servants in social service and education agencies, academe and civil society; and strong support and active participation of communities and parents seeking the best quality of life for their children. Thailand’s commitment to meeting the challenges of EFA propelled the issue of ECCE to the forefront of reform efforts, highlighted as a supporting goal to achieving education for all Thais:

“The basic education goal aims to ensure universal access to basic education by increasing the completion of primary education by at least 80 per cent of primary school aged children both in the formal and non-formal systems. Supporting goals are:

1. expansion of early childhood development activities, including appropriate family and community-based interventions;
2. reduction of disparities between boys and girls.”

--- Section 3: Education, Children in Thailand, Country Report on the Follow-up to the World Summit

Out of the 44,903 educational institutions which provide pre-primary classes, 1,403, or 3 per cent, are in Bangkok, with the remaining 43,500 spread out among the other provinces. In some provinces, pre-primary programmes tend to be more centred in or around urban areas and bigger towns. This is being addressed by the government in collaboration with families and partners in civil society. Today, even the Border Patrol have been mobilized and are now responsible for establishing ECCE programmes for children of Karen hill tribes from Myanmar seeking refuge from the Myanmar military and now living as refugees on the Thai-Myanmar border in northern Thailand.

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10 Educational Information Centre, ONEC, 1999.
Kindergartens vary in size and scope, from small- to medium-sized independent centres devoted to classes for children aged between two and five years, to larger schools with nine to 12 classes for children aged up to six years old, often within public primary schools with a population of 1,500-2,000 students. The government is the major funding source for kindergartens – most ECCE provision is through kindergarten and pre-school classes within the public school system. Government funds provide for infrastructure and equipment, teacher and staff salaries, utilities and basic operational expenses.

Public funds from both national and local governments are supplemented by fees that parents pay to cover meals and other running costs. Fees paid by parents comprise the second largest source of funding for ECCE. In Bangkok, parents pay 5,000 baht a year for the three daily meals and make a 500-baht contribution each term to subsidize special school activities or projects. Families who are unable to pay are given reduced rates or exempted and most schools raise funds for these subsidies. These fees are generally lower in other provinces, including urban centres outside Bangkok.

Most schools also receive grants and donations from large corporations or philanthropic foundations but these comprise only a small percentage of the funds for ECCE. These can be in the form of equipment such as computers, audio-visual equipment, as well as books and learning materials. Parents also actively help to raise funds and organize activities to support the schools’ efforts to improve their ECCE programmes.

Private schools are classified by the MOE into two types: 1) non-subsidized schools; these are those established after 1974, and are considered financially well-off and self-supporting and can charge tuition fees without government regulation; and 2) subsidized schools; those established before 1974, which are dependent on government support. Some receive 100-per cent subsidies, while others receive 40 per cent. Those receiving full support are usually connected with charitable organizations and those with partial subsidy are generally proprietary-based. The kindergartens established by organizations such as charitable foundations or professional organizations are often intended for children in disadvantaged communities and in addition to government subsidies are supported by grants and donations from private individuals and corporations.

There are also temples and mosques where pre-school classes are organized. In these kinds of non-profit programmes, parents may be expected to make financial contributions or contribute their time and labour as volunteers. Of course, there are also private kindergartens in urban centres which cater to children from wealthy families. These are usually established by individuals, partners or small corporations and some may belong to the non-subsidized category while others may receive partial subsidy. In the final analysis, the government is still the major financier of Early Childhood Care and Education in Thailand.

In addition to the demonstration kindergartens in public schools in every province, there are also demonstration schools in teacher education institutes as well as state universities with Schools of Medicine and other allied health degree programmes. The most prominent examples of these are the Child Development Centre in Mahidol University’s National Institute for Child and Family Development, and the La-or-utis Demonstration School at the Rajabhat Institute in Bangkok. These demonstration schools are also recipients of public funds for infrastructure, staff salaries and utilities. They charge tuition fees, comparable to the rates at private schools, to cover all other operational expenses. These fees are deemed necessary to achieve and maintain the standards of quality that are expected of demonstration schools given their multiple roles within higher education, training and research.
**Supervision, Licensing and Standards**

ONPEC, under the Ministry of Education, is directly in charge of establishing and supervising ECCE programmes in public schools. This is done by the national office through the provincial primary education commission and district education offices of the MOE. ONPEC also conducts special studies and research for internal monitoring and evaluation of the quality of kindergarten and pre-school classes. The Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assurance was established in preparation for the implementation of the Education Act of 1999. National standards for education, previously developed when it was an interim office under ONPEC, have been promoted and the evaluation of schools, teachers and students has since begun. The MOE has been promoting both internal and external evaluation processes and the Commission for Private Education in the MOE fulfils these functions for private kindergartens.

**Staffing and Characteristics of Service Providers**

Teachers are the primary service providers in kindergartens and pre-school programmes. Most kindergarten teachers in Thailand comply with the required pre-service formal education qualifications. The minimum requirement used to be a post-secondary diploma degree acquired after a two-year teacher training course that was offered by Rajabhat Institutes or teacher training colleges. This was phased out in favour of a four-year undergraduate course leading to a bachelor’s degree in education or a related course, which is the current requirement.

There are 44,023 bachelor degree holders among teachers at the pre-primary level, which means 100 per cent of kindergarten teachers have at least a college degree. As early as 1994, data for the IEA-PP study showed that almost all (97 per cent) kindergarten teachers were certified, which indicates that they fulfil the formal education requirements for licensing and certification. This pattern has been sustained. In private schools, of the 25,888 kindergarten teachers, around half (12,595) had bachelor’s degrees, 6,042 had general education qualifications, and 4,000 had diploma degrees, as of 2000.12

**II. Working Towards the Goals of EFA: Quality ECCE for All Young Children in Thailand**

**Implementation and Management of ECCE Programmes in Thailand**

Several government ministries are involved in the implementation and supervision of ECCE programmes, policy formulation, research, development of standards, training and capacity-building. These are: Ministry of Interior (Department of Community Development, Local Administration); Ministry of Education (ONPEC, Department of Curriculum and Instruction Development [DCID], Department of Non-formal Education, Department of Religious Affairs, Rajabhat Institutes, Office of Private Education Commission); Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (Department of Social Welfare, Department of Labour Protection and Welfare, Department of Skill Development); Ministry of Public Health (Department of Health, Department of Mental Health); Ministry of University Affairs (National Institute of Child and Family Development, Mahidol University); Royal Thai Navy; and Border Patrol Police. The National Education Commission, which is under the Office of the Prime Minister, established the National Institute for Early Childhood Care and Education which co-ordinates the development of policy guidelines, standards and regulatory frameworks that are essential to the education reform efforts mandated by the Education Act of 1999.

12 Private Education Commission, data for the year 2000
Universities and NGOs are also involved in the implementation of ECCE programmes, especially since the education reform efforts emphasize the need to support and strengthen professional development and capacity-building for ECCE service providers. The National Institute for Child and Family Development at Mahidol University was established precisely for this purpose, as well as to conduct various forms of research and special studies, to monitor the outcomes of policy initiatives and programmes linked to reform efforts, and to provide technical support for policy makers, programme managers, teacher educators and childcare trainers, as well as service providers themselves. It is the first institution in the region to offer multidisciplinary graduate programmes leading to a Master of Science degree in Human Development with a strong emphasis on ECCE.

Early Childhood Curriculum

The goals, objectives, content (concepts, facts, skills, attitudes to be learned), approaches, instructional strategies, teaching-learning processes and forms of evaluation are all part of the early childhood curriculum. It is manifested and translated into experiences for young learners within the kindergarten classroom and other physical spaces that are used as extensions of the classroom.

On paper, the curriculum may be underpinned by sound theory and state-of-the-art approaches; however, young children cannot benefit until the rhetoric and reliable research-based recommendations are translated into daily adult-child and child-child interaction. This interaction must take place in a variety of activities and language experiences and encounters among children and other people they are in contact with, in daily routines that occur within organized and tailor-made physical spaces, and at a pace that is attuned to the way young children learn.

Thus, the acid test for a successful curriculum is in the way that a classroom is brought to life and motivates the children and their teacher, which is achieved through the programme structure and planned learning experiences, as well as the spontaneous and informal lessons that arise from day to day.

This is an interesting time to assess early childhood curricula in Thailand – it is just past the mid-decade point since education reforms were launched in earnest and the process of expanding Early Childhood Care and Education through kindergartens and pre-school classes in public schools began. Six years is enough time to allow one to see and appreciate the outcomes as well as to identify the areas that need more work and issues that need to be addressed as Thai educators – in their different roles and contexts – translate policies and guidelines into their daily teaching practices involving four- to six-year-olds in kindergarten and pre-school classes.

According to the National Education Commission: “School curricula in Thailand have often been modified and revised in order to be responsive to the changing socio-economic conditions as well as to advanced technologies.” Part of the efforts to meet the quality standards involves the revision and enhancement of national curricula and guidelines for implementation by the different ECCE programmes such as childcare centres, nurseries and kindergartens.

There is no single national curriculum and the different ministries responsible for supervision of the ECCE programmes within the early childhood years have each developed their own curricula and guidelines. These are developed in accordance with the principles and guidelines as stated in the National Scheme of Education. These curricula basically provide general principles on suitable approaches and strategies, outline educational goals and objectives, and recommend the scope and coverage of curriculum content. It is also clear that innovation, creativity and diversity are encouraged. These curricula are organized and designed to promote learning experiences that support the physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive development of Thai children.
All public and many private kindergartens implement the Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education for three- to five-year-olds developed by the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare have also developed guidelines for childcare centres. There are some private sector childcare centres who position themselves as school readiness programmes, and they therefore adopt the kindergarten curriculum developed by the MOE which is designed to address school readiness objectives.

Curricula at the pre-primary level are organized into teaching units which are to orient children’s daily activities, and to effectively achieve this the National Education Commission and ONPEC acknowledge the importance of adequate training for teachers, childcare givers and administrators. Implementation of the curriculum varies widely between urban and rural centres, largely as the former tend to have more highly-educated and better-trained staff, greater financial and material resources, and a higher level of active parental involvement and support, as they are often in a better position to contribute time and material resources.

Several policy directives are related to early childhood care and development:

1. to establish a system of learning networks;
2. to provide and promote prenatal care, child-rearing practices and education necessary for child development;
3. to prepare every child for entry to primary school;
4. to reform teacher pre- and in-service education;
5. to improve curriculum content and teaching-learning processes at all levels and in all types of education;
6. to enhance the capability of students and the population in using the Thai language;
7. to promote and support the participation of families, local communities, social institutions and mass media in the educational process.

As stated in the 1992 National Scheme of Education and the Eighth National Education Development Plan
First among the guidelines and measures identified under the Learning Network and Education for All plan is “the expansion of services for pre-school children”. The guidelines call for flexibility in developing curriculum content and teaching practices, and the integration of instructional processes and content choices that are proven to be effective based on research and special studies. The design of curriculum content must “provide basic learning experiences for individual and social development, emphasize the importance of Thai language, and enhance thinking, understanding, creativity and analytical skills of learners.” The guidelines also call for the application of “formal, non-formal and informal modes of learning suitable to learners’ abilities.”

Taken as a whole and within the context of total education reform efforts, these policy directives and guidelines can be interpreted as an explicit acknowledgement and acceptance of the validity and effectiveness of learner-centred processes, culturally and socially relevant content, and active learning approaches, including an emphasis on play and social interaction in early childhood curriculum and programme activities. All these are considered non-negotiable in Early Childhood Care and Education because they are most appropriate for young children given their stages of development, capacities, interests and needs.

It is fortunate that Thailand’s educational policies were grounded in an educational philosophy that emphasized holistic human development to improve quality of life and enable people to contribute meaningfully to national development, and to build a peaceful and harmonious society. The principles, goals, policy directives and guidelines are well-defined and consistent, which work to the advantage of Thai children because they protect them from inappropriate, even harmful, practices that result from misguided interpretations of the school readiness functions of ECCE programmes.

These principles and policies are important shields for four- and five-year-olds, who are now protected from the unnecessary pressures of literally learning by rote skills and concepts they would encounter in traditional primary schools. In many countries, the traditional approaches that have dominated primary education were simply applied to the kindergarten, so four- and five-year-olds were initiated sooner to the chalk-and-talk routines, rote learning drills, worksheets and tests that are the staples of most primary schools. This is a result of defining “school preparation” and “school readiness” only from the point of view of the teacher or the subject and not the learner; and when educational programming is not guided by child development and an awareness of how children learn at different stages.

Fortunately, education reforms in Thailand that started during the period 1997 to 2001 deliberately tried to move away from teacher-dominated, traditional approaches where children are forced to play a passive role. Thailand launched these comprehensive reform efforts and proceeded on the basis of well-informed, experience-based planning and evaluation cycles, expanded multi-disciplinary research and invested in professional development programmes for teachers. Of course, there is much more work that needs to be done so that all – rather than “some” or “many” – of the kindergarten classrooms will be thriving and dynamic learning environments tailor-made for three- to six-year-olds, just like those classrooms in the Samsen and Chiang Mai Kindergarten Schools.
Within the public school system in Thailand, there are demonstration kindergarten schools which are working models of best practices in Early Childhood Care and Education. Some of these were established as magnet schools in the 1970s with the mandate to demonstrate effective practices in ECCE in order to attract more families to the public school system. Thailand’s education officials at that time believed that providing educational programmes of the best possible quality would be an effective strategy for restoring the faith and confidence of parents in the public education system. Most of these kindergartens were gradually expanded into full primary schools offering a complete elementary education programme, but to this day they retain the name “Kindergarten” e.g. Samsen Kindergarten School or Chiang Mai Kindergarten School, as a way of distinguishing themselves from other schools. Then, within the context of educational reform efforts of the 1990s, the magnet schools concept was expanded to address teachers’ professional development needs. They were established as “learning laboratories” to test and promote innovations, and assess the appropriateness of practices learned from other countries and thus contribute to improving the quality of education. Now there is one demonstration kindergarten school in each of the 76 provinces of Thailand. These schools are evidently perceived by the parents as effective public schools based on the extent to which their student populations have increased and the consistently high number of applications each year. This is because they have established a reputation for providing good quality education and have aptly positioned themselves as “schools of choice”.

Furthermore, in addition to providing a service to the communities where they are located, these kindergartens have also lived up to their mandate as resource centres that support the Early Childhood Care and Education programmes of other schools and childcare centres. The teachers in these kindergarten classes are generally well-experienced, highly qualified and competent professionals. Many of them are master teachers, and their work with children and their classrooms are used to maximize the professional development opportunities for teachers, in-service training of childcare workers and pre-service teacher education students from Rajabhat Institutes and other teacher education colleges. They are clearly up-to-date on modern pedagogical issues and classroom management practices that are considered cutting edge and most effective for children aged between three and eight years. Their classrooms are stimulating and child-centred learning environments, and there is much evidence of developmentally appropriate content and processes that clearly involve the children as active learners.

The teachers take a project-based approach, and keep many interesting examples of curriculum webs and charts developed with children at various stages of a task, including photos of children engaged in activities and samples of children’s art work and creations, neatly filed and stored or compiled as books. These provide a quick snapshot of the diverse and interesting topics they have worked on with their students over the years. These are appropriate, interesting and culturally relevant topics for the four- and five-year-olds that they teach. Most of these topics are also among those recommended by the Ministry of Education and are featured in the national curriculum framework and guidelines, while some are generated from the children’s own interests or emerging needs.

One example of such an initiative that developed with the particular needs of a group of children in mind is a project on eyeglasses that involved Mrs Sirikorn Wongtrakul’s K-2 class in Chiang Mai Kindergarten School. The idea for developing the topic of eyeglasses into a learning unit came from her observations about the children’s reactions to a classmate with special needs. Some of them were very curious about his eyeglasses since he happened to be the only one in class wearing them. The teacher felt that in addition to introducing helpful concepts related to their own bodies and opening up many opportunities for exploring their environment, learning about how things are made and about people and their work, a learning unit focused on eyeglasses would serve a very important and meaningful purpose for the children in her class. It would be an effective way of helping them to understand and accept individual differences as well as similarities, and would facilitate building a rapport and strengthening their friendship with this special classmate and with one another, thus helping to promote the attitudes, knowledge and social skills needed to create a truly inclusive classroom.

Aside from in-depth thematic studies, the children are also immersed in a wide range of developmentally appropriate activities in which play is a primary means for learning and development figures prominently. They have time for active play outdoors and indoors as well as creative arts, music and movement activities essential for developing their gross and fine motor skills, for self-expression and socialization. The children move about independently - from the outdoor play areas into the classroom, and from one activity period to clean-up time and on to a meal. Mealtimes are obviously social events as the children move about independently, getting themselves ready by washing their hands, organizing themselves into circles and taking turns to distribute milk for their morning snack. The children have access to puzzles, games which use cards or boards, collections of various objects used in different familiar contexts (home and school), as well as natural items like seeds, stones, and dried plants for sorting, matching and sensory exploration. These are all very useful for developing thinking skills, learning essential logical-mathematical concepts and language development. They have access to all kinds of clothes and props for dramatic play (often related to the current topic of their project) and a wide range of supplies and materials for creating, constructing and experimenting which allows children to maximize arts and crafts for processing their growing knowledge base, for documenting their learning experiences or simply for self-expression and problem-solving. There are many picture books, story books and posters or cards related to curriculum or project themes, such as science and the natural environment, a well as their own families and their local community. All of these are in the Thai language, illustrated with pictures that reflect their own culture.

The science corner has many things of interest for children and invites exploration: jars with different kinds of seeds, herbs or soil and sand, potted plants, and an aquarium with different kinds of fish. Within this physical environment there are many opportunities to talk with or listen to their teachers and their classmates, as well as to sing and listen to stories, all of which helps to make the classroom an enriching
Working for Access, Quality and Inclusion

National policies to further develop Early Childhood Care and Education programmes in Thailand and address these issues were already included in the previous medium-term national development plan for 1997 to 2001.

The Eighth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1997-2001) stipulated key guidelines for the development of pre-school children as follows:

1. encourage greater understanding of the responsibilities of family life and raising children among young people, newly married couples and parents through the co-ordination of relevant social agencies;
2. encourage all forms of readiness preparation for pre-school children, for example in child development centres and workplace nurseries, as well as within the family through co-ordination of the public and private sectors, and local communities;
3. enable all children to have full access to adequate nutrition.

Within the context of the Major Programme I: “Promotion of Basic Education for All” of this National Plan, the following targets were set for ECCE:

1. by 2001, all pre-school children shall be provided with a minimum of a one-year school readiness programme;
2. at least 90 per cent of children aged between three and five years will have access to primary education in the year 2001.

The House Committee, established to consider the National Education Bill, made the following observations in relation to ECCE:

“Early Childhood Care and Education at present, in terms of the under-fives age group, has not been included in basic education. [However, the education] provided during this period in life is most crucial, as it forms the basis for subsequent learning and development. The government should therefore assume a direct or participatory role and provide encouragement and support for...”

Special Places Where Children, Teachers and Parents Play and Learn (cont’d)

environment for the development of early literacy and cognitive skills. There are a few worksheets or activity papers but these evidently do not dominate the curriculum and are used only as a supplement to the more interesting activities. Rather, they are greatly outnumbered by pieces of the children’s art work and crafts often related to the theme or topic of the project. These are displayed on every available inch of wall space or on shelves. The children’s drawings show their awareness of their environment with such careful attention to detail that they provide foreign adult visitors with effective, distinctive and colourful depictions of where they are in Thailand at that time.

Teachers in these demonstration schools belong to a collegial group of peers, as professionals learning together. They are also supported in their curriculum development processes by a curriculum coordinator whose task it is to focus on the details of the curriculum of each class and the educational programme so that teachers have a resource person, a sounding board and someone to brainstorm and plan with. This stimulates a dynamic curriculum development process. The curriculum coordinator works closely with the Assistant School Principal and the School Principal, direct supervisors of the teachers. This investment in professional development is a pre-requisite for developmentally appropriate and high-quality curricula. The returns on these investments are visible: the quality of children’s work that are prominently displayed in the classrooms; the children’s individual portfolios which are also used to assess learning outcomes in a collaborative manner involving the children, parents and teachers; and the teachers’ own curriculum “portfolios” – documentation of curricula that they have implemented in the past as well as those they are currently working on with the children, each put together in their own personal style.

These teachers, fuelled by their own professional and personal development, are catalysts for change in two important ways: 1) they gain the trust and confidence of parents who are satisfied with their children’s school life and who are reassured by their children’s learning outcomes; and 2) they act as mentors and resource personnel for peers from other schools, and they are seen as models to student-teachers they work with or who are observing their classes. They share their own experiences and their knowledge by opening their classrooms to observers, supervising student-teachers and leading workshops with peers. In doing this they make some of the most valuable and lasting contributions to the improvement of the quality of Early Childhood Care and Education programmes in the public school system in Thailand.
individuals, families, community and local administration organizations, private persons, private and professional organizations, religious institutions, enterprises and other social institutions to take part in early childhood development. Such development, of a comparable quality and standard, should be equally provided.”

In recognition of the need for ECCE-focused strategies, the National Institute was given the mandate to prioritize development of the Policy and Plan for Early Childhood (under five age group). The plan also identified all those responsible for early childhood care and development and emphasized the responsibilities of parents and families in “providing the basic foundations of life”, and in turn the responsibility of the government to educate and support families as they fulfil their responsibilities.

In assessing the obstacles to early childhood development, the policy makers and experts in Thailand noted that there were several cultural factors, such as perceived norms and beliefs, which inhibited attitudes towards early childhood education, and many of these perpetuated deeply ingrained misconceptions about the nature of children’s development. These include: the view that children are passive and dependent learners, who need to be subjected to parental control, and should be invisible so as not to distract or disrupt adult activities; substituting material goods for parental attention and love; and the mistaken belief that young children are not yet responsive to learning programmes, hence the absence of efforts to support their learning and development.

These misguided notions concerning the education of young children often lead to infants being deprived of essential physical, psychosocial and verbal interaction with parents and other family members or caregivers, which are among the most critical elements for supporting and stimulating children’s growth and development. The lack of appreciation for the value of childhood and the limited awareness of children’s rights – including their rights to development, special protection and participation – also account for the lack of understanding in some families of the importance of education for young children, and the realisation that they have a responsibility to ensure their children have access to and take advantage of ECCE programmes.
A policy statement made by the Council of Ministers which was delivered to parliament in November 1997 articulates the government’s policy in relation to ECCE and parents: “Educate parents and families on providing the basic foundations of life and preparing children at the pre-primary school level while promoting pre-school education.”

“As far as the present critical situation of young children and their families are concerned, urgent measures are needed for early childhood development. These steps should begin with education for newly-weds, would-be parents and expecting mothers. Such an education is aimed at developing informed parents, committed to the long-term development of their children. Furthermore, it is necessary to establish quality standards for nurseries (for children below the age of three) and childcare centres (for the three- to five-years age group) to ensure the provision of quality services.

Section 13 (1) of the 1999 National Education Act provides state support for parents or guardians to gain knowledge and competencies in bringing up and providing education for their children or those under their care.”(National Education Commission)

Thailand’s national policy thus reaffirms the role of parents as the primary caregivers of young children, but at the same time acknowledges the responsibility of the government to support parents to enable them to fulfill those responsibilities. The Education Law also emphasizes the responsibility of parents for ensuring their children’s access to educational opportunities and reiterates the importance of parental involvement in children’s education. This is an appropriate balance of accountability and responsibility shared by families and the state, in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

**Quality and Access: Early Childhood Care and Education Programmes, Policies and Education Reform Efforts**

Thailand has had a child development plan since 1979, with the formulation of a long-term strategy for childhood and youth education. National policy guidelines have been drawn up based on the fundamental needs of children, and strategies devised for providing the necessary services to meet those needs. However, the government acknowledges that the implementation of these policies remains inadequate and has decided to develop a distinct and focused plan for children under five – the “early childhood” years.

“The services offered, however, are not adequate either in terms of quantity or quality. There is a lack of coordination, nor is there unity in educational policy and orientation. Assessments reveal that the quality of nurseries, childcare centres and kindergartens needs improvement in administration and management as well as childcare methods. Service providers lack the knowledge required, nor do they fully appreciate their roles and responsibilities. There is a lack of criteria for, and control of, acceptable quality and standards.”(National Education Commission)

This critical assessment of the status of early childhood care and development was made in 1999 by the National Education Commission with the concurrence of government ministries, such as the Ministry of Education. It also provides a context for the principles underlying the National Education Law, as it relates to ECCE and subsequent reform efforts in line with the policies outlined by the new law.

Thailand’s National Education Law of 1999 provided a national policy framework for educational reform, from which to move towards more effective ECCE programmes that promote a holistic approach to early childhood care and development. The Education Law put emphasis on “reforming the learning process and structure of education by increasing alternatives for educational management and curriculum development, including the provision of quality assurance and opportunities for children to have access to free education for at least 12 years.” It goes on:
“Paragraph 2.1 of the resolution of the Council of Ministers on the policy on 12-year basic education, adopted on 16 March 1999, reflects the government’s appreciation of the importance of early childhood development (0-5 age group). It recognizes that this is a crucial period for brain development. Education provided at this level should therefore aim at children’s development. It recognizes particularly that family institutions should also be encouraged to provide education at this level. The operation plan for implementation of the policy and measures for 12-year basic education should therefore include early childhood development (0-5 age group).”

The new education policy calls for decentralization of the management and implementation process of educational programmes, which are blamed for the lack of coordination among the different ministries, which in turn is the reason for the absence of an integrated and coherent plan for education and the corresponding budgets for implementing such a plan. Fragmented, sectoral approaches have often resulted in unnecessary overlaps among agencies, which can place extra burden on already stretched resources.

At the same time, some important aspects of educational programmes were frequently neglected or overlooked, mainly because there was very limited information exchange, and coordination was kept to a minimum both for inter-governmental agencies and in multi-sectoral, public-private contexts.

Decentralization is also seen as being critical to encouraging more active community participation in the decision-making process about educational policies and programmes. One of the major issues cited as a priority targeted by the educational reforms is a lack of relevance and responsiveness of programmes to the diverse needs of local communities. Decentralization is expected to allow more flexibility and encourage co-ordinated, systematic and cost-effective planning and implementation at the levels of government which are closer to schools and local groups.

Meanwhile, the national policy defines and promotes specific quality standards. The government’s own assessment of the quality of education highlighted the fact that:

“Students have low achievement rates due to a teacher-focused process of teaching and learning. Children are not allowed to express themselves and pursue independent studies. Lessons focus on theory and rote learning rather than practice. Other problems include teacher inefficiency and the inadequacy of some teachers in some subjects. Assessment focuses on the ability to memorize rather than on practical skills or critical and creative thinking.”

Thus, the new emphasis on quality assurance and standards was a direct response to the other major issue: the low quality of educational programmes. These reforms include quality standards for various other ECCE services such as nurseries, which are childcare centres that are also designed to serve as school readiness programmes for young children. This raises the bar of expectations for teachers and school administrators who must work with their students in a way that complies with these quality standards.

Thailand’s national policy since the passage of the National Education Law has explicitly promoted child-centred, play- and experience-based approaches to caring for and teaching three- to five-year-olds. There has been a deliberate effort to move away from inappropriately structured, barren classrooms, poorly disguised as school readiness programmes. This is now evident in the practices of teachers and caregivers in most childcare centres and kindergartens throughout the country. The impact of the Learning Laboratories for Early Childhood Care and Education that were established all over the country to try out innovative approaches to ECCE can now be seen.

The third major problem identified in the education assessments that paved the way for policy reforms was the prevailing inequalities within the education system. It was noted that economically disadvantaged groups within Thailand, including people with disabilities and those living in remote areas, do not receive the same education opportunities as the rest of society.
Although there has been significant progress and an increase in the educational opportunities for all Thais, there are still considerable disparities in access to and quality of educational programmes. Those who live in less-developed provinces, as well as poorer families in both urban and rural areas, still have limited access when compared to middle-income and affluent families in urban centres. These inequities also exist among schools – schools in remote rural areas are less well-equipped and have less-qualified teachers than their counterparts in urban areas.

The government’s response to this has been to concentrate the efforts of concerned ministries and local government authorities to establish more pre-school classes and childcare centres in rural areas and to ensure that public funds are used mainly for these initiatives to bridge the gap between the rich and poor children of Thailand in terms of their access to ECCE programmes.

This work continues in order to ensure that education reforms designed to improve the quality of ECCE programmes take root and transform each village childcare centre, home-based programme and kindergarten or pre-school class into the best possible learning environment for young Thai children. However, there is one urgent and compelling challenge that the leaders of Thailand’s ECCE community must face: that of ensuring no young child will be excluded and the opportunities now enjoyed by millions of young children will also extend to those who are at greatest risk and stand to benefit the most from ECCE programmes.

In particular, those still most in need of help include: disabled children and those with developmental needs; the children of indigenous hill tribes in the northern, north-eastern and central provinces, and the children of Muslim communities in the south; the children whose lives are affected, in various ways, by HIV/AIDS; the children of poor urban families living in the slums of Bangkok; and the children of refugees in search of a safe haven living along the borders of Thailand and its neighbours. Three to five per cent of the population of three- to five-year-olds may seem like a small number, but that figure represents real children, each of whom is an infant or young child, a human being – with a face, a body, a mind and a heart – waiting for his or her own chance to enjoy their right to education.

The following powerful and pertinent statement was made by a respected Thai professional and public figure, in 2000:

“…We have to help children from birth, to use their senses to the fullest, to be able to think and to express their feelings. They must not be forced to sit and listen all the time, and answer the teacher’s question – not being able to think critically, creatively and independently. How are we then going to get quality citizens? This is why we must reform our education, our children’s learning process, and especially the way parents, childcare givers and teachers view the child. The child should be seen as a dynamic self, which should be encouraged to develop to her/his fullest potential. We are already 40 years late…” (Dr Saisuree Chutikul, Member of the UN Committee on Child Rights and former adviser to the Prime Minister.)

There is every reason to believe and expect that this generation of young Thai children, as well as those born after them, will surely benefit from the policies, programmes and actions that are being formulated and implemented, in response to Dr Saisuree’s timely critique-cum-reprimand and urgent appeal.
I. Caring for and Educating Young Filipino Children Today

Filipino Families as Caregivers: Coping with or Escaping the Poverty Trap

The majority of Filipinos entered the new millennium with the usual celebrations, marked by external displays of optimism and animation, but with much hidden anxiety. Filipinos are currently experiencing a particularly challenging period, marked by an apparent conflict between the quality of life they are led to believe they can attain and the day-to-day work available to them. Skyscrapers and luxury high-rise condominiums, large shopping malls, cutting-edge technology, luxury cars, high-end fashion and leisure activities: none of these can disguise the fact that the country is in a very difficult economic situation, which ADB economist E. Pernia calls a “low-level equilibrium trap”, or simply the “poverty trap” to the layperson. One in three Filipinos is poor and lives on US$1 a day or less. This is said to be the highest poverty rate in South-East Asia.

The economy is growing at only 4.5 percent (in terms of gross domestic product), and unemployment is high at 11 percent, as is population growth, at 2.3 percent per annum. The Philippine population is now estimated at 82 million. Most are young people, with more than 50 per cent below 22 years old, and 37.5 per cent below 15 (NCSO, 2000). Every year, 1.8 million Filipinos are born, increasing the burden on families and a public social service delivery system that should assist families as caregivers and educators. In 30 years, it is projected that there will be 164 million Filipinos. Some experts predict that after the birth of two more generations, by 2010, a decline in the population growth will be achieved. Thus, they expect that by 2050, the under-15s population will drop to 20 per cent of the total.

Experts at the Population Institute at the University of the Philippines, however, are doubtful that this will be achieved by then. Their realistic forecast is that a decline will not be attained earlier than 2030, given the lack of political will, continuing interference of the Catholic Church resulting in limited choices in contraceptive methods, insufficient information and a lack of quality reproductive health services available (M. Concepcion, 2003).

Filipino families are the primary caregivers and teachers of more than five million young Filipino children under the age of six. In addition to parents, “family” also refers to older siblings, grandparents, uncles and aunts. In both urban and rural communities, the extended family is very much a

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14 Poverty incidence is at 34-40 per cent based on various credible estimates.
15 Based on World Bank standards.
16 The Philippines is just behind Mexico at number 12 on the list of most populous nations on earth.
part of the Filipino child’s early life; the self-contained nuclear family is very rare in the Philippines. Even among rural-urban migrants there is always an effort to recreate the extended family network among new neighbours. Filipinos always seek a “community” to which their family can belong. Traditionally, extended family or clan members are part of this community. In changing times, neighbours, province-mates who also moved to the cities or new friends readily take the place of kin in their “new communities”. They eventually become part of the childcare support network on whom families with young children can rely.

Filipino child-rearing practices are based on a unique blend of pre-colonial, indigenous cultures and Chinese, Spanish and North American influences. Distinctive patterns may be observed, with similarities or shared practices among individuals belonging to a certain ethnic, cultural, religious or socio-economic group, or those with similar levels of education.

At the same time, there are some deeply-held beliefs on popular child-rearing practices that are shared across diverse ethnic or cultural communities. In general, families are more nurturing and very protective of young children. School-aged children (which, until the early 1990s, meant age seven and up) or children in the middle years of childhood are expected to be more independent, not just in relation to their school life but also in assuming more household chores and other responsibilities within the family.

Most Filipino families prefer to find ways for children to be cared for in their own homes, or at least in the neighbourhood. Aside from basic considerations, such as the inconvenience of travelling with young children without easy access to transport, many believe that better care can be provided in their own homes with family members or hired help. This is often assumed regardless of the characteristics of caregivers, or the physical conditions and resources in the household or neighbourhood.

Most middle- and upper-income families can afford to hire full-time, live-in nannies, sometimes even nurses and midwives. Poor families may also have a relative living with them who takes on childcare and housekeeping tasks. Even when women leave home for extended periods to work in urban centres or overseas, they can usually rely on other family members to be their children’s surrogate parents. Although this practice is prevalent, it does not necessarily mean that the optimum quality of care is assured.

Ultimately, whether it is the mother or father or grandparent who assumes the role of primary caregiver, it is the person’s knowledge, attitudes and personality, his or her practices as caregiver that determine the quality of care that a young child is provided. Those beliefs and practices are shaped by personal life experiences especially from their own childhood and family life; their understanding of how children develop and what would best support their optimum development; their aspirations for their children and the kind of people they hope they will become in the future; social and cultural influences; and emerging lifestyles and the needs that these entail. The information that these primary caregivers acquire in relation to children and how they grow, develop and learn is usually interpreted through these social and cultural lenses.

This preference for home or neighbourhood care for infants aged three years and below in part explains why there is very little demand for group- and centre-based care for infants and toddlers. It is when they are aged three-and-a-half to six years old that parents enrol them in centre-based ECCD programmes, such as day-care centres, public or private kindergartens or pre-primary classes.

Another reason for low participation rates in centre-based programmes among under-threes relates to the prevailing perceptions and understanding of the primary purpose of early childhood programmes. Kindergartens, nursery schools and “prep” (preparatory) classes in elementary schools became popular among middle- and upper-class families in the 1950s. At the outset, these were positioned as
“school preparation” programmes. From colonial times, Filipinos attributed a high premium to completing formal, higher education degrees, so their children’s admission to “good schools” was a major parental concern. Entering a good elementary school would ensure acceptance into a good high school, in turn a pre-requisite to admission into reputable tertiary institutions.

Thus, admission to the first grade of primary school was viewed as the initial step towards achieving widely-desired and deeply-valued goals. Pre-school education was positioned to provide children with a head start, and thus give parents a sense of security that their children would successfully clear the first hurdle in their school life. This remains a prevalent perception, despite spiralling tuition costs as well as the increasing dissatisfaction with the quality of education in the Philippines.

Given this positioning of Early Childhood Care and Education programmes as preparation for formal school, the two years immediately preceding entry to elementary school have been seen as the crucial period (ages four and five). Pursuing this line of reasoning, most parents deemed it premature for children aged three and below to participate in these kinds of “school-preparation” programmes. On the other hand, those who are aware of the importance of pre-school education work hard to be able to afford the costs of ECCD classes for their four-to-six-year-olds.

II.Supporting Families through ECCD Services

II.1 Day-care Centres and Community-based ECCD Programmes

Patterns of Operation

Most barangay (village) day-care centres function as three-hour or half-day activity-and-playgroups for three- to five-year-olds, five days a week. A day-care centre functioning at full capacity usually serves two different groups of children in two shifts: one in the morning and another in the afternoon. A few centres provide childcare services for those children whose parents seek them.

Due to the passage of a law designed to strengthen child protection efforts soon after the Philippine Senate ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, there is now a public day-care centre in virtually every village of the country. Since the decentralization of basic health and social services in 1990, the local government unit is directly responsible for the management and operation of these centres.

In the late 1990s, a national policy was introduced to promote the establishment of day-care centres in the workplace. As a result, there are an increasing number of government offices, as well as private corporations, which provide full-day childcare programmes that match parents’ working hours, that is, from 8 a.m. or 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. or 5 p.m. Some of these are linked to the local government units of cities which are also the employers of public civil servants such as the police.

17 Also referred to as childcare centres, creches and nurseries, but for the purposes of this paper, day-care centres will be used as it is the term most used in the Philippines.
18 Republic Act 6972, the “Barangay-Level Total Protection of Children Act”, has a provision that requires all local government units to establish a day-care centre in every village. In effect, the law institutionalized the features of the day-care programme that provide for young children’s learning needs aside from their health and psychosocial needs. However, an earlier law first established day care as a national programme.
19 There are 41,924 barangays (villages) in the country. As of 2000, there were 32,787 day-care centres; a few villages may have more than one. In 1998, 26.7 per cent of the villages did not have access to any such programmes (Department of Social Welfare and Development).
Some city governments support day-care centres for children of police women since the police force is under their direct supervision. There are NGOs like Arugaan, Save the Children (USA), Parents Alternative and Community of Learners who assisted these agencies or corporations in establishing their centres.

Day-care centres that are operated by the private sector or non-profit organizations may also provide half-day or full-day sessions. Some of them are more flexible, and may remain open through to early evening to accommodate the working day of some of the parents. There are even ECCD centres which provide night-time childcare services for children whose parents work unsociable hours, and a few NGO-run community-based ECCD programmes also provide emergency care and drop-in childcare and infant programmes for parents who work on a daily or contractual basis as temporary workers.

**Services Provided**

The public day-care system is the largest provider of early childhood care and education services for three- to five-year-olds. Table 2.1 shows the coverage of the day-care centres vis-à-vis kindergartens and private sector programmes. Most of the day-care centres operate half-day sessions comprised of supervised play and group activities (arts and crafts, music and movement, storytelling), childcare for personal hygiene, supplemental feeding, health and nutrition education, learning experiences for early literacy and mathematics, and socialization experiences to support social and emotional development. Growth monitoring and assessment of children’s developmental status using a Child Development Checklist are also included. Most public day-care centres provide only one meal, generally a snack, each day. The ones that function also as child-minding centres serve lunch and possibly a second (morning or afternoon) snack.
Early Childhood Care and Education in the Philippines

All day-care workers in the public system are guided by a national programme developed by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) in collaboration with multidisciplinary partners in academe, civil society and international agencies like UNICEF. In the best situations, day-care centres provide children with developmentally-appropriate experiences that respond to their needs and capacities in a holistic manner.

However, in places where the day-care worker is not adequately trained and supervised, the children are either subjected to inappropriately structured school preparation programmes or passive, uninteresting adult-directed activities. In these cases, resources are also usually severely limited, resulting in the lack of appropriate play materials, equipment and physical facilities.

In terms of public ECCD services, the village health centres are the main service delivery points for decentralized maternal and child health services that complement the group experiences in day-care centres. These include immunization and a programme for the integrated management of childhood illness, both designed to improve prevention and treatment of common childhood diseases.

In addition, the Department of Health at the outset included the organization of classes for mothers on basic health and nutrition, implemented by community health volunteers and village nutrition workers. In some cases, these community health workers jointly implement health and nutrition activities like growth monitoring and supplemental feeding with the day-care workers.

Some ECCD programmes affiliated with religious groups also provide religious instruction and initiate young children into the rituals or activities of their own religious community. Many of these pre-school programmes are also school preparation programmes and serve as the entry point to the private elementary and secondary schools also operated by religious groups.

Another less widespread but very promising form of ECCD provision is the “supervised neighbourhood playgroup” which has long been promoted by the DSWD as a component of the Parent Effectiveness Service (PES), its national parent education programme. The PES is designed around parent discussion groups that meet on a regular basis. In anticipation of the children’s presence during these sessions, the DSWD included the supervised neighbourhood playgroups as a way of building on informal children’s peer groups to develop stimulating settings for socialization and early learning. This is made possible by the recruitment of a trained adult facilitator, usually a parent volunteer, who undergoes training to be able to work with neighbourhood children.

These playgroups may convene in a designated home in the village from one to five times a week. In the pilot project areas of the DWS during the early 1990s, these were successfully activated alongside the parent groups. A mass media component was added as a supplement and two series of radio programme episodes were broadcast. Expansion at a national level has been difficult to accomplish mainly because there was little attention paid to actively promoting the programme, providing sufficient resources and guiding already overburdened social workers at the local government units to implement the PES.

However, a renewal of interest may very well result from the encouraging success demonstrated by recent ECCD pilot projects such as the Kinder Plus Project, linked to the new ECCD law which involved establishing these playgroups in more than 114 rural barangays (villages) in Central Luzon. These programme experiences, combined with those of various NGOs, indicate that in the Philippines, the playgroup or home-based ECCD programme may very well offer a truly viable, affordable and effective approach to ECCD provision for the under-threes as well as three- to five-year-olds in remote rural villages who are unable to participate in centre-based ECCD classes.

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The National Programme for the Day Care Service is documented and explained through: the following publications of the Department of Social Welfare and Development: The Day Care Manual, Weekly Plan and Activity Guide, A Resource Book on ECCD; expanded teaching-learning units on additional themes; principles of child development; the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; working with children with special needs and facilitating parent participation and involvement in ECCD.
Table 2.1 Children’s Participation in Various ECCD Programmes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of ECCE Programme</th>
<th>No. of Schools/ Centres/Classes</th>
<th>Enrolment</th>
<th>Age Group Served</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day-care Centres</td>
<td>32,787</td>
<td>1,526,023</td>
<td>3-5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGOs/Community-based Pre-schools</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>3-5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DepEd Public Pre-schools</td>
<td>7,477</td>
<td>349,653</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Pre-schools</td>
<td>5,064</td>
<td>297,880</td>
<td>3-5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECCE for Grade I</td>
<td>All Grade 1 classes</td>
<td>2,472,009</td>
<td>6-7 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Coverage and Access, Group Size and Adult-Child Ratios**

There are more day-care centres and community-based ECCD programmes in urban areas than in rural areas. Although there are a few public day-care centres and NGO-run or church-affiliated community-based ECCD programmes in remote rural villages, including those populated by indigenous cultural groups, they are few in comparison to the number of centre-based programmes in urban areas, and are certainly inadequate bearing in mind the size of the rural young child population.

At the same time, the existing day-care centres are insufficient for the large number of children below six years who live in densely-populated and severely congested urban areas, particularly the slum communities in Metro Manila and other major cities. In these areas, the minimum of one day-care centre for each barangay (village) as required by the law is clearly inadequate to serve all three- to five-year-olds in their respective villages.

In general, day-care centres in urban areas have larger groups, with 35 to even 60 children at a time (morning or afternoon shift) with a total of between 70 and 120 children served by one day-care centre each year. With typically one day-care worker responsible for each group, this results in average adult-child ratios of between 1 to 30 and 3521, and reaches a high of 1 to 50 at the more overcrowded centres. However, in many day-care centres with very large group sizes, two members of staff usually share responsibility for one group. This brings the ratios closer to the levels in the Department of Social Welfare and Development’s guidelines, which recommends one day-care worker for every group of 25 three- to five-year-olds.

There are also some day-care staff who are able to mobilize parent participation, so they can count on volunteers who assist with cooking and serving snacks, cleaning and maintenance or repairs. Others who have more training and experience involve parents in facilitating children’s activities, assisting with childcare or preparing indigenous playthings and learning materials. In cases such as these, the adult-child ratios are actually at optimum levels.

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21 An average ratio of 1:35 based on data from 39 cities and municipalities is provided in the Country Case Study on ECCD Indicators in the Philippines for the EFA 2000 Assessment that was undertaken by a Philippine Team in collaboration with the Consultative Group on ECCD.
In rural villages, group sizes are smaller. Enrollment rates are generally lower for various reasons, such as lack of awareness and appreciation for these programmes and the inaccessibility of centres that requires long-distance travel for young children whose families rarely have access to affordable means of transport. In rural villages it can be difficult to find a strategic location for a day-care centre in relation to the homes of the targeted families because they are typically dispersed in small clusters of three to four homes at a time.

Data from the Kinder Plus Project, which focused on ECCD programmes in rural communities, showed average group sizes of between 10 and 20 children for day-care centres in participating rural towns. Fifty-nine per cent of the centres had between 10 and 20 children in each group, 26 per cent catered to between 20 and 30 children at a time, and only 9 per cent had group sizes of thirty or more.

**Staffing Patterns and Service Provider Characteristics**

The primary service provider in the public day-care system is the day-care worker, most of whom are recruited from within the local community, since one of the requirements is that they live near the centre. The following qualifications for day-care staff are prescribed by the Department of Social Welfare and Development:

- Female; between 18 and 45 years of age; high school graduate; physically healthy – if she has any disabilities, these should not pre-empt performance of tasks as a day-care worker; must be of good moral character; preferably with prior work experience with pre-school children; willing to undergo training and accept technical supervision from the DSWD; must render full-time service for a minimum of two years.

There is no national level data available on the number of day-care workers who comply with these qualifications. However, one can form a fairly accurate profile from a representative sample derived from current data generated within special ECCD projects and surveys involving provinces and municipalities. Based on these data, the emerging profile of day-care workers shows that most are aged between 20 and 40 years old: 44 per cent are aged between 30 and 40, and 38 per cent are between 20 and 30 years of age. A few (8 per cent) are aged 40 to 50 years.

Most of them exceed the minimum qualifications for educational attainment. Some 62.5 per cent of day-care workers are “undergraduates”, which in this case means that in addition to a high school diploma, they also attended one to three years of college, but did not complete their course of study. About 16 per cent have college degrees while 21.5 per cent are only high school graduates.

Most of them had no work experience of any kind, 30 per cent had some form of previous work experience when they were hired but not related to children, while very few (8 per cent) had some experience of working with children. Fewer than 30 per cent had participated in some form of in-service training, which means that most day-care workers learned to work with children on the job, yet they received very little pre- or in-service training or technical supervision.

They are a committed group of public civil servants and by the time of the survey had considerable experience working with young children: 26 per cent had been working with children for six to 10 years and 19.7 per cent for two to three years, 13 per cent for more than 10 years and nine per cent for only one year. However, very limited supervision and in-service training has limited their continuing development as ECCD workers.

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23 1) Data from ECCE Databank of the “Kinder Plus” pilot project implemented in three provinces of Central Luzon, Department of Education and Community of Learners Foundation; 2) Data from the Survey conducted among 39 cities and municipalities in a national search for “Child-Friendly Cities and Municipalities” by the Council for the Welfare of Children.
In NGO-run community-based ECCD programmes, the primary caregiver is often called a child development worker or teacher. Qualifications are generally the same as those of day-care workers in government centres. There are NGOs, however, who recruit women from the local village who may not have the necessary academic background and may have completed only elementary school or a year or two of high school.

These ECCD programmes are generally in remote rural villages including those for the children of tribal communities where there are few adults who completed their full secondary education. Yet they are the only well-positioned candidates for sustainable ECCD programmes in these remote communities. Therefore, intensive capacity-building, supervision and support are provided to enable these women (teenagers, mothers or grandmothers) and in a few instances, young men, to assume the role of the day-care worker or teacher in their own communities’ ECCD programmes.

While these may not be government-accredited centres, some ECCD workers, such as those in community-based programmes implemented by NGOs like Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), COLF, Kaugmaon, Pag-Amona, or others enrolled in day-care workers’ training courses, are able to provide very good, high-quality care as well as apply developmentally-appropriate and effective teaching practices.

**Sponsoring Organizations and Financing**

As mentioned elsewhere, both the government and the private sector are responsible for establishing and operating day-care centres and other community-based ECCD programmes. In the case of the public day-care system, direct implementation or service delivery and programme management is the responsibility of the municipal or city government and the barangay leaders (the local village council). They share the investment costs, such as construction and furnishing the buildings or physical facilities, as well as the operational costs, which include the day-care workers’ salaries, supplies and utilities.

Parents’ monthly contributions are also expected but the official policy is that a family’s inability to pay for this should not prevent a child from attending the day-care programme. However, as Tables 2.2 and 2.3 show, there are costs that the family must shoulder. This may seem rather low, assuming there is only one child per family. However, typically there are four to six children in one family, and two might be in the elementary grades, with two more aged between two and five, so the total costs of all children attending school and day-care can be overwhelming for a minimum-wage earner and well beyond the reach of those who can only find an income on a seasonal basis.

Table 2.2 shows the costs of the day-care programme from the perspective of a Local Government Unit (LGU) for a 20-day month, 10 months a year (all figures are Philippine Pesos).

| Table 2.2 Typical Expenditure Items for One Day-care Centre in a Barangay (Filipino pesos) |
|---------------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Costs                          | Monthly   | Annual    |
| Honorarium of DCW              | 3,000     | 36,000    |
| Repair and Maintenance         | 2,000     | 20,000    |
| Supplies and Materials         | 1,000     | 10,000    |
| Feeding/snacks (5/Child/20 days)| 6,000     | 60,000    |
| X 60 children (average no. of children at centre) | 12,000 | 126,000 |
| Total Cost per Child           | 200       | 2,000     |
The above costs are shared by the municipal or city government and the barangay or village council. In many instances, food funds are not regularly provided by the local authorities, and so centres rely heavily on parental contributions and donations from private individuals, politicians and business corporations. However, children are only in the centre for half a day (two- to three-hour sessions), so this is just a snack and they generally eat their main meals (breakfast, lunch) at home.

Early on, the day-care programme was closely associated with feeding and this was considered the primary attraction, and the funds came from special projects of national agencies and politicians. For a time, some food supplies were sourced from the foreign aid package of the United States, but this was phased out by the mid 1990s. Sustainability of the feeding component remains a problem, because beyond the mobilization of resources through special projects, soliciting contributions from private donors and channelling some foreign aid, there is no systematic and clear direction in policy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Costs paid by family</th>
<th>Monthly</th>
<th>Annual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Registration Fee</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation Fee</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Allowance (10/child/day)</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing (uniforms)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total*</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>2,850</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* At an average of PhP200 daily wage or an annual income of PhP48,000, the amount per child represents roughly 6 per cent of the annual family income.

There are many more public day-care centres than private sector-run programmes, even taking into account unreported private and NGO-run ECCD centres. The government is still the largest service provider for ECCD for three- to five-year-olds. Thus, there is a great need to invest as much as possible in improving and strengthening the day-care system. For now, it offers the greatest potential as the most accessible early childhood care and development programme for the children of poor families, for children with disabilities who come from these poor families, and for children who live in remote, isolated rural villages.

**Licensing, Supervision and Standards**

At the national level, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) is the agency responsible for overall policy and programme development, setting and promoting guidelines and standards, providing technical assistance to the local government units through the regional field offices, monitoring and evaluation. With the passage of the ECCD Act in 2000, the day-care programme, as well as home-based ECCD programmes for the under-six age group, while still a responsibility of the DSWD, will now be accredited by the ECCD Coordinating Councils at the Provincial Level. The DSWD is usually considered a leading member of this inter-agency committee but the Head of the School Division and the Head of the Provincial Health Office are also members. The difference is that standards and mechanisms for accreditation will be those that are developed in collaboration with other agencies. It will surely build on the previous set of standards already being used by the DSWD but it should now reflect the multidisciplinary nature of ECCD.
II.2 Pre-schools, Kindergartens and Nursery Classes

Patterns of Operation

There are various pre-school programmes in both public and private schools: 1) the kindergarten classes (also called pre-elementary classes) for five-year-olds within public elementary schools which were established through external resources generated by the Parent-Teacher Community Association; 2) the nursery, kindergarten or preparatory classes within the larger private elementary schools which serve three-, four- and five-year olds; 3) private pre-schools offering three- and four-hour classes for children below six years; and 4) NGO-run centre-based community ECCD programmes for five- and six-year-olds. Most pre-school programmes run Monday to Friday, and those with large enrolments generally operate two or three shifts of three-to four-hour sessions per age group. There are no full-day kindergarten or nursery classes.

Services Provided

Most pre-schools are designed as school preparation programmes and are usually organized as single-age groups. Although the programme models, guiding philosophies, approaches and methods differ, all ECCD programmes in the Philippines are designed to support children’s successful transition from community- and centre-based settings to schools. Teaching young children is the primary service, although there is also an element of nutrition, e.g. growth monitoring, nutritional education and feeding, usually one meal a day (either a snack or lunch). In most cases, children bring food from home and they are assisted or supervised by the teacher and support staff (in private settings) or volunteers (in non-profit community-based programmes).

Public schools with school physicians and nurses on staff may provide some primary health care services, but this is a rare situation given the shortage of nurses in relation to the typically large student population in most public schools. Most of the children who attend kindergarten in public schools can avail themselves of public health services through their village health centres or private practitioners.

Private pre-schools or ECCD centres with a certain number of children enrolled are required to include nurses on their staff. However, based on a survey of 271 private and NGO-run ECCD programmes, few private schools with student populations ranging from 80 to 250 children aged between two and six years actually have nurses among their staff, and most indicate the minimum number of staff for non-teaching tasks and administration. The families of individual children tend to rely on private health professionals for prevention and treatment of illness. As is the case with participation in pre-school, the costs of access to health care are borne entirely by the families.

Group Size

Pre-school classes vary in size and in the number of adults responsible for the children. Generally, in both public and private schools there will only be one teacher working with a class of four- to five-year-olds. Class sizes for this age group range from 20 to 40 children per group. These large kindergarten and preparatory classes are usually in urban public schools and large private schools. Some schools provide two teachers or one teacher and a teacher assistant for groups bigger than 20. Group sizes are smaller for three- to four-year-olds, ranging from 15 to 25, with adult ratios of one teacher to seven or eight children. At least two adults are usually responsible for classes of younger children between the ages of two and three-and-a-half.
Early Childhood Care and Education in the Philippines

Participation and Access to Kindergarten

There was an increasing trend in annual pre-school participation over the EFA decade (1990 to 2000), from a total of 397,364 children enrolled in 1990 to 555,502 in 1997; since 2000, a further significant leap has been made, based on the latest report from the Department of Education (DepEd), which indicates that 922,354 children were enrolled for the school year 2002-03.

Aside from private schools or community-based NGO programmes, the children were served through 1,428 pre-school classes in the public school system. There were 914 private sector-run pre-schools who were involved in the Department of Education’s Pre-school Service Contracting Scheme. This is similar to a voucher system wherein children who do not have easy access to a public school kindergarten class may be enrolled in private schools and then reimbursed by the DepEd, through a special fund allocation.

In 1983, the DepEd launched a programme to establish more pre-school classes throughout the public school system. They started with 20 school divisions which were also priority areas for implementing social development programmes under the poverty alleviation strategy of the national government at that time. These were supported through the various legislators’ Countrywide Development Fund, which is a discretionary funding window that targeted the government agencies responsible for basic education and social services to mobilize increased public resources for various projects, including ECCD. These school divisions were in the most disadvantaged provinces, and basic education was a key component of the development programmes in these areas, where ECCD was seen as critical to achieving the goal of increased school retention and completion. The aim of these classes, therefore, was to support children’s overall development and school readiness before their entry into Grade One. Over the 10 years since then, the programme has been implemented throughout the country with a total of 714 permanent teachers hired to handle the 1,428 classes. In 2001-02, 57,120 children were enrolled in these additional kindergarten courses.

Sponsoring Organizations

Various organizations from the private sector have established Early Childhood Care and Education centres or schools as well as pre-school classes within larger elementary and secondary schools. Although all of these organizations clearly desire to provide a service to children and families and rely on tuition and other fees paid by parents, a distinction has to be made between various private schools or ECCD centres: 1) the entrepreneurial kind, also designed to be a commercially profitable enterprise and registered as a proprietorship or listed publicly, including some which are affiliated with religious groups; 2) the religious organizations registered as non-profit and engaged in philanthropic work; 3) NGOs, civic groups and grassroots peoples’ organizations registered as associations or as non-stock, non-profit foundations. The latter two kinds are usually focused on providing a service for children and families from less affluent families, including those who live in urban slums or remote rural villages.

Although there have long been kindergarten classes in public schools, these were not funded on a large scale by the DepEd from its annual budget. Schools had to raise their own funds and the Parent-Teacher Associations usually took the lead in this. The funds raised were actually contributions from parents. Since national law provides for tuition-free public education, the official policy of the DepEd was that fees could not be made compulsory but must be voluntary donations. Teachers were thus paid out of these additional funds, and were not hired on a permanent basis. It was only in 1983 that the DepEd began to hire teachers and fund the running of pre-school classes, using special fund allocations in the first year and then gradually integrating these within their annual budget.

24 Pre-school enrolment as it is used here also includes nursery, kindergarten and preparatory classes.


**Licensing, Supervision and Standards**

Pre-schools are required to seek a permit to operate and register with the Department of Education. DECS Order No. 107s, 1989, “Standards for the Operation of Pre-schools (Kindergarten level)”, provides guidelines for the establishment of private pre-schools. The DepEd requires the preparation of a feasibility study by prospective school administrators as an initial step in applying for a permit to operate a pre-school programme.

In addition, the proponent must prepare additional documents that provide programme and curriculum details, age groups and classes to be organized, staffing patterns and qualifications, the space to be used and facilities provided. The Department of Education Schools Division’s city or provincial officials inspect the site as well as assess the submissions and recommend their approval or disapproval to the regional office. The DepEd regional office grants the school a temporary permit that is valid for one year. After three to five years of renewing this permit with annual inspections conducted by the DepEd, a school can apply for government recognition and submit the additional requirements in order to qualify.

In the past, the Department of Education always worked with academe and educators from the private sector to define standards for ECCD and establish a peer monitoring system. In the 1990s, the DepEd and these partners organized the Council for Early Childhood Care and Education in the Philippines (CONCEP), which functioned as an advisory committee. There are also professional ECCD associations that are local chapters and affiliates of international ECCD associations, such as Association for Early Childhood Education International (ACEI) and Organisation Mondial Prescolaire (OMEP). None of these councils and organizations are accrediting organizations. They serve the professional development needs of early childhood educators and the members are mostly teachers and administrators from private schools and those from the academic institutions involved in teacher education.

With the passage of the Early Childhood Care and Development Act in 2000, the DepEd is now working on refining the programme frameworks and standards in collaboration with other member agencies of the Council for the Welfare of Children (CWC). Under the ECCD Act, the CWC has been given the additional mandate to function as the National Coordinating Council for ECCD. These frameworks and standards will be applied to the curriculum, teacher and caregiver qualifications, physical environment, and services.

**Staffing and Characteristics of Service Providers**

There is generally one teacher working with each group of children in one classroom. Some schools or centres assign two adults to work with one group as “team teachers” There are some schools, meanwhile, which provide for as many teacher assistants as needed, especially for three- and four-year-olds, and often for the five- and six-years age group. The teacher assistants are not necessarily college graduates but will have completed high school and between one and three years of college. They usually receive in-service training and are closely supervised by the teacher and/or school administrator.

The Department of Education prescribes the following qualifications and profile for teachers in pre-schools: 1) a Bachelor of Science degree with specialization in Early Childhood or Kindergarten Education, Family Life and Child Development or Elementary Education with at least 18 units in ECCD; an allied non-education college degree with at least 18 units of ECCD; 2) male or female, between the ages of 21-35; 3) training, experience and interest in working with young children and 4) certified physically and emotionally fit.

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25 As stated in Department of Education Order No. 107s, 1989.
II.3. Family Life and Parent Education

The Department of Social Welfare and Development initiated the Parent Effectiveness Service (PES) as a national parent education programme. Although the PES is designed for all parents, it has been implemented mainly in selected rural villages or low-income urban communities, since the local social welfare office is responsible for the programme and they consider these their priority areas.

Within the national ECCD laws and GOP-UNICEF Country Programme of Cooperation for Children, the PES is also closely associated with the “home-based ECCD programme” and the supervised neighbourhood playgroups which are among the programming options encouraged by the DSWD. These provide early childhood education services for children aged two to three who are not enrolled in day care or even four-year-olds who live in areas too far removed from their nearest village day-care centre.

Innovative strategies to reach more parents through various forms of media have been pilot-tested over the last two decades, many with support from UNICEF. Two examples, described below, involved the use of radio, which has broad national reach in the Philippines and entails relatively lower production and dissemination costs. In both cases, these efforts involved a partnership between the Department of Social Welfare and Development (at the national and local level), UNICEF, the Philippine Children’s Television Foundation (PCTVF), and national and local broadcast or community radio networks.

From 1994 to 1996, the PES-on-the-Air project was initiated by the former Bureau of Family Welfare, and a radio programme entitled Pamilyang Pinoy sa Himpapawid (the Filipino Family on the Airwaves) was produced and broadcast. Twenty-six episodes were aired using a magazine format with two parents (representing a mother and a father) as co-hosts. The content of the radio programme was complementary to the curriculum of the PES at that time which was focused mainly on ECCD topics and issues. After the radio episodes were broadcast, audio cassette tapes were made available to local government units and partner NGOs who used these within community-based parent education programmes.

The second project is the ECCD-School-on-the-Air (ECCD-SOA) which was initiated in 2001. ECCD-SOA seeks to support parents and caregivers with relevant and helpful information about care giving practices and nurturing the growth and development of young children. In its pilot stage, the project involved the production and broadcast of a radio programme designed for parents and caregivers living in urban areas. Twenty-four half-hour episodes have been produced. Each episode consists of two parts: 1) a pre-taped drama segment; and 2) a 15-minute discussion facilitated by the programme host with a resource person or parents as participants. The DSWD is completing a printed manual to guide those who wish to make use of the ECCD School-on-the-Air project (Usapang Makabata). A second phase which involves the replication of the ECCD-SOA in other parts of the country is planned.

The challenges for the proponents of PES today are: 1) to expand its outreach so that more parents can be supported as caregivers, thus improving the quality of care and teaching that young children receive at home; and 2) to diversify the processes, enhance the content and invest in capacity-building for facilitators to fine tune its responsiveness to social, cultural and economic contexts for all kinds of Filipino families. At the same time, where there are parent education groups, there must be a systematic approach to activating child-focused aspects of home-based ECCD, such as family-based day care and neighbourhood playgroups which are intended to complement the centre-based programmes.

26 Childcare for a small group of young children provided in a home by a parent trained to be a caregiver much like the family day care that is very popular in Latin America.


III. Working Towards the Goals of EFA: Quality ECCD for All Young Children in the Philippines

Implementation and Management of ECCD Programmes in the Philippines

Private schools and NGO-run centres which do not rely on funding from the government are generally autonomous after they have been able to secure the necessary permits to operate and acquire government recognition. They are fully responsible for managing their own programmes, and deregulation has been the norm for many years now.

The government’s primary concern is for public ECCD programmes: kindergarten classes in public schools and day-care centres. National government agencies, specifically the DepEd and the DSWD, are responsible for establishing policies, standards and guidelines, as well as processing and acting on applications to establish ECCD programmes. Their regional offices undertake the tasks of inspection and make recommendations regarding the approval of these applications over time, leading to accreditation based on a ratings system.

Programme implementation and management of day-care centres have been the responsibility of local governments for two decades now. A social welfare officer in every city or municipality is assigned to be the overall supervisor of day-care workers, to provide training and monitor their performance. In municipalities with a large number of day-care centres, there may also be an assistant social worker who works with the day-care staff, or a senior day-care worker designated as a “day-care trainer” who assumes training tasks in addition to daily responsibilities.

Public kindergarten classes are held in public schools, so they are supervised by the principal or teacher who is designated as school head. The DepEd formulated guidelines for the organization of these pre-school classes in 1985 to establish standards for their management and supervision. Like other teachers, they must satisfy the pre-employment teacher education requirements, but generally receive in-service training from senior teachers or from the district supervisor.

There is also a supervisor at the provincial level (the School Division office), assigned to monitor these kindergarten classes and to provide staff development support for teachers. These supervisors are considered ECCD specialists in their divisions and are usually supported by the central office through their participation in periodically organized seminars and workshops. Some of them will have been able to pursue graduate courses or special short courses in ECCD.

These parallel systems for managing and supervising two kinds of ECCD programmes—privately- and publicly-funded—have been operational since the inception of the day-care programme in the 1970s, prior to which kindergarten classes were mainly run by the private sector.

Since the passage of the ECCD Act, the national government has increased inter-agency, inter-ministry and multi-sectoral coordination for policy development and overall management of national ECCD programmes. Although there were also coordinating efforts and mechanisms in the past, such as the Inter-Agency Committee for ECCD within the UNICEF-assisted country programme, the passage of the ECCD Act compels the government agencies to identify or revisit specific issues that require joint decision-making. There has been a marked increase in programming and standard-setting activities that are jointly undertaken by the Department of Social Welfare and Development, the Department of Education, and the Council for the Welfare of Children, along with their partners in civil society and academia.

The law removed certain unclear and arbitrary distinctions between various ECCD programmes, while at the same time leaving undisturbed the difference in emphasis between the “socialization” function of the day-care programme and the “educational” function of the pre-school or
kindergarten, with a convenient separation of programme management responsibilities between the two government agencies. The DepEd would be responsible for all kindergarten or pre-school programmes, while the DSWD would oversee day-care initiatives.

In ECCD Law (R.A.8980), day-care centres, kindergartens and pre-schools are all considered “centre-based”, but the law identifies the departments’ respective responsibilities for registration, licensing and monitoring day-care centres or pre-schools. This has compelled the two agencies to resolve issues such as overlapping roles and gaps in policies, management and supervision. However, at both the national policy and local implementing levels (town- and village-level government), there is still a need to broaden the concept of ECCD to be more inclusive or conciliatory in their conceptions of various programme models.

At the national level, this relationship between the DepEd and DSWD seems a fairly straightforward approach to programme management and division of responsibilities; programme proponents must simply decide whether they wish to establish a school or a childcare centre in order to determine which government agency they must deal with for the application process, reporting and accreditation requirements.

In addition to the school-centre distinction, age is also a factor: the initial agreement reached between the two agencies is to divide responsibility so that 1) centres working with children below five would be supervised by the DSWD; 2) kindergarten classes in elementary schools and pre-schools or centres working with five-year olds would be supervised by the DepEd.

Each of the two agencies, the DepEd and the DSWD, has previously defined operational standards and guidelines for their respective programmes. These parallel and distinct guidelines are deterrents to defining and promoting developmentally-appropriate and culturally-relevant standards of quality across models and among service providers, parents and other stakeholders in ECCD. There are pre-conceived notions about certain aspects of ECCD that lead to inappropriate practices based on programme guidelines which, in turn, are based on certain policy decisions. Some examples will be addressed in the next section on Curriculum.

The conception of these two ECCD programmes as parallel but distinct rather than complementary and part of a developmental continuum also has significant implications for children’s access to and participation in these ECCD programmes. At the village level, particularly, these parallel management systems have resulted in competition among service providers and unnecessary confusion among parents regarding the nature of the day-care and kindergarten programmes and the implications for their children’s entry into primary school.

There are reports, from both NGOs and local government units in different parts of the country, that some principals or school teachers warn parents if their children remain in the day-care programme until the age of five, they risk being denied admission to the first grade. However, these admonitions contradict national policy and are not sanctioned by the Department of Education. Kindergarten is not compulsory nor is it a requirement for admission to primary school. But in these communities, where school principals are generally viewed as authority figures and powerful decision makers who can clearly affect their children’s education for better or worse, parents tend to be intimidated and often believe these unauthorized “policy” statements.

There are actually signs of a sharp decline in enrolment of five-year-olds in day care in these villages. On the one hand, this can be viewed within the context of the current low national participation rates in day care among this age group, especially since some five-year-olds have been transferring to kindergarten classes, which opens up more space for three- and four-year-olds in day-care centres. At present, however, this is not the way that day-care workers and their supervisors interpret the figures. For them, this trend stems from the effects of the aggressive recruitment of five-year-olds by kindergarten classes or pre-school programmes. Where this has occurred, all the
service providers and their supervisors share the sentiment that one or the other group is encroaching on their respective bureaucratic turf.

A more important point to consider should be the impact of the programmes on children and their quality in terms of care giving and teaching – regardless of whether the children are enrolled in a day-care centre or kindergarten classes. Those responsible for the management and supervision of day-care programmes and the school-based kindergarten interpret policies that are in turn reflected in their approaches to ECCD. The ways that children are affected can be better understood by looking into the early childhood curriculum. The positive or negative consequences of certain policies and directions taken in curriculum development will affect the quality of children’s learning experiences in both kinds of ECCD programme. The impact on children should always be the primary consideration.

**Early Childhood Curriculum**

Throughout the country, one can find examples of truly innovative and developmentally-appropriate curricula implemented in both public- and private-sector ECCD programmes. A few are even designed specifically for young children in vulnerable life conditions such as those who live in urban slums or remote rural communities, including children of indigenous cultural communities. Among them one can also find inclusive programmes where children with disabilities and developmental disorders play with their peers and participate in a variety of activities. Of the latter kind of programmes, however, the majority are run either by private individuals, academic institutions or NGOs, and very few are easily accessible to low-income families who cannot afford to pay the tuition fees needed to enrol.

Among the private schools, the early childhood curriculum shows various influences and programme models or approaches that are internationally recognized. As a result, most ECCD programmes can be described as eclectic in their approach to philosophy, conceptual frameworks and curriculum design. However, while the theories that influence their development may be rather similar to one another, the specifics of the curricula are a more accurate indicator of these programmes’ orientation. These curricula can be broadly classified under three categories, described here in terms of their focus and their methods.

The first type of curriculum is geared towards the traditional primary school, which is organized in terms of subject matter areas and focuses mainly on cognitive, literacy and numeracy skills. Children are mostly engaged in teacher-directed, structured, sedentary classroom tasks, and their experiences are limited to paper-pencil tasks with a sprinkling of arts and crafts, music and movement.

The second type of curriculum is informal, play-based and activity-oriented that allows children to explore a variety of topics in a comparatively random fashion. The learning experiences are designed to support physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive development.

The third type follows a similarly diverse and comprehensive pattern, to respond to all dimensions of child development. However, a more integrated and well-balanced curriculum that shows careful attention to content is achieved by organizing activities around well-selected themes or topics of study. These programmes are more learner-centred and emphasize children’s active participation. There are also ECCD centres that implement or adapt specific programme models, such as those based on Maria Montessori’s work, the developmental-interaction approach associated with Bank Street College, the Waldorf School, and the Kumon method from Japan. Their curricula can also be seen in terms of the three types mentioned above.

Although Maria Montessori did not intentionally develop her theories, methods and materials to be promoted as a “package”, her influence in the field of ECCE is as broad and pervasive as that of other major theorists. Montessori schools have gained popularity and established a reputation as quality ECCE programmes in the Philippines since the 1970s. This led to a proliferation of pre-schools carrying the name “Montessori”, whether or not their proponents had formally trained with any institution on the Montessori programme.
At this stage, there are also examples of inappropriately and prematurely structured classrooms where children remain seated and spend hours on end listening to the teacher, copying from the board or filling up worksheets, reciting words and numbers every day and all week. This is because their primary objective is to prepare four- and five-year-olds for the entrance tests which they will have to take in order to be admitted to the private schools their parents choose for them. Even more limited than “school readiness” or preparation for school, these kinds of programme are sometimes more like rehearsals for the school admission routines: responding to interviews, taking a test, remaining seated in the classroom and always paying attention to the teacher.

The curriculum of the public school kindergarten and the day-care centre is designed to be more like the second type mentioned, with some features from the third type of curriculum. The day-care centre’s activity plan is organized around topics or themes and is designed to provide a variety of activities: dramatic, manipulative and group play, arts and crafts, music, storytelling and other language experiences.

The day-care workers’ main references are: 1) the original Weekly Plan Activity Guide, with selected topics for a ten-month period; and 2) the Resource Book on ECCD which includes additional themes and recommended concepts and learning experiences. The daily routines and the physical space of the day-care centre are similar to the pre-schools that are compatible with an activity-centred curriculum. There are well-defined play or activity “corners” and the children’s daily schedule is divided into blocks of time for specific activities and transitions between e.g. play, storytelling and meals.

There are indeed public day-care centres that effectively implement the curriculum as it was intended; however, due to the inadequacy of resources to establish day-care centres and provide staff with appropriate levels of development support, very few are able to set up such a stimulating and conducive physical environment or to effectively implement the recommended activities.

It has also been observed that there are day-care workers, especially those without sufficient training on the national day-care programme and curriculum, who often resort to inappropriate practices that mimic highly-structured adult directed teaching methods from the traditional primary school in a well-meaning but misguided attempt to prepare the children for their entry to Grade One.

The Department of Education’s kindergarten curriculum is more explicitly focused on supporting “school readiness” and promotes the use of compiled worksheets, manipulative play materials, as well as teacher-made resources. Kindergarten teachers are provided with a “Pre-school Handbook” which describes the instructional objectives and concepts or content to be covered, recommended classroom activities and learning materials. The daily schedule and some guidelines for classroom management are also included.
Another reference provided by the DepEd is a copy of the “Eight-week ECCD Curriculum in Grade One.” This is based on the full-year kindergarten curriculum and designed to be implemented during the first eight weeks of the school year for all Grade One students. A work book for the children and several story books suitable for five- and six-year-olds are also included in what is similar to the basic kindergarten classroom ‘package’ recommended for use in the public schools.

The classroom design is also supposed to include interest or learning centres. Unlike elementary school classrooms, the kindergarten classroom has child-sized tables and chairs that allow for small-group interaction, rather than rows of desks where individual children sit. Over the past five years, the DepEd has maximized external or supplementary funding sources through special projects in order to procure and distribute such kindergarten “packages” to public schools in the different provinces. Schools who may not have received these special funds try to comply with the recommended design by seeking support from their own district or division office, the Parent-Teacher-Community Association or local and international donors.

Although the recommended activities that comprise an appropriate ECCD programme include a range of learning experiences, there is a tendency among many teachers to keep the class as a whole group practically all day, which precludes more active play and interaction among children, as well as opportunities to explore concrete materials through independent experiences. It has been observed that many of the kindergarten classes still tend to be watered-down versions of the Grade One classroom, especially due to the following factors: (i) the teacher is either a new recruit, or else may be experienced but lacking in formal pre-service ECCD training with little or no in-service development; and (ii) the DepEd’s teachers’ reference package and recommended kindergarten materials are not available.

At the outset, the DepEd recognized these limitations, which led to a conscious effort that started in the EFA decade from 1991 onwards to organize more ECCD-focused training for educators and supervisors in all provinces. In recent years, some special projects have also been implemented which have provided for the training of teachers by resource persons who are ECCD specialists from academic institutions or NGOs. The DepEd has increased its attention to ECCD through capacity-building and improved monitoring and supervision. However, experience shows that where adequate and effective training is provided with the essential tools, such as references and basic learning materials, new teachers are able to apply the recommended strategies independently. More experienced teachers can adapt or even change their own practices after they learn that these are not suitable for kindergarten teaching.

Another matter that the Department of Education has had to deal with over the past decade is the implementation of the Eight-Week ECCD curriculum in Grade One. In 1994, the DepEd introduced a new policy lowering the age of entry into school from seven to six years. The percentage of six-year-olds at that time attending kindergarten was even less than current levels. So in a typical Grade One class in the public school system, the majority of the students did not have any prior ECCD experience.

The policy of lowering the age of school entry and retaining the curriculum was justified through a study conducted by the DepEd that concluded that there was barely any difference in the skills and abilities of six- and seven-year-olds, and therefore six-year-olds would be perfectly able to cope with the demands of Grade One. In the initial year of the implementation of this new policy, no adjustments were made to the Grade One curriculum. However, the DepEd’s Bureau of Elementary Education, in collaboration with some ECCD specialists, worked to address some emerging issues and concerns. Monitoring reports were validating the concerns of some ECCD specialists.

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28 These include the support provided by UNICEF through its country programme for children and the loan-financed ECCD Project (from Asian Development Bank and the World Bank) as well as special funds made available as allocations by legislators who are members of the House of Representatives or the Senate.
about the adjustment of many six-year-olds to the first grade and the level of their learning outcomes, as well as the response of teachers and their ability to manage a class in which many of the children were not prepared for formal education.

To address this problem, the DepEd’s Bureau of Elementary Education revised the first six weeks of the Grade One curriculum to include objectives and content from the kindergarten curriculum. They pilot-tested this in some schools, and after the evaluation results showed a significant improvement in the performance of the children, two more weeks were added. Thus, the Eight Week curriculum was developed and is now implemented nationwide.

At the early stage of its expanded implementation throughout all the country’s schools, the teachers and DepEd supervisors understandably encountered some difficulties. Some were simple misunderstandings about the nature of the changes being introduced, such as whether it was optional for the entire class, and if so, at whose discretion, and whether they were stop-gap or long-term measures. There were understandably many Grade One teachers as well as school heads who had not yet attended training activities for ECCD so they were not in a position to understand the rationale for the curriculum and the changes required in their approaches to teaching and managing their classrooms.

However, as more teachers and supervisors participated in ECCD training and the DepEd Central Office clarified operational guidelines, so teachers, school heads and parents noted the difference in the children’s positive response to the content and activities of the new curriculum. Continuing support through capacity-building and the improvement of classrooms to make them appropriate for six-year-olds is still needed. It is still necessary also to engage the DepEd in a policy review which would include a review of the entire Grade One curriculum to determine whether it is really and fully appropriate for six-year-olds.

**National Policies for ECCD**

National laws provide the legal basis for the creation of certain programmes, define roles and responsibilities among government agencies, determine mechanisms for implementation and provide for public funds or authorize the generation of funds from other sources. Some of these laws are fully focused on ECCD. An example is the Republic Act 8990, “The ECCD Act”, which began to be implemented in 2002. There are also national laws which are broader in scope but provide a legal mandate for some ECCD programmes, such as the Education Act which is the omnibus law for the Philippine educational system. The DepEd refers to this as the basis for expansion of ECCD classes in the public schools. Another example which is even broader in terms of the range of programmes provided with a legal mandate is P.D. 603, Child and Youth Welfare Code, enacted in 1974. This law codified the statutes and clarifies the responsibilities and obligations of the state and its citizens in relation to children as well as the duties and responsibilities of children and youth themselves.

At the national level, there are three line agencies directly involved in ECCD policy development and implementation: the Department of Education, the Department of Social Welfare and Development, and the Department of Health. Within the school system, these policies are implemented at all levels, from field offices (regional, provincial or city) to schools. The DepEd has issued several Department Orders or Memos that either introduce new programmes (e.g. the pre-school contracting scheme; Eight Week ECCD curriculum in Grade One), define standards for the organization of private pre-schools, or create coordinating councils. (See Annex A.)

An example of the interaction between the two kinds of policies in the process of developing them and as programming evolves over time can be found in the history of the Day Care Service, as it was formerly called. As a programme, it was initially implemented on the basis of a national policy developed by the Department of Social Welfare and Development which derived its legal mandate
from the Child and Youth Welfare Code.29 In 1978, Presidential Decree No. 1567 entitled the “Barangay Day Care Centre Law of 1978” was passed which provided for the establishment of a day-care centre in every barangay, with at least 100 family heads to look after the nutritional needs, and social and mental development of local children.

These laws were the basis for the development and implementation of the Early Childhood Enrichment Project (ECEP) from 1978 up to the mid-1980s. The ECEP was initiated by the DSWD, in collaboration with other agencies and organizations such as UNICEF, the Department of Family Life and Child Development at the University of the Philippines, the Child and Youth Research Centre of the DepEd, the Nutrition Centre of the Philippines, and the Children’s Communication Centre.

The implementation of ECEP gave the day-care programme a much-needed boost, since its inclusion within several GOP-UNICEF Country Programmes for Children (CPCs) during the 1980s ensured support for previously overlooked essentials. For example, the backing provided through the CPCs from 1980 to 1987 provided the first wave of month-long training for 1,000 day-care workers each year.

A basic package of reference and learning materials was also developed and distributed within ECEP. These included: the Weekly Plan Activity Guide (WPAG), reference books on child development, play and storytelling for day-care workers and 100 titles of children’s picture and national-language story books. By the end of the two phases of ECEP, 4,300 day-care workers had undergone month-long training and 8,200 were provided with modified on-the-job staff development. By 1992, there were 12,000 day-care workers who had been trained – comprising some two-thirds of the total number of day-care workers at that time.

The challenge to expand, build and operate new day-care centres was soon overlapping with the emerging issues of poor programme quality and a lack of resources to maintain and improve existing centres. This required continuing efforts to improve programme management, mobilize resources and explore other dimensions of policy.

Close to 10 years later, another national law, R.A. 6972, the “Total Development and Protection of Children Act”, was introduced. Aside from effectively institutionalizing the programme features and elements of day care that were introduced through the ECEP, this law paved the way for a second wave of rapid expansion targeting infrastructure and the recruitment of day-care workers. It also linked the day-care programme with child protection efforts, identifying ECCD as one of the key services to protect children from abuse or neglect and to support their growth and development. It gave the national government the authority to establish those centres, as well as defined the responsibilities of national and local levels of government.

In the first years of implementing R.A. 6972, the DSWD as a centralized national government agency managed the Day-Care Programme. Initially, the resources were limited: out of 42,362 barangays only a few hundred had day-care centres. Even before decentralization took effect in 1991, there was a pressing need for advocacy and social mobilization among local government officials to generate support for the programme.

Shortly after, in 1992, a landmark piece of legislation was to have a direct impact on the day-care environment: the Local Government Code transferred the political and administrative authority, functions and responsibilities of the central government to local government units (LGUs), endowing the LGUs with responsibility for ECCD management and financing. The DSWD was to continue to be responsible for policy and programme development and for providing technical assistance to the day-care workers through their direct supervisors, the municipal social workers. The municipal social

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29 Article 69 of Presidential Decree No. 603 (Child and Youth Welfare Code) asserts that day-care services and other substitute parental arrangements shall be afforded any child whose parents and relatives are not able to care for him/her during the day.
welfare office was no longer supervised by the DSWD but by the office of the local chief executives: city or municipal mayors. Funding for the day-care centres, like other devolved public services, was to be provided by the LGUs, which were also given expanded taxation powers, and thus the potential for increasing their revenues.

In addition, each LGU receives an equitable share of the national treasury funds. Thus, the DSWD had to shift its focus from a direct involvement in programme implementation to supporting those at the local level who were now both service providers and programme managers. The Day-Care Programme’s evolution provides a clear example of the mutual relationship between programmes and policies: programme experiences inform policy development, which in turn facilitate the expansion of those programmes.

At the local level, the municipal and city government, in collaboration with the barangay (village) council, are responsible for implementing national policies, but they also have the power and responsibility to draft and approve local legislation, which they propose and deliberate upon. When enacted, they take the form of ordinances or resolutions. Examples of local-level policies related to ECCD include the allocation of monies, either as regular or additional funds from the annual budget of the city or municipality, as well as from the barangay. This is critical to the implementation of ECCD programmes because the service providers’ compensation, materials, equipment, training, repairs and maintenance and even infrastructure are dependent on the level of support from both tiers of local government.

The ability to prioritize the allocation of funds, for example whether to privilege developing infrastructure over training, can mean the difference between good or poor programme quality. The status, wages and working conditions of day-care workers form a particularly critical aspect of ECCD that is so dependent on local policies. In this regard, so much more remains to be done. The day-care worker is one of the most underpaid, overworked, and inadequately supported public servants. Furthermore, the great majority of people working in ECCD work on a contractual basis, despite many, deeply-committed staff members deciding to stay in the profession for as long as 10 years or more.

After more than two decades of day-care programmes, why does this situation remain unchanged? In part, this has to do with a long history of village-level volunteerism that forms the backbone of the delivery of social services. For this reason, there is a tendency to exploit workers in this category even when they are full-time staff and are not volunteers.

Gender bias is another factor; day-care workers are mostly female. Their work – taking care of and teaching young children – is not seen by the mostly male local leaders as not important or challenging enough, because it is perceived as “household work” which, of course, is unpaid, unacknowledged, and requires even longer working hours. The third reason is directly related to the nature of ECCD: early childhood programmes have little impact on the interpretation that local leaders have of their roles and responsibilities. However, there are signs that this has begun to change over the last decade. Thus, the comprehensive policy that is articulated by the new ECCD Act reaffirms the importance of early childhood care and development, its benefits and the responsibilities of the central and local governments, institutions, service providers, families, communities and civil society in the implementation of ECCD programmes.

The multi-sectoral, multidisciplinary nature of ECCD is addressed through the expansion of the functions of existing child-focused inter-agency structures, from the national to local level. This is to ensure that there are multiple layers of coordination and collaboration involving all duty-bearers engaged in knowledge sharing and programme experiences, which in turn will strengthen partnerships as well as enhance every stakeholder’s understanding and appreciation of the importance of providing quality care and learning experiences in the early years.
By building on existing mechanisms, the law also helps to stimulate many of these councils which have become inactive or are no longer functioning. The premise is that young children and ECCD programmes are excellent convergent points for community collaboration, and provide a focus that can be gradually expanded to include other issues affecting children in the community, such as their need for protection from abuse and violence or working for the inclusion of the poor, disabled or those with a debilitating illness.

The experiences of the Local Councils for the Protection of Children show that the political will of local leaders is more clearly directed or strengthened when there is a group that can undertake and sustain advocacy and social mobilization. One of the objectives of the ECCD Act is to establish a mechanism for the early detection and screening of children with disabilities and the activation of a referral system so that early intervention can be provided and the participation of these children in ECCD programmes can be facilitated. This is designed to strengthen existing facilities, seen as especially limited within the public service delivery system, and is an important step towards truly inclusive early childcare provision.

In the private sector there tend to be more examples of inclusive ECCD programmes and health professionals involved in screening, diagnosis and treatment of children with special needs, or other kinds of therapeutic intervention. Within Metro Manila, public tertiary health care facilities provide these services for free or at very low cost, which ensures children from poor families can also benefit. There remains, however, a need for greater capacity-building as well as systematic deployment of educators and health professionals to various regions of the country, so that the objectives of this new law can be more fully achieved.

**Quality and Access: Educational Reform Efforts and ECCD**

Filipinos, like citizens of any other developing country, aspire for the kind of quality of life that can only be made possible by sustained social development, economic progress and political stability. Since colonial times, when schools and the public education system were introduced, Filipinos have held the completion of formal education in high esteem. However, the association of education with success from the point of view of the individual, the community and society means that nowadays there is even greater incentive to reach the top of the educational ladder. With a persistent upward trend in population growth, there is tremendous pressure on families to provide the means for their children to attend and remain in school, and on the government and the entire public school system to respond to the already high yet still increasing demand for education.

Unfortunately, this coincides with a public school system reeling from the negative fallout of long-term neglect and under-investment, criticisms regarding poor leadership, inept management and, worse, graft and corruption at various levels of the bureaucracy. Unlike a couple of decades ago, however, the government today can count on its partners in civil society and local communities to lend a hand. While developments in education in general are usually associated with the private sector, which has traditionally been led by an emphasis on innovation this is no longer the case, particularly in the realm of early childhood education. There have always been public officials at various levels of the education bureaucracy who have been receptive to ideas and practices from outside as well as within the public school system in looking for solutions to education issues and these officials have been successful in encouraging their colleagues to shift to a more open and collaborative approach in working with academic institutions, NGOs, and even private educators.

**The Context for ECCD within Education Reform in the Philippines**

In the 1970s and 1980s, the growing sense of nationalism and an emerging awareness of human rights and social justice, which were closely linked with strong resistance to tyranny, oppression and imperialism, provided the impetus for students, educators and school leaders to take a more critical
look at the state of Philippine education. The focus of these calls for educational reform was primarily on the inappropriate content of the curriculum and outdated, passive teaching methods. There was an added focus on the lack of democratic and participatory processes in school management and student-school administration dynamics, especially at the tertiary level, and to a certain extent also among secondary schools.

During this period, the Philippine government was heavily in debt and the Department of Education was one of the heavier borrowers. Progressive educators at that time were highly critical of the proposed changes in the elementary and secondary education curricula for their lack of social and cultural relevance, and for being overly accommodating to the analyses and recommendations of mainly foreign consultants brought in by the World Bank. They were also critical of the textbooks that were published at very considerable cost to the government and which were used as propaganda material by the former dictator President Ferdinand Marcos to introduce children to his benevolent, “prosperous” New Society.

It was also at precisely this time, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, that three faculty members\(^{30}\) from different colleges in the University of the Philippines each began work on ECCD programmes in response to the needs of certain groups – all living either in poverty or in other challenging life conditions. Together with other volunteers, including university students, parents and supportive individuals, they were responsible for what can be considered the pioneering efforts in education reform – from early childhood to basic education.

They worked as volunteers in non-profit organizations composed of parents who were former political detainees, factory workers, the urban poor and peasants. These professionals worked either in tandem and active collaboration with one another, or else in independent but complementary ways within specific communities and programmes that they helped to nurture and sustain.

Aside from these educators, among other pioneers were public health professionals, psychologists, artists and writers. By 1986, they were able to organize a child-focused network of NGOs and people’s organizations, with the major emphasis on ECCD. These were the organizations that pursued the reform agenda introduced by the ECCD pioneers: equitable access to quality early childcare for the children of the poor, the working class and farmers, the politically-oppressed and culturally diverse communities. At a time when press freedom was curtailed, they organized public forums and symposia, and together with partners in the mass media found ways to provide the public with information about issues concerning educational reform in general, and ECCD in particular.

It was during these highly-charged and unstable times in the Philippines’ history that some significant changes and innovations in the field of early childhood care and education were introduced. It marked the beginning of a new era in ECCD which actually started through small but persistent programmes, which included: 1) a child development centre which was used as the university demonstration school; 2) a non-profit full day-care centre for children of former or current political detainees; 3) a day-care centre set-up by mothers in an urban poor community; and 4) an independent, inclusive school for children from infancy to adolescence set-up by an NGO, which also provided training for all the day-care centres referred to here. There were also others outside Manila, most of them start-up day-care centres in low-income communities, as well as two academic institutions providing training for day-care workers in Davao City, Mindanao and in Cotabato Province.

They implemented what quickly became known as “alternative” ECCD programmes. Alternative to what? The political situation at that time had become highly polarized, where one was either a die-hard follower of the dictator, Marcos, or was struggling against his regime and suffering from the

\(^{30}\) These comprised: one from the Department of Family Life and Child Development, who was an ECCE specialist; a faculty member at the Department of Psychology, who was also starting a prolific research career; and a Professor in Social Work and Community Development.
abuses that he, his military and business cronies perpetrated. People gave up their lives to fight for
their causes and to rally against a repressive government, clearly considered by many to be the
enemy.

Given this situation, it was untenable for many groups in civil society to work with the government,
or to promote its services and assist in their implementation. The basic distrust in the government
spilled over to the day-care centres, largely because they were the focal point of the nutrition
programme of the First Lady, Imelda Marcos.

Of course, there was a positive side to this nutrition agenda, namely increased attention to a very
real and important problem, and in fact the nutrition programme was very well-funded at that time.
But it was also one of the “showcases of a benevolent conjugal dictatorship” and in that sense
exploited the children in particular and the ECCD programme at large. Thus, there was little room
for collaboration between the ECCD “social activists” and the day-care workers at the grassroots
level.

On the other hand, opponents to these government-run initiatives clearly could not align themselves
with the private, entrepreneurial pre-schools serving mainly middle income and affluent families, and
which were preparing children for entry into prestigious private schools. The lines between the
social classes were clearly marked. What is more, ECCD programmes did not meet the DepEd’s
prescribed guidelines for pre-schools at that time.

Only one of these “alternative” organizations was financially self-sufficient, which it achieved by
running a private school that survived on the fees paid by parents. They then used the surplus funds
to subsidize the poor children enrolled in the school, as well as to work with parents in urban poor
communities to assist them in setting-up their own community’s ECCD programmes. All the other
organizations had to raise money themselves, through grants and donations. Fortunately, in those
two decades donor interest in the Philippines was high so a good number of European donors
supported ECCD programmes, sometimes for 10 years or more. There were also a few North
American funding agencies such as Save the Children, but at that time these functioned more like
local charitable organizations.

These local and internally-funded social welfare or philanthropic organizations were not a natural
choice for local civil society groups to form an alliance with, because their visions and philosophies
tended to be at one or other end of the political spectrum. The civil groups therefore had to create a
special niche for themselves, together with their partners in academe and the health sector, as well
as the University of the Philippines, known to be a hotbed of political activism. The niche was
declared as “alternative”, and its features and accomplishments include the following:

1) a child-centred early childhood curriculum which was creative, innovative, and socially and
culturally relevant;
2) a focus on empowering parents and community members to become involved in
curriculum development;
3) strong partnerships with parents and community members with their active participation in
the programme;
4) flexible adaptation of childcare support within ECCD, including full-time care for a
short-term period if needed;
5) playgroups and parent education sessions on the picket lines;
6) an openness to working with disabled children and seeking out children who may have
been excluded;
7) psycho-social support through individual and group therapy for children who had been victims of armed conflict and militarization;

8) the groundbreaking inclusion of a factory-based day-care centre in negotiations on the Collective Bargaining Agreement;

9) the exchange of collections of games, songs, poems and children’s stories in Filipino as well as the Visayan language of the south, which greatly enriched the curriculum;

10) experiential but theoretically well-grounded training on child development, early childhood programming and curriculum for day-care workers and volunteers by university instructors who were also working daily with children in their own classrooms;

11) special attention to local indigenous groups and ways of developing curricula on themes drawn from local culture;

12) a deliberate effort to explore and understand gender issues in early childhood with parents and other ECCD teachers, social activists and feminists.

All these helped lay the ground for the EFA decade, and local groups were able to build on these programme experiences for similar projects to develop ECCD among both the rural and urban poor. By 1990, a different administration was in power and there was greater scope for collaboration, even if some of the ECCD advocates were still critical of the government when they considered it necessary. The EFA decade marked another significant stage in education reform and ECCD practitioners were still highly visible participants. Both public- and NGO-run programmes had a chance to consolidate lessons learned and benefit from one another’s strengths.

Now there is a continuing effort to work together knowing very well that far too many children have not yet been reached. The whole spectrum of “alternative” early childcare NGOs have been working closely with ECCD-focused government agencies, as well as various local government units in different parts of the country. The result is similar to the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, with each of the government agencies, LGUs, partner NGOs and academic institutions making their own contributions to working with young children and families.

The integration of ECCD services and programmes actually happens not at the school or day-care centre, nor indeed at any service delivery point; these can rather act as effective convergent points, so that various service providers can ensure that all children receive the necessary support and intervention. Real integration has to come at the level of the family – it is with the family that responsibility for a child’s access to early childcare services must lie, and it is the family that defines and sets the tone for the quality of their child’s interaction with others from day one. This means that all efforts must centre on the family unit, providing appropriate support to parents as caregivers and teachers of their own children. That is where integration can be most effective and where it counts most.

The logical next step then is to work on activating and strengthening the multiple layers of co-ordination as envisioned within the new ECCD law. It will be necessary for large-scale reform drives also to intensify efforts to secure the necessary resources for programming and to explore more and better ways to work with young children and families. The interaction between various stakeholders offers additional opportunities for developing programme features or processes that will help to complete the ECCD “jigsaw puzzle.” This will maximize the synergy between health, nutrition and early education and between families, service providers, community members and their partners.
The challenge for ECCD is clearly to broaden access to and improve the quality of programmes. These are not parallel goals, nor are they to be addressed in a linear fashion. The problem of limited access does not just have to do with the inadequacy of resources. By observing the trends of participation particularly among poor families or those who are isolated because they live in remote rural villages, it becomes evident that it is not really a lack of resources that precludes their participation.

Rather, there are some very practical considerations, for example, distance from centres and availability of transportation. The physical demands and dangers for long trips made on foot or with animals as transport in mountain terrain certainly pre-empts daily participation in centre-based programmes like the day-care centre or the kindergarten. In a country where the wet season accounts for half the year and which lies right in the middle of the typhoon path, bad weather is a recurring reason cited by parents for their children’s absence from ECCD programmes. During the rainy season it is very difficult to commute with children to day care or to school whether on tricycles, jeepneys or on foot. This calls for adaptations in programme design so that children’s access to early learning experiences will not be hampered.

There are now examples of functional home-based ECCD programmes for children in rural villages including those where indigenous tribal communities live. By bringing the programme to a cluster of homes, there is first of all a marked difference in parent interest and participation. Even school-aged children cannot stay away because they are drawn to the activities. This then becomes a natural starting point for child-to-child programming approaches for children in the middle years. Some NGOs have successfully implemented such a family-focused ECCE programme among indigenous communities.

Access and quality are generally considered two sides of the same coin. While there are still some who believe that improving quality has to wait until better access is achieved, this is not the case, nor should this view be perpetuated, because if the quality of ECCD programmes is poor, it can actually do much more harm to the participating children and can discourage parents from supporting their attendance. Indeed, there are many examples of a significant increase in enrolment when it spreads by word of mouth that a playgroup or day-care centre is really a rewarding place to play, learn and socialize with others for children between two and five years old. Good quality invites participation.

Ultimately, access is about decisions that parents make as their children’s primary caregivers. Parents – whether rich or poor – know what they want for their children and have their conceptions of quality care and education. The challenge is to find ways of engaging them in that dialogue and motivating them to support their children’s participation in organized forms of ECCD and to extend that support for nurturing their active learning capacity at home through their interaction with their children.

The opportunity to translate into practice the rhetoric of “access to quality early childhood care and education for all” presents itself once more with a new law targeting the provision of additional support and resources for the provinces where there are families who need extra help. In the past, the lack of political will rather than of any material and human resources was the single most effective deterrent to the fulfilment of the rights of young Filipino children to ECCD programmes, but that seems to be changing.

There is today very much to build on in a country where so many innovative and culturally-relevant programmes have been developed, and ECCD practitioners are working in partnership with families and communities to care for and teach young children. Imagine if the courage, resolve and persistence that enabled Filipinos to oust two Presidents were now mobilized to ensure that the nation’s future citizens will be cared for and taught in such a way that they will grow up healthy, compassionate, competent and constructive members of their society. That would surely be the most worthy demonstration of political will imaginable.
Chapter 3. Early Childhood Care and Education in Viet Nam

I. Caring for and Educating Young Vietnamese Children Today

Vietnamese Families as Caregivers: Working Hard, Coping with Change

Today there are more than 80 million people in Viet Nam, 40 per cent of them children below the age of 16. Viet Nam’s economy is largely dependent on agricultural activities, with two thirds of the population living in rural areas. Ten million Vietnamese households live in 10,335 communes in over 51,000 villages.

There are 54 ethnic groups in Viet Nam. The Kinh, whose language is Romanized Vietnamese, comprise the majority; other ethnic groups, such as the Nung, Hmong, Khmer, Hoa and Thai, live mainly in mountainous regions and highlands.

With a low Gross National Income (GNI) per capita of US$390 in 2000, Viet Nam was routinely referred to as one of the world’s poorest countries. However, in just four years, the GNI has increased by US$100. Poverty is reported to have decreased from 58 to 37 percent between 1993 and 1998.

What is even more significant is Viet Nam’s ranking as 101 out of 162 countries in the 2001 Human Development Report. This means Viet Nam has achieved “medium levels” for human development, as measured by indicators used in the Human Development Index (HDI). This is attributed mainly to comparatively high achievements in the so-called “soft” indicators such as life expectancy at birth, infant mortality rates, school enrolment and adult literacy. In the last 10 years, the under-five and infant mortality rates have decreased significantly. Sustained and successful immunization campaigns are considered as the major contributing factor for preventing illness and childhood deaths. However, the prevalence of malnutrition remains high, with nearly 40 per cent of children below five being underweight.

The net primary school enrolment rate in 1999 was 88.5 per cent and school completion rates are at 63 per cent. The adult literacy rate is 90.3 per cent. Public education expenditure per capita

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31 Child-friendly Primary Education for Disadvantaged Children; A Funding Proposal, June 2001, UNICEF
32 Ibid
33 Human Development Report, Viet Nam, UNDP, 2001
34 Ibid
35 UNICEF, 2001
36 Human Development Report, Viet Nam, UNDP, 2001
increased tenfold, from VND 10,311 in 1991 to VND 107,263 in 1998. Total government expenditure on education remained constant at about 12 per cent from 1998 to 2000. According to a Child-focused Budget Study by Save the Children-Sweden, 40 per cent of the education budget was allocated for basic education, which includes nursery, pre-school, primary school and adult literacy programmes.

Despite the majority of Viet Nam’s population still falling into low-income brackets, and the similarly limited financial resources of the government, the Vietnamese enjoy a relatively high educational and health status based on human development indices.

**Supporting families through ECCD services**

As is the case with many countries that started out as predominantly agrarian societies, Vietnamese family members have always shared responsibility for farm work. Virtually every family member old enough to help in some way gets involved in farm activities. Even when agriculture was almost fully state-controlled and the co-operative system prevailed, women and men worked alongside each other, and even school-aged children and grandparents worked at peak times.

For this reason, even before major changes in the economy had taken place and urban centres were developed, Vietnamese women in rural villages have long needed childcare support. Traditionally, grandparents and older siblings or cousins would substitute for the mother as needed. Vietnamese women comprise half (51.9 per cent) of the total national workforce, with 71.3 per cent of working women in agriculture and 10.5 per cent in industry. There are 2.1 million women in the state economic sector. They account for the majority of the country’s workforce in light industries, textiles, garments and food processing.

The state-run public educational, health and social service institutions, the largest of which is the public school system, are the largest employers of women in Viet Nam. Women occupy only 29 per cent of the management positions in the state bureaucracy, while they account for practically the entire human resource base for early childhood care and education (99 per cent of ECCE teachers are women). The relatively high rate of women’s involvement in the labour force indicates that in both urban and rural areas there is a clear need for childcare support systems for the mothers of the 11 million Vietnamese children aged under six years.

For the first three years of a child’s life, it can be assumed that there are still extended family members such as grandparents to help out; figures show that 87 per cent of children under three years old are cared for at home. Poor families have no other option. Those who can afford to prefer to hire full-time caregivers or household help in their own homes. About 734,000 infants and toddlers (under three years) are cared for during the day in state-run childcare centres, community day-care centres or by home-based service providers. This is still a significant number. There is then a major shift towards childcare outside the home starting at age three-and-a-half to four. It is reported that only 45 per cent of three- to six-year-olds are cared for at home. Current forms of provision for early childcare and education include: creches, community childcare centres and day-care centres (for infants up to three years); home-based childcare (for groups of five to 15 infants up to two years); and kindergartens and pre-schools (for three- to six-year-olds).

According to official Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) documents, there are basically three kinds of ECCE programmes through which children under six years of age are provided with

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37 US$1 to about VND 15,200  
38 Human Development Report  
The appropriate early learning experiences, or through which parents are supported as caregivers. These are: 1) childcare or day-care centres, creches and nurseries for infants up to three years; 2) kindergartens; 3) parent education programmes.

As a matter of official policy, there is a deliberate effort to de-emphasize or remove the distinction between the childcare centres and kindergartens and to promote all of these as ECCE services that are part of one developmental continuum. National state policy has always included special attention to the care and education of children, and it is considered an important responsibility of families and of the state. President Ho Chi Minh himself articulated that, from its inception, ECCE was to be explicitly connected to the rights of women to actively pursue their goals and contribute to society beyond the traditional responsibilities for child-rearing and home management. President Ho emphasized the importance of providing women with a support system for the care and education of young children.

Thus, kindergartens have always been defined in terms of both education and childcare while the day-care programme is also expected to provide early learning experiences. This direction has been sustained by the Ministry of Education’s Early Childhood Care and Education Unit and other lead agencies since they assumed responsibility for coordinating both types of ECCE services. Thus there are some programme aspects that are common to both in terms of programming guidelines or standards prescribed by the MoET.

I.1 Childcare Centres

Patterns of Operation

Childcare centres and home-based childcare services are clearly designed to provide childcare support. There are various options available to parents depending upon their work schedules as well as resources. Centres are open five to six days a week, and children can spend either full or half days in childcare centres or home-based care. Children can be fetched later in the afternoon instead of a rigid schedule that would compel parents to cut their working hours short. Children are brought to the centres between 7 a.m. and 8 a.m., depending on the situation of their parents, and are fetched between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m.

Day-care centres offer various options aside from the full-day programmes; there are also children who spend only half days in the centre (morning or afternoon) depending on the family’s needs, and children may or may not eat their lunch in the centre. The MoET also reports that there are day-care centres which care for children with parents who work night shifts. This flexibility is uncommon in the region and Viet Nam is one of the first to encourage such a diversity of options.

Services Provided

Childcare centres generally provide full- or half-day childcare services, with established routines for personal care, health and hygiene such as feeding (with two meals within the day), bathing, dressing, toilet routines, and naps or periods of rest. Most of the day-care centres are basically child-minding programmes providing mainly custodial care (feeding, hygiene, rest, supervision). In some rare instances, there are childcare givers with limited formal training but who have experience and sufficient knowledge and skills. In addition, they are considered to be truly comfortable in their roles, and able to interact with children throughout the daily care-giving routines in a manner that promotes young children’s learning and overall development. Thus there is the potential for more systematic quality improvement efforts, which are necessary at this stage.

40 Also referred to as day-care centres, creches and nurseries; for the purposes of this paper, childcare and day-care centres will be used interchangeably
In principle, childcare centres are expected to provide things to play with and learning materials that are appropriate for infants from three months to three years of age. They are also expected to organize group activities for music, movement and storytelling in order to support young children’s physical, psychosocial, cognitive and language development.

In the well-run and well-equipped centres located in urban areas, in addition to physical care, the children are also provided with enough time, space and materials or equipment for play and activities like storytelling and art. Interaction with peers and the caregivers is also an integral part of the child’s experience. Childcare givers are also trained to facilitate these stimulating and supportive activities for child development.

However, these are not yet typical throughout the country, primarily because of a combination of two factors: inadequacy of teacher training, and limited funding and material resources allocated to ECCE.

It must be emphasized, however, that mass-produced and costly playthings, equipment and learning materials are not necessary to achieve the child development goals prescribed by national programme standards and guidelines for childcare centres. Nonetheless, the impact of this dearth of physical resources is heightened because teachers who are not sufficiently trained and supported through close supervision are unable to explore other more viable and equally effective alternatives. Parents and local leaders who have not yet been reached by parent education programmes are seldom in a position to conceive of more ways and means of enriching the childcare centres as learning environments. This is typical among community-run childcare centres in rural villages or home-based childcare in lower income urban areas. Thus, services are limited to physical health care and supervision of children i.e. child-minding or custodial care.
Group Size

The MoET guidelines\(^{41}\) for childcare centres include recommended group sizes for specific age groups (see table 3.1). Group sizes vary depending on the sponsoring organization, age group and location of the childcare centre, and thus, for example, there are urban-rural and within-rural (central-lowland, mountain or remote mountain areas) differences. In most rural areas, children are cared for at home from infancy through to age three, but some two- and three-year-olds who live within a reasonable distance are brought to community-run childcare centres. The location of a centre near a primary school also facilitates the participation of young children because older siblings take care of bringing and then fetching them as they go to and return from school. This makes it viable for the family to support the young child’s participation in the ECCE programme.

In rural areas, group sizes tend to be close to or smaller than the maximum number prescribed. Demand for childcare support is not as high so they are not as congested as those in the urban centres where the need is much greater. The MoET estimates that group sizes in a number of childcare centres in urban areas are one-and-a-half to two times more than the recommended levels. Large group sizes combined with few adult caregivers results in high child-caregiver ratios, which in turn has a detrimental effect on the quality of care that young children can be provided with. This is considered another reason for the decline in participation rates. Parents choose either to keep their children at home or bring them to neighbourhood childcare givers who provide small-group care in their homes.

The MoET’s assessment is that, in general, the state-run childcare centres and day care centers in more developed and affluent urban areas comply with recommended standards. However, only 20 per cent of centres and classrooms in the non-state sector are deemed suitable or fulfill national guidelines in regard to physical facilities or materials. Private schools for more affluent children account for most of that 20 per cent. A very small percentage of community-run childcare centres, mostly in rural areas, meet the minimum basic standards.

Furthermore, there are variations in the quality of physical care needed to ensure children’s health, nutritional, hygiene and safety needs, ranging from very poor quality to adequate. The MoET assessment is that some day care centers do meet the required standards but there is concern that the food served to children is insufficient and lacking in nutritional value in day-care centres where financial resources are limited. Evidently, this has a detrimental effect on children’s nutritional status, particularly those attending centres throughout the year and from an early age.

In principle, the Ministry of Health is responsible for monitoring the quality of health care but there is no apparent co-ordination between the district level education office and their colleagues in the health ministry. At the village level, it is clear that the public health system is well utilized, and families assume responsibility for bringing their children to health centres.

\(^{41}\) Pursuant to the 55/QD Decision on Kindergarten Operational Regulations which was issued in 1990 by the MoET

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of children in a group (maximum)</th>
<th>Age group</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 to 6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>7 to 12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>13 to 18 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>18 months to 2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>2 to 3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>3 to 4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>4 to 6 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The other primary concern is whether the quality of childcare meets the required standards that aim to support a holistic approach to child development. The observation is that most of the home-based childcare services only meet the standards for physical health care, in terms of basic supervision to ensure the safety of children in the group. The children’s needs in terms of psychosocial, language and cognitive development are not adequately addressed. Caregivers do not provide organized and developmentally-appropriate play activities and materials needed for young children’s learning and development.

This is consistent with the observations of other organizations that parents’ dissatisfaction with the quality of care is one of the main contributing factors to decreasing participation rates for day-care centres in the past 10 years. Poor quality of care has been attributed to several factors: caregiver characteristics (low levels of competence, lack of training); large group sizes and high adult-child ratios; programme activities that are not stimulating; and a physical environment with insufficient resources for various types of play and language learning.

**Sponsoring Institutions or Organizations**

From 1987 to 1998, significant changes in the Vietnamese economy overlapped with the introduction of national education reform efforts. Centralized state control of agriculture was discontinued and the 100/BBT Directive was introduced. The co-operative-based agriculture system was replaced with household farming which shifted the focus and burden of economic activities onto the families.

These changes affected day care participation rates, which decreased from 27 per cent during the period 1986-87 to 13 per cent in 1991-92. Children could be cared for at home since many of the parents were unemployed during the early stages of implementing economic reform measures, and many who had work could not afford the costs of childcare services. To address this decline in day-care enrolment, the government decided to maintain only existing day-care centres and did not establish new ones. At the same time, the MoET promoted the enrolment of as many five-year-olds as possible in the kindergartens, which were also full-day programmes. This is why figures will show that state-run childcare centres account for only 30-35 per cent of total ECCE service provision.

Among the state-run childcare providers are pilot centres or schools established for the purpose of demonstrating effective practices in early childhood care and development. They are also designed to provide some form of support for other ECCE programmes in nearby areas.

It was during this period that private or home-based childcare provisions began to be offered in response to the need of many families for childcare services. This rapid expansion of non-state service provision for childcare is a significant development. MoET statistical data reveals that within a four-year period (from 1994 to 1998) coverage by non-state childcare centres almost doubled from 33 per cent to 62.5 per cent. There are two main types of non-state ECCE programmes: 1) community-owned and operated childcare centres and kindergartens usually in rural villages; and 2) privately-owned day-care centres and kindergartens, often in urban areas. Some of these may receive subsidies from the government and the communes, but the vast majority are now entirely community-run and supported mainly by parental contributions.

Table 3.2 shows the number of children served by these different types of private sector provisions, with a distinction between those who receive financial subsidies from various levels of government and those who do not.
Early Childhood Care and Education in Viet Nam

The first type of non-state ECCE programme is the community-run childcare centre or kindergarten, established by village residents and local leaders, Village Development Committees (VDCs), in rural villages where there were no state-run programmes. The MoET defines these community-run centres as those established, funded and managed fully by “a political, social or economic organization”. Parents, VDCs and some communes provide all financial and material resources needed to establish the centres or kindergarten schools; they do not receive funding from central government. The MoET ECCE Unit provides guidelines while the District Education Office monitors their programme.

The MoET noted that these community-run day-care centres and kindergartens are fraught with set-backs, foremost among which is the poor-quality care and teaching on offer, due largely to insufficient financial and material resources and a lack of qualified teachers. This is aggravated by the fact that they receive minimal supervisory support and in-service training is rarely organized. These centres are generally located in low-income neighbourhoods, sometimes urban though mostly in rural areas, and rely mainly on parental contributions which are understandably limited. The current situation which reflects a sharp decline in financial resources is due in part to the fact that the co-operative welfare fund is no longer available to these centres. VDCs seldom prioritize fund allocations and provide only bare essentials such as caregivers’ salaries, which are usually low.

However, there are some encouraging examples of VDCs that appreciate the importance of the day-care centres as a support system for women who work outside the home. They provide sufficient funding to cover extra expenses in addition to the salaries of caregivers, and strive to assure that children’s meals are provided daily.

Two ECCE centres in a mountain area in the north that were visited for this study provide illustrative examples. One centre was attached to a primary school while the other was a new, well-designed building across from a school with a lychee orchard at the back. The infrastructure was made possible through the joint efforts of the VDCs and the District Education Office, and included fund-raising from overseas Vietnamese.

Fortunately, some of the community-run ECCE programmes in the most disadvantaged communities can still rely on multiple funding sources. For a certain period, they have adequate resources because they receive support from UNICEF or from international NGOs such as Save the Children (UK), Save the Children (USA), Enfants et Developpement, and Radda Barnen. Most of the

The state is responsible for funding the set-up of the programme, including the necessary infrastructure, while the school or centre-based managers are responsible for managing and raising operational costs. In most cases, 50 per cent of those costs are borne by families.

All financial requirements from setting up the programme and operational costs are provided by the founding organization.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service Provider/ Type of ECCE</th>
<th>Age of children</th>
<th>Number of children served</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State-run Kindergartens</td>
<td>3-6 years</td>
<td>2,120,454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day-care centres</td>
<td>0-3 years</td>
<td>367,290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi state-run Subsidized day care</td>
<td>0-3 years</td>
<td>94,042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subsidized kindergartens</td>
<td>3-6 years</td>
<td>850,748</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community-run Community day-care centres</td>
<td>0-3 years</td>
<td>199,248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community kindergartens</td>
<td>3-6 years</td>
<td>1,099,706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Home-based day care</td>
<td>0-3 years</td>
<td>74,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private kindergartens</td>
<td>3-6 years</td>
<td>170,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
international organizations also work in collaboration with local government authorities as part of advocacy efforts.

In most cases, the international NGOs invest mainly in capacity-building and training, as well as pay attention to programme and curriculum development. They also provide additional supplies and play materials, with the result that these community-based centres may often be better equipped than some of the state-run day-care centres. The encouraging fact is that most of the NGOs heed the government’s call for greater support to the most disadvantaged regions where many of the ethnic communities are found, such as the Mekong River Delta, the Northern Mountains and the Central Highlands. Some of these programmes include a parent education component and successfully implement home visits as a feature.

These programmes also emphasize self-help approaches and active participation by parents and community members. So beyond contributing small amounts of money to help support the operations of the programmes, parents are also involved in some programme activities and contribute their time and labour as needed or as their time permits. In addition, there are areas where UNICEF assistance with water and sanitation facilities, and other NGOs’ support with training, converge with various forms of state support for ECCE programmes. This improves the quality of care that families are able to provide very young children.

The second type of childcare is provided by entrepreneurial individuals or organizations from the private sector who set up home-based centres as well as pre-schools in urban areas. They cater to the children of more affluent families and rely mainly on the fees paid by parents for their operations. They account for only 7-8 per cent of service provision, which is understandable given the economic situation of many Vietnamese families. Private service providers are required by the MoET to register, apply for their licence and comply with the prescribed guidelines, and their compliance is monitored by the local authorities.

The MoET is concerned about misconceptions regarding the policy of encouraging the private sector to establish ECCE programmes as a way of popularizing and promoting society’s responsibility to young children. It has been noted that one persisting misconception is that the state is unable to fulfil this responsibility and so it is passing on the task to the private sector. The state encouraged these initiatives and developed guidelines to systematize the process because the government wanted to effectively utilize the limited public funds for the more disadvantaged communities. By allowing additional service providers to enter the picture, those who can afford to pay for childcare will have the option to patronize private-sector services while those who cannot afford these can be served by the state-run facilities.

**Licensing, Supervision and Standards**

Day-care centres serving under three-year-olds used to be under the supervision of the Ministry of Social Welfare, before responsibility shifted to the Viet Nam Women’s Union, with technical guidance provided by the Ministry of Health. When the Committee for the Protection of Mothers and Children was established in 1971, they took over the responsibility for supervision of the day-care centres and then developed the policy document which provides the standards and programming guidelines in 1973.

In 1987, the committee was merged with the Ministry of Education at that time, which is now what is known as the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET). The Early Childhood Care and Education Department of the MoET was established in 1991 and is now responsible for day-care centres. The ECCE Unit at the national level is responsible for overall supervision of these childcare and education programmes, and there is also an ECCE Unit at the provincial level under the district office for education and training.
At this point, the MoET describes the urgent need for improved co-ordination among the various agencies and organizations at the local as well as central levels. This is the only way they can ensure the effective implementation of licensing procedures, development of guidelines, supervision of ECCE service providers and monitoring of the private sector’s compliance with prescribed guidelines. The commitment to ECCE as well as the efficiency of management at the local levels must be strengthened, while a comprehensive and cohesive policy document to guide private sector participation in ECCE service delivery has to be developed.

As previously discussed, the primary issue in regard to day-care centres is the inadequacy of the quality of care provided, particularly by the community-run centres in rural areas and the home-based childcare services in both urban and rural areas.

**Staffing and Service Provider Characteristics**

As of 2000, there were 48,691 teachers in day-care centres. Most of these had received some form of basic training (31 per cent), participated in short-term courses (31 per cent) or been enrolled in three- to six-month professional development programmes (21 per cent); 15 per cent had completed a two- to three-year training programme in ECCE. There were only 225 day-care teachers with university or college degrees, which points to a real shortage of qualified teachers, especially for early childcare. Day-care centres are managed by directors and deputy directors, and there are 1,468 DCC administrators nationwide.

**1.2 The Kindergartens**

**Patterns of Operation**

State-run kindergartens generally operate as full-day classes which begin anywhere from 6.30 a.m. in the rural areas to 7.30 a.m. in big cities like Hanoi, to 4 p.m. In rural areas, younger children aged around four years old usually do not return for an afternoon session when they go home for lunch. Private kindergartens may start at 8 a.m. or 9 a.m. and do not necessarily implement full-day schedules so the children spend about three to four hours in the kindergarten.

State-run kindergartens in Viet Nam also have a long history. As early as 1924, President Ho Chi Minh wrote about the need to establish a kindergarten and day-care system for the improvement of social education. President Ho also emphasized that it was necessary to support the liberation of women from the restricted roles and lower status that limit their participation in communities and in Vietnamese society in general. In 1945, the newly-established Democratic Republic of Viet Nam started to fulfil this vision and began to expand state-run kindergartens. However, from 1975 onwards, there was a need to rebuild the infrastructure in some parts of the country devastated by the war. In 1982, the government issued a policy supporting the establishing of rural kindergartens as community-run schools and authorized the appointment of one headmaster for each kindergarten as a tenured state employee.

Pilot ECCE centres were established starting in 1991 as one of five priority projects in the Master Plan for ECCE (1991 to 2000) which was implemented in the wake of the reorganization of the educational system. Existing state-run kindergarten schools or childcare centres which were considered a cut above the rest to begin with and which showed the potential to achieve high-quality programming were identified as pilot ECCE centres, and the government invested additional resources in order to transform them into model ECCE programmes. These additional investments consisted of two types of resources: material; and the knowledge and competencies needed to implement effective ECCE curricula.

\[\text{Decision 133/HDBT, issued on August 17, 1982}\]
Material resources involved, among other things, upgrading infrastructure; for example, the government financed the construction of new buildings or additional classrooms and purchased learning materials and equipment. Knowledge and competencies were provided through investments in the training of teachers and supervisors of these pilot schools, and the additional investment in human resources for ECCE gave these schools a clear advantage from which children could benefit in significant ways.

The pilot centres were also designed to serve as experimental sites for testing curriculum innovations and demonstration sites for the application of improved, child-centred ECCE teaching strategies and effective programme implementation methods and practices. Some were established in mountain areas and aimed at ethnic minorities, and all pilot schools are expected, in turn, to serve as resource centres for other schools in the province or city. While it is not yet clear how well these pilot schools are fulfilling their professional development mandates, what is certain is that they are able to provide quality care and education for the children enrolled.

The returns on the government’s investment in these pilot schools are considerable for the children they currently serve, and the size of the school population attests to the positive image they have developed. Two of the schools visited for this study were evidently popular among families, based on the number of children enrolled. Considering the high costs of ECCE, which must beshouldered mainly by the families, the large number of parents who are willing to send their children to these pilot schools indicates two things: 1) in these areas, there is considerable awareness among families regarding the importance of ECCE; and 2) parents expect certain standards in ECCE, and actively seek out quality programmes for their children. In Ha Long pre-school, sturdy, colourful and well-designed playground equipment stands as testimony to active parent participation. Parents are far more motivated to get involved when they trust the ECCE programme and are confident that their children are provided with the quality of care and education that they expect.

\section*{Services}

While kindergarten classes provide children with learning experiences that aim to support their overall development and facilitate their adjustment to primary school, they also offer a full-day childcare programme that provides attention to children’s physical and health needs (meals, exercise, afternoon nap, toileting and hygiene). Additional health services, e.g. immunization, are supposed to be co-ordinated by the Ministry of Health. Support for children’s social and emotional development is provided through the experiences gained from group life and the relationships developed with teachers and other children in the school.

\section*{Access to and Participation in Kindergartens}

When the entire educational system was reorganized in 1993, Early Childhood Care and Education (comprising kindergarten and day-care centres) was identified as the first in a five-part national education framework. From then on, there has been a steady increase in kindergarten enrolment and national policy has helped to increase public awareness of the importance of ECCE.

To match the increasing demand, the government allocated resources to establish kindergarten classes in primary schools and also as separate schools in heavily populated areas. In major cities like Hanoi, there are public kindergartens which have a very high student population with as many as nine classes, three for each of the age groups: three-, four-, and five-/six-year-olds. In Ha Long Bay, there are also large kindergartens with at least two classes for every age group. Some of these kindergartens were set up more than a decade ago yet they continue to be dynamic educational programmes that implement developmentally appropriate educational approaches.
Today, over 2.1 million children, mostly aged four and five, are enrolled in kindergartens, a figure which represents a little more than half of the total population of three- to six-year-olds. State-run kindergartens account for the largest percentage of children’s ECCE participation rates, specifically for the four- and five-year-old age groups, and are quite sufficiently established in most parts of the country, with the exception of several rural areas, mostly in the south and central areas, as well as in the remote mountain villages of the north. There are also more non-state ECCE programmes run by local communities or private individuals in the northern provinces compared to the central and southern parts.

The high participation rates for kindergarten is not surprising given the long history of formal education in Viet Nam which developed among the Vietnamese people a deeply ingrained appreciation of the value of schooling. Even if poverty posed a major obstacle to many Vietnamese families, they still put a high premium on formal education. The people extend this high esteem to those who are involved in education; teachers and school principals are highly-respected in their communities.

These cultural factors, combined with the government’s current policies and intensive efforts to ensure universal access to basic education, as well as the positioning of kindergartens as a school preparation programme, enabled the idea of the kindergarten to be easily accepted by parents. It is now viewed as the first important step towards the broadly shared aspiration for every child to have access to, and to complete, a full education.

The “culture” and structure of Viet Nam’s educational system as it exists now is a blend of ethnic Vietnamese, Confucian Chinese and French influences. However, it was also observed that there are now increasing numbers of state-run kindergartens in urban centres where dominant non-Asian, contemporary or Western influences are reflected in the kinds of learning materials that they have selected.
Staffing Patterns and Service Providers’ Characteristics

There are over 144,000 ECCE teachers in Viet Nam today, according to recent data, a figure which still falls some way short of the number of teachers needed to enable almost all young Vietnamese children to participate in ECCE programmes. Sixty-five per cent are non-tenured and work in nonstate facilities, most of them in rural areas, while the remaining 35 per cent (a little over 50,000) are employed by the government and are tenured. In terms of qualifications and formal training, 51 per cent have attended two-year pre-service education programmes, while only 3 percent of teachers are graduates of three- or four-year ECCE programmes. Twenty-five per cent attended nine-month training programmes, 8 per cent had only three to six months of training, while 12 per cent had had no pre-service training at all, and are literally learning on the job. Four national teacher training colleges in three of the major cities, namely Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and Nha Trang, have Early Childhood Care and Education departments where teachers can enrol in the two- to three-year programme. In addition, there are intermediate pre-school teacher training schools in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City that offer short courses as well as the two- to three-year programme. All provincial teacher training schools offer ECCE training programmes as well, but at this stage there are evidently very few teachers who are able to enrol in these training programmes.

The rate of expansion due to the increased demand for ECCE programmes has far outpaced the supply of teachers. This is really the more challenging issue that the MoET and all other agencies involved in ECCE have to deal with at present. Quality will not be attained if teachers do not receive in-service training to compensate for the inadequacy, or even absence, of any kind of pre-service training. Aside from the lack of training, other important factors to address are the poor working conditions, instability of employment status and very low compensation of teachers. The majority of ECCE staff are based in rural communities and work in non state-run programmes, and more than half (around 86,000) must divide their time between teaching and farming.

Although policies were developed to ensure a minimum allowance (VND 144,000 a month, around US$9) for contractual teachers, this is still obviously insufficient. In most provinces, they are paid only 10 months a year or receive only between VND 100,000 and 120,000. In Hanoi, the People’s Committee added health benefits (75 per cent of costs incurred for medical treatment or for childbirth) and severance pay (equivalent to one month for each year of service).

I.3 Family Life and Parent Education

The family is considered the “root” or foundation of the Vietnamese nation. Like most of their Asian neighbours, the Vietnamese people are bound by and deeply value their family ties. The development of a child’s personality and a person’s individual identity and moral character as an adult are attributed largely to family relationships and the education provided by the family. The responsibility of parents to raise good citizens is explicit in the 1992 Constitution: beyond child-rearing they are expected to educate their children.

Thus, the state assumes responsibility for enabling parents to fulfil this role, and the MoET considers parent education as a major strategy for the success of ECCE programmes. In part, the increased attention to parent education was due to the severe limitations of the government in financing public ECCE programmes during the years when economic reforms were being pursued.

In order to mitigate the negative effects of their inability to access ECCE initiatives, the MoET explored parent education as a major approach to supporting children. The aim is to enhance the capacity of parents to support their children’s early childhood care and education as well as to raise awareness about the importance of their children’s participation in various ECCE programmes, particularly kindergartens.
They developed various activities to these ends, such as: 1) home visits by ECCE teachers to provide information for parents of any young children who are not in group childcare; 2) media-based approaches for information and education; and 3) setting up Parents’ Corners in kindergarten classrooms and day-care centres. The first of these were developed in 1997 within the context of a pilot project that was implemented in five districts located in five provinces. The teachers were provided with a set of materials for use with parents and they were also taught appropriate communication skills to be applied in the context of home visits.

The media-based approach involved dissemination of information about early childhood care through television and radio messages. Building on the experiences of the pilot project, the Government’s Committee for Population, Families, and Children is spearheading a media campaign as part of an existing programme, Integrated Early Childhood Development (IECD), with support from UNICEF.

A study of knowledge, attitudes, and practices in relation to ECCE and a survey on media for children were conducted in 2001 and several workshops involving media practitioners and those directly involved in ECCE programmes were convened. Children’s books and posters for caregivers were also developed in an “ECCE and Media” workshop. The books feature child and family interaction, telling stories about the importance of family support to nurture curiosity, and different ways of developing the child’s senses. One story portrays gender fairness through the daily routines of two siblings in a family from an ethnic tribal community; in another story a grandfather nurtures his disabled grandchild’s holistic development and works for the child’s inclusion in the community.

The 2002 workshop focused on the development of a more detailed communications plan with a media campaign which was launched in early 2003. The prototype materials which were previously developed during the 2002 workshop have been produced and are being disseminated within the context of ECCE service delivery for parents and young children. These include posters depicting caregivers’ activities with children, children’s books, caregivers’ books, radio and television spots, and a “newborn gift pack” for families to promote holistic child development from birth.

The government believes that family life education programmes have much more ground to cover. They also can be further improved in terms of content as well as coverage by applying focused approaches in selecting more specific target groups including young people who are not yet married and younger parents in ethnic communities or remote villages.

II. Working Towards the Goals of EFA: Quality ECCE for All Young Children in Viet Nam

Implementation and Management of ECCE Programmes in Viet Nam

The primary responsibility for supervision, formulation of policy and general directions, and the development of programming strategies, guidelines and standards for ECCE is with the Ministry of Education and Training. The Early Childhood Care and Education Department at the Ministry is the lead unit at the central level. The ECCE unit shares responsibility for national coordination of ECCE with the Ministry of Health, the Commission for Population, Family and Children and the Viet Nam Women’s Union. They are responsible for both state and non-state ECCE programmes.

The four central level agencies divided responsibilities for the management of ECCE as follows: 1) the MoET is responsible for developing programmes and standards, supervision, monitoring of the implementation of Early Childhood Care and Education programmes and for promoting parent education on ECCE; 2) the Ministry of Health attends to the health and nutrition components including immunization for all children under five, disease prevention, nutrition education, food

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supplementation and other interventions to reduce malnutrition; 3) the Commission for Population, Family and Children is responsible for overall child-focused policy which, of course, includes national ECCE policy; and 4) the Viet Nam Women’s Union is responsible for parent education to enhance their knowledge of parenting practices. Together with the MoET, they are responsible for promoting the importance of children’s participation in ECCE programmes among parents. They also have a special focus on children under three years who are presently underserved or in programmes of poor quality compared to three- to five-year-olds.

Given the decentralized system within which ECCE in Viet Nam is implemented, the management of both state-run and non-state kindergarten ECCE programmes requires effective co-ordination and communication among the various levels of ECCE programme management, and this involves the lead agencies at both the central and the provincial, city and village levels. The MoET-ECCE department works directly with its counterparts at local levels. In turn, the provincial and district ECCE departments work together, with the district offices directly responsible for supervision of kindergartens, day-care centres and pre-schools. The same offices are also responsible for monitoring non-state ECCE programmes.

Improved co-ordination at the central level among the four main stakeholders in ECCE is imperative so that effective leadership and support can be provided for the supervisors and programme managers among local departments (provincial and district). Since teachers and other caregivers are far beyond the reach of the ECCE national programme managers, the logical step would be for investment in capacity building for effective supervision and management at all the local levels.

A viable strategy would be the combination of capacity building for programme managers with the creation of an improved and highly functional monitoring system that serves the immediate purposes of programme planning as well as periodic evaluation of programme status and impact. This information should be made available to all stakeholders in order to maximize data collected through this monitoring system in their respective contexts. Data that is not returned to those who are directly involved in ECCE programme implementation will serve the limited purpose of fulfilling bureaucratic requirements but will bear little or no impact on the quality of ECCE initiatives. Service providers and local-level managers should be provided with the processed and analyzed data which they gathered in the first place.

This is necessary for two reasons: first, to validate the initial analysis and findings; and second, to make the most of the data-gathering exercise as a practical tool for problem-solving and programme development. Thus, these monitoring and information systems should fulfil the complete cycles of data-gathering, processing, validation, analysis and diversified forms of communicating findings. At every step in the cycle the central levels of government must ensure that whenever possible, those who provided the information are involved. Concrete actions and constructive changes can be the logical next steps as a result of monitoring and data-gathering processes, but it can only happen when those who generated or contributed to the data-gathering process are able to validate and study it for themselves.

The need for a more user-friendly and highly functional monitoring system that provides information on indicators for access and quality is heightened at this stage. Such a monitoring system is essential to build a reliable database and information system on ECCE services and will help ensure that the strategies for improving the quality of ECCE programmes are based on realistic conditions and reliable information.

An effective strategy for monitoring programmes with a view to improving quality is also imperative given the rapid expansion of community-managed programmes and service providers from the private sector. UNICEF-Viet Nam has also completed some initial work in this regard, which is currently in the form of a simple rating scale with 30 items across six categories (physical environment; health, nutrition and physical growth; school enrolment and completion; psychosocial and
physical development; teacher’s morale; and parent and community participation and support). It is a useful and simple tool. This kind of monitoring serves a very practical purpose, identifying as it does areas that need improvement or those that work effectively, and can be replicated to improve the quality of ECCE programmes.

The stakeholders themselves believe that there needs to be more clarity in their respective roles and a sharper focus on specific issues already identified in regard to expanding access and improving the quality of ECCE programmes. Multi-sectoral collaboration and coordination is even more critical at the local levels given the decentralized context for ECCE management and service delivery. At the moment at the provincial and district levels, it is mainly the Education and Training offices who assume the coordinating functions. This must be expanded to include the other stakeholders at these local levels of ECCE programme management and implementation.

There are four factors that heighten the need for such clarity and systematic targeting of efforts and resources. These are: 1) the large disparities in access and coverage between urban and rural areas; 2) the sub-standard quality that typifies existing ECCE programmes for children from lower-income families in both urban and rural areas; 3) the rapid expansion of non-state-managed ECCE programmes; and 4) the limited amount of financial resources or public funds for ECCE which is a perennial deterrent to implementing plans for expansion and improving quality. These can also derail the achievement of national development goals which rely heavily on the quality of children’s learning achievements and their successful completion of formal education, both of which are heavily dependent on participation in quality ECCE programmes.

It will therefore make a tremendous difference if certain critical measures are immediately implemented, such as: 1) clearly defining complementary roles among the four lead agencies at the central level and ensuring effective communication among them at all times; 2) initiating synchronized planning, implementation and evaluation cycles in collaboration with counterparts at the local levels; and 3) organizing and building the management capacity of an inter-agency and multi-sectoral group at the provincial, city and village levels to replicate the central multidisciplinary coordinating body in order to translate multi-sectoral plans into concerted and convergent action at the community level.

**Early Childhood Curriculum**

The government has prioritized curriculum reform efforts in the past decade. Instead of simply focusing on expanding access, the commitment to improving the quality of the national curriculum “on paper” as well as in actual implementation is evident. Implementation of the new curriculum began in 2003, initially among five-year-olds in kindergartens. The revised curriculum applies the thematic approach to organizing content so that children are able to explore their everyday world more meaningfully and in greater depth.

The themes included in the national curriculum of Viet Nam are: Myself, My family, Our kindergarten, Our village. With each theme, there are activities and materials in the classroom that give an indication of how concepts related to the specific theme, e.g. village workers, are taught. There are posters, matching cards and storybooks to support the content and introduce information about the theme. Children engage in small-group discussions on the topic at hand, and they also work on arts and crafts and visit places that are related to the particular theme.

The commitment to a child-centred approach that emphasizes play as an integral part of the ECCE curriculum is visible in the classrooms where the revised curriculum is being implemented. The daily schedule is structured to provide opportunities for whole/large group activities, small-group interaction, as well as individual activities. An increasing number of classrooms in Viet Nam now feature
distinct learning corners that contain learning materials for a particular curriculum content area e.g. language, arts, mathematics and science. Classroom furniture is child-sized and conducive to flexible group sizes.

The MoET is managing the transition from the old programme to the revised curriculum. They are conducting training and orientation seminars for school heads and teachers with an effort to prioritize those who work in rural mountain villages and other remote areas. This curriculum reform effort is clearly a gradual process. The MoET has structured it as a 10-year project, starting in 2003 with five-year-olds and in subsequent years the new curriculum for the younger age groups will also be implemented. Principals and teachers can also decide for themselves how they approach the transition.

For example in Hoa Sen Kindergarten, three out of the 19 classes started implementing the revised curriculum as “pilot classes”. This is the school’s first step in its transition to the revised curriculum; however, they did not confine this to the five-year-old classes. Instead, each of the three pilot classes represents one of three multi-age groups: three- to four-year-olds; four- to five-years; five- and six-year-olds. In Ha Long Pre-school, 12 out of the 13 classes are implementing the revised curriculum, with only the youngest age group continuing to follow the traditional subject matter. Other schools have involved all the classes with five-year-olds during the first year of implementation. As these examples show, the schools can decide independently what strategy and pace they feel is appropriate for shifting to the revised curriculum.

The emphasis on learning early literacy and numeracy skills is evident but not prematurely structured or abstract. The best-equipped classrooms in state-run schools, such as those in Hoa Sen Kindergarten as well as the pilot schools in other provinces, are well-designed and set-up for age-appropriate learning experiences in language and mathematics. There are enough teacher-made materials for learning about numbers, patterns, shapes, pictures, letters and words.

The rural schools with limited learning materials compared to these urban kindergartens nevertheless teach concepts and skills in language and mathematics through a variety of objects, posters or picture cards, arts and crafts, music and group games. The teachers use both mother tongue and the national language in communicating with children only, although the village leaders and teachers emphasize the need for children to learn the national language in preparation for their entry into primary school.
hands touching them and more than one pair of eyes staring back at them. So from the first years of life, they are accustomed to being a part of a group: the family, the extended family, the neighbours and the peer group and then on to early childhood care and education programmes, in the ideal scenario.

But one other important factor here could be the clarity of expectations and the consequences regarding their behaviour within the group, in this instance the kindergarten class. The rule is: they can be part of the group and the adults (teachers) and classmates will accept them because they approve of their behaviour. There are elements of this rule that are made verbally explicit and elements that are not, and this is reinforced by the similar expectations at home in the presence of adult family members. Undoubtedly, this consistency between home and school expectations communicates to young children that their ability to live up to those rules in group life will determine whether they will merit adult and group approval or not.

Still in the context of organized forms of ECCE provision, there is a need to contend with the impact of large group sizes on the quality of learning experiences. Being in such big groups for five days a week, 10 months of the year can be stressful for any child, even harmful for some. If being in large groups means they will not be supervised and will not benefit from meaningful adult-child and child-child interaction supportive of their development and learning, then the learning process may well be detrimental. So group size and the availability of adult caregivers and teachers should always be considered in tandem. In Viet Nam, such large group sizes are manageable partly because of the low adult-child ratios in kindergartens with sufficient resources. In Hoa Sen Kindergarten, for example, three teachers and three student teachers are responsible for each class of 50 four- and five-year-olds. This translates to a ratio of one teacher to 16 children on the days that student teachers are not present. Most of the week, however, when they are there, the ratio is one adult to eight children. Children get a chance several times within the day to play or interact with peers and one or two adults in a small group. This relieves them of the stress of being in a large group the whole day and pre-empts the possibility that a child will remain anonymous and unknown to the adults who need to get to know children individually well enough to be able to support them and plan the curriculum effectively. Their classrooms are actually large multi-room spaces so learning corners are set-up as separate small inner rooms without doors. The learning materials are stored on shelves inside, within easy reach of the children as they work on small-group or individual activities. Everything is visible from the large central area of the classroom where most whole-group activities are conducted.

There are two issues that relate to curriculum and programming that merit serious attention and more careful study if the government wants to successfully provide ECCE programmes to those who are currently neglected. Firstly, there are groups of children whose life conditions contribute to their being marginalized not just from ECCE but from education in general and, in some cases, community participation. They are the children of ethnic minorities, children who are disabled and children who live in remote villages without schools (who may not be ethnic minorities or disabled).

The government has made an explicit commitment to prioritize access to ECCE for the children of ethnic communities. Ensuring access must necessarily extend beyond the provision of a teacher, a curriculum, a building and materials. In the case of these groups of children, there are additional considerations if the goal is to provide them with meaningful experiences in an ECCE programme. The philosophical underpinnings of the programme, the goals and objectives, the content and learning experiences will determine whether an educational programme is responsive to their needs, appropriate for their diverse abilities and skills, respectful of their own culture or perspectives, sensitive to their social, cultural, economic context and relevant to helping them prepare for a future of active participation in their communities and as productive citizens of Vietnamese society.

There is little mention of specific adjustments to be made in the revised curriculum in regard to these considerations. There have already been difficulties encountered with the primary school curriculum which was given attention much earlier than the ECCE curriculum. For example, in 1996 there were three different primary school curricula being used in Viet Nam, causing confusion among the teachers and school administrators in remote areas without communication facilities and who did not receive enough support from supervisors at the district level.

There are also cases when special curricula developed for specific groups, e.g. ethnic minorities, are irrelevant to their culture and social context or inadequate to meet the objectives of language learning. The challenge that presents itself first of all is to develop an appropriate and effective curriculum for various age and cultural groups. While these may share certain basic instructional objectives and essential content, these curricula should still include specific objectives, content and learning experiences that are tailor-made for each of the groups and that reflect their social and cultural context.
The second important challenge, therefore, is to ensure that the process for curriculum development will be meaningful, based on sound theoretical foundations, and is truly participatory. Fortunately, in Viet Nam there are experiences to be learned from, since there has been some preliminary work focused on marginalized children.

Two projects involve Early Childhood Care and Education programmes for children of ethnic minorities. One project is organized by Enfants et Developpement and features some very promising approaches to building community-based ECCE programmes among these otherwise neglected communities. The other project was initiated and is supported by Save the Children/UK and shows how curriculum development processes can be maximized to improve the quality of ECCE programmes. There is also a project on inclusive education which was initiated and is supported by Save the Children/Sweden. Although it was more focused on primary schools at the early stages, the experiences and the concepts of inclusion promoted by this initiative are definitely relevant to ECCE.

Bridges to Primary School: Curriculum and Language

A project was initiated by Save the Children-UK (SC-UK) in 1996 chiefly to establish and support pre-primary classes in the existing primary system for children aged five and six. SC-UK began by setting up pre-primary classes in five villages, and by 2002 there were already 45 classes in various schools. This expansion was made possible with the support and co-operation of the local education offices that even agreed to support the teachers’ salaries, training and other forms of logistical back-up.

In their work with the children of ethnic minorities in these village schools, SC-UK devoted considerable attention to two critical aspects of ECCE programmes: 1) language use and learning; and 2) curriculum development. In regard to language, they anticipated at the outset that this was an issue to contend with. In fact, none of the children that they work with speak Vietnamese; they speak their own local language. But like other children of ethnic communities, they are suddenly thrust into an exclusively Vietnamese language environment upon entry to primary school. Teachers do not speak their language so it can be assumed that the experience is intimidating for children who have not had even limited exposure to organized forms of ECCE. And it can only get worse, because their teachers will continue to be unable to communicate with them for the rest of the time they are in school. Furthermore, the burden is always on the child to learn the Vietnamese language. However, if they had a chance to participate in ECCE programmes, at least for one or two years, they would have the opportunity to communicate with other children and adults in both languages – mother tongue and Vietnamese. So SC-UK supported the setting-up of-

More details on this in the section on Good Practices in ECCE below.
Early Childhood Care and Education in Viet Nam

pre-primary classes to provide the children with just such a “transition mechanism” to ease their entry into primary school, to facilitate their adjustment and to enable them to learn in the national language.

In terms of curriculum development, SC-UK also invested in a process of working out the best possible option for the children and their teachers. They started with the 36 lessons developed for ethnic minorities by the MoET but found that this was inadequate for the children’s language learning needs and irrelevant to their context. They tried extending it by adding 14 lessons and then went on to a more comprehensive curriculum development process. The result was a nine-month curriculum organized with nine themes. This is considered adequate to give five- and six-year-olds a good foundation in the Vietnamese language before they enter primary school.

A major part of the support that SC-UK provided was for teacher training. This was a crucial investment by the project. Investing in capacity-building is also one of several mechanisms for sustainability that NGOs can activate, and in this case, SC-UK chose to do so by recruiting and training teachers from the local community. The teachers had diverse educational backgrounds, ranging from first grade of primary school up to secondary-level education. During the teacher training activities, they were introduced to principles and practices that promote active learning and teaching methods to implement the nine-month curriculum. A systematic and comprehensive approach to teacher training with an emphasis on curriculum development will enable teachers to respond appropriately to the demands of working with different groups of learners. It will also facilitate their adjustment to changes in the national curriculum, such as the new curriculum for Grade One which was introduced in 2002.

National Policies for ECCE

National ECCE policies in Viet Nam are lodged within two related frameworks: the first is within national education policy, and the second, children’s rights; Viet Nam ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child shortly after it was passed by the UN General Assembly in 1990. Both national plans, therefore, related to these frameworks that were developed on the basis of the state’s legal commitments including early childhood care and education.

Article 35 of the 1992 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam stipulates that “Education is the first priority in the national policy.” The Education Law of 1998 re-defined Viet Nam’s education sector, and it is here that there is explicit reference to early childhood care and education as a part of the broader education system. However, ECCE is not compulsory nor a pre-requisite for entry into primary school. Rather, the government tries to create demand among parents and promotes children’s participation in ECCE through the parent education programmes and the use of various media for raising awareness.

The Education Development Strategic Plan for 2001-2010 serves as the operational framework for current educational programmes and reform initiatives. This plan defines the goals, targets to be met by mid- and end-decade and identifies indicators of progress. It builds on lessons learned from experiences and from a critical situational analysis of the educational system. This national plan was developed in order to fulfil the commitments renewed during the World Conference on Education for All held in Dakar, Senegal, April 2000.

The primary targets of the National Education Plan are to increase school participation and completion rates, so that 97 per cent of Vietnamese children will be in school by 2005, and 99 per cent by 2010, while 95 per cent are targeted to complete their schooling in 2010. National policy makers are fully aware of the fact that participation in ECCE provides special benefits to children from ethnic communities, disabled children and those from poor families. There is evidence in Viet Nam of the positive impact of at least one year of participation in an ECCE programme. Children who participated in ECCE classes had improved language and literacy skills and better understanding of basic number concepts compared to those who did not have access to these classes. This equipped them for the process of adjustment to primary school and active participation which resulted in their improved school performance.

48 National Education Development Strategic Plan, and National Plan for Child Protection
Increasing attention is being paid to ECCE at higher levels of government, with, for example, a special inter-ministerial conference on ECCE convened in June 2002 by the deputy prime minister. One of the primary concerns addressed during this conference was the large disparity between ECCE service provision in different parts of the country and the unevenness of expansion and quality of programmes established by semi state-run and private institutions. A significant direction for ECCE policy was defined at this conference: the government’s priority for ECCE programming is to expand access to ECCE in poor villages and remote, mountain areas. In order to do this, resources will be re-directed from more affluent urban areas.

The government acknowledges the fact that international donors have made substantive efforts to support poor families and ethnic communities in setting up community-based ECCE programmes and will draw from these experiences for policy development and formulating strategies for programme implementation given the fact that they are the priority target groups. The situational analysis undertaken in preparation for the EFA National Plan points to the new policy directions as appropriate starting points for the formulation of a more coherent, focused and detailed ECCE strategic framework and development plan for the period 2001 to 2020. This ECCE policy document would elaborate on the basic directions already articulated within the National Education Plan.

The government has identified the following areas as priorities: 1) to develop policies and regulations to manage various forms of ECCE service delivery by semi-state and non-state sectors; 2) to develop mechanisms for financing targeted ECCE programmes in poor and remote areas; 3) to allocate resources for infrastructure within the annual government budget; 4) to address the working conditions, employment status and professional development of teachers; 5) to strengthen the capacity of the local officials responsible for management and supervision of ECCE programmes; and 6) to improve coordination among the various sectors involved in ECCE from the central to the local levels that work directly with communities and ECCE service providers.

**Quality and Access: Educational Reform Efforts and ECCE**

The government has clearly identified its priorities as far as access is concerned. Narrowing the gap between poor families without ECCE access and the affluent families who can afford to pay for children’s quality ECCE programmes requires a focused approach and ideally the collaboration of various social services and interventions in those villages that are considered priority target areas. Now that the government has decided that poor families and children from ethnic communities in remote, mountain areas are the priority groups, it is necessary to establish a clear implementation process.

To this end, it would be helpful to identify and adopt tools that can be used to define specific indicators for family poverty, and at the same time define risk factors for child development. This will enable the local ECCE programme managers within the government to systematically locate, identify and screen these children and families, and determine who and where they are. After most of the families within the villages have been identified the perfect entry point would be the parent education programme through its home visiting component.

Within the parent education programme, the possibility of introducing a culturally-sensitive and reliable but user-friendly developmental screening tool should be seriously considered. If the government has any intention of doing this, this early stage in the 10-year period would seem timely, for the following reasons.
First, this kind of screening can help with focused targeting; second, it paves the way for a viable system at the village level that can be used to locate and identify children with disabilities and other developmental problems. It will also be relevant for identifying victims of child abuse and other rights violations. Third, it can be used as baseline information on the developmental status of very young children up to age three, which will then provide a basis for more reliable measures of programme impact. Follow-up studies on the continuing development of these children may also be considered. At the same time, it offers many opportunities for parent education and serves as a very practical tool for helping parents better understand their children.

The information learned from this interaction with parents can in turn be used to further improve and broaden the scope of the content of the parent education programme. This has also been an area of concern of the MoET. Traditional child-rearing practices that facilitate children’s well-being, learning and development can be reinforced and promoted. Those that must be changed because of potential harm to children can be identified and then strategies to make those changes possible can be developed.

The viability of this initiative depends on several factors: the level of commitment on the part of central government to develop and monitor indicators of ECCE programme quality and the impact of ECCE on children, in part determined through changes in their health, nutritional and developmental status; commitment to monitoring quality in ECCE and the capacity of village-based ECCE workers to learn procedures and record information accurately; and the efficient coordination among the various ECCE service providers from various sectors and at all levels of government.

Ideally, the children can begin to participate in an informal home-based programme linked to the existing parent education programme. This would also be a good opportunity to introduce the child development screening tool as a learning material for parent education. There are many more benefits that can be derived from a serious investment of this kind, including the measurement of programme quality indicators and the monitoring of the government’s implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Another important and practical task would be to map out the existing programmes and their proponents, along with their service providers. This would best be done in collaboration with UNESCO, UNICEF and international NGOs, like members of Save the Children Alliance, Enfants et Developpement and others. There should also be opportunities for learning lessons from the programme experiences in the areas that they supported, and time to analyze the implications of these for programming as well as policy formulation.

A phased approach to curriculum reform is generally more effective, whether it involves all the schools in the country, a number of schools in a district or only half the classes in one particular school. One advantage is that other teachers can observe how their colleagues are making the transition. If the first group of teachers succeed, then it will also motivate the others or at least reassure them that it is a manageable task. This helps to build their confidence in themselves as well as in the new curriculum. There will be many opportunities for peer exchanges that can establish, strengthen or invigorate any collegial support systems. This is essential for all teachers as they will have to learn some new concepts, activities and change their practices in order to successfully implement the revised curriculum.

There are also schools, such as Ha Long Pre-school, which can easily build on the supportive processes of supervision that already operate fully in the school. More experienced teachers work as coaches or mentors to the new or less experienced ones. The teachers work together: planning, preparing materials, solving problems and testing innovations. One of the school administrators also
works with the teachers as a curriculum co-ordinator who is available as a resource for them. The teachers in Hoa Sen Kindergarten also work together in groups to plan classes, discuss questions and share their experiences and materials. This kind of a support system will make a big difference and can hopefully be replicated in most of the schools throughout the country.

Kindergartens and childcare centres in rural areas where some ethnic minorities live were visited for this study. The teachers there are still implementing the traditional curriculum. They know about the revised curriculum through the district office and a few teachers have attended training programmes organized by the city. However, they speak about the revised curriculum in a vague future tense because they said they don’t have the necessary materials to implement it.

The physical set-up of these kindergartens as they are now will certainly have to be transformed in order to provide the kinds of active learning processes envisioned in the new curriculum. The classrooms are smaller, less colourful and there are not enough details that would be of real interest to children. This is because of the limited number of learning materials, and the absence of children’s work on the white walls where only a few posters and pictures are displayed.

It appears that creative activities like drawing, painting and moulding with clay are not organized, most probably because there are no art materials and supplies available. Simple varnished wooden tables and chairs are either lined up in rows or arranged along the four walls with an open space in the centre. There are no distinct learning corners. There are usually two, at most five shelves where the learning materials are neatly displayed. The children are often in whole or large groups and spend most of the activity period in their own places; however, they do have time for outdoor play. The teachers organize group activities like circle games or music and movement outdoors where there is enough space.

One cannot overlook the proliferation of learning materials which are “store-bought”, or mass-produced and sold to schools. These are the learning materials produced by the state-owned Educational Equipment Co. as well as a few other private publishing houses and manufacturers of toys and educational materials. It is apparent that there has been a boom in the production of local educational materials and in the toy manufacturing industry, spurred by the great demand in the rapidly expanding ECCE sector. It is not unusual to find exactly the same puzzles or manipulative toys in two kindergarten schools in different cities like Hanoi and Ha Long. It is a positive indication that a major requirement for achieving a child-centred and effective curriculum is being addressed in a pro-active way by the MoET. From the MoET’s point of view, the shortage of learning materials, especially among non-state schools due to their lack of funds, poses a major deterrent to curriculum reform. The perceived solution or strategy is to promote these mass-produced learning materials in order to ensure that children will be provided with concrete and active learning experiences.

However, there could also be unintended consequences if this approach is not complemented by other initiatives. The proliferation of these factory-made educational materials heightens the contrast between resource-rich urban classrooms and their relatively bare rural counterparts that make do with only a few posters, two or three shelves with baskets or boxes containing teacher-made materials and a few toys.

The well-stocked classroom with a complete range of mass-produced products may become the standard image of an effective ECCE classroom or centre. This would then imply that a classroom which has fewer of these materials but yet achieves the same objectives by using mostly teacher- or parent-made versions and recycled objects for counting, sorting, sequencing, and arts and crafts would never meet the criteria for quality in ECCE. These classrooms will always be considered less effective or inferior. If so, then poor kindergartens or day-care centres will never be able to meet quality standards.
There are many other indicators of quality in an ECCE programme, but an emphasis on certain kinds of learning materials will limit or possibly distract the ECCE community from the more essential elements, such as the quality of interaction between and among children and teachers.

There are other disadvantages to promoting this intensified mass production of ECCE learning materials as a major strategy in curriculum reform efforts or as a way of providing the tools for learning and teaching. One of these is the risk of sending out the message or validating an emerging perception that the new curriculum depends on access to these materials. So until a school can afford to purchase these toys and learning tools, the teachers will not be in a position to implement the new curriculum. This presents an unnecessary obstacle to curriculum reform.

A second problem is the possible homogenization of young children’s concepts of Vietnamese culture. Many of these mass-produced learning materials are broadly distributed throughout most of the 64 provinces. In effect, children are now starting to be saturated with visual images through artists’ drawings that mainly reflect a generic urban-based child, family, kindergarten or community with some token images of ethnic minorities. Considering the fact that Viet Nam has such a diverse and complex ethno-linguistic mix in its 54 ethnic groups, this becomes a critical issue. It assumes greater significance within the context of national policy, which has made ECCE for children of ethnic minorities a priority for this decade.

What can be even more challenging for teachers is the task of “unlearning” some of the practices and approaches that they have been used to employing, but that would be inappropriate for the revised curriculum. Using themes requires more flexibility without losing focus and working within the clear structure of content i.e. concepts and information related to the topic of study. Thematic teaching calls for a more open-ended approach that elicits children’s active participation and spontaneous or incidental contributions.

At the same time, teachers should not lose clarity and a sense of direction in managing the flow of activities and introducing concepts. Organizing course content around themes is one of the most effective ways of integrating the curriculum into the learning process. While it may be fairly easy to design a theme study on “My Village”, for example, there will always be a lot of work required in preparing and implementing the activities. The approach requires more careful attention to details such as the combination of materials and activities to be included in developing the theme, and the sequence in which these will be used or achieved. With the old curriculum, teachers did not have to make these decisions because they received a prescriptive curriculum with monthly lesson plans that were almost uniformly implemented. All the teachers had to do was stick to the plan.

Although much remains to be done in terms of widespread application of the revised ECCE curriculum, this is clearly a move in the right direction. There is every reason to believe that these curriculum reforms will be successfully implemented within the 10-year time frame for the National Education Plan. There are also positive indications that serious efforts will be made to fulfil the commitment to ensure that children from poor families and children of ethnic communities will be prioritized to enable them to gain access to ECCE.

Viet Nam has proven itself a determined and persistent caregiver and provider for its young children and has impressive accomplishments to attest to this. When those accomplishments are assessed within the social, economic and political context in which they were achieved, it is even more impressive. It was a battle-scarred Viet Nam that had to establish these solid foundations for ECCE. In fact, even in the midst of war, the political leadership did not forget the importance of early childhood care programmes as part of the support system for families.

The country is at a good vantage point as far as ECCE is concerned. First, there is a long and diverse experience base to draw upon that informs the current efforts to expand access and broaden quality. Second, there are enough examples of successful programmes and effective
practices that can be promoted and disseminated among service providers and programme managers. Third, there is a cadre of ECCE specialists and the potential for more effective inter-agency and multi-sectoral collaboration is great.

Furthermore, the international donors are firmly committed to ECCE and are solidly behind the government. It is probably one of the few countries where international donors have taken the initiative to organize themselves into a “working group for ECCE” and defined the basis for their collaboration. Aside from achieving more efficient programme management and cost-effective approaches to using funds from foreign donors, this also strengthens the policy and programming base on which continuing efforts can be anchored. Beyond the financial resources, international donors can also contribute their institutional experience and expertise in ECCE. This will enrich the programming and policy development process that will definitely continue to be led by the Vietnamese.

The Vietnamese people and their government have demonstrated the political will to fulfil their promises and achieve their targets by the end of the decade in the year 2010. In the same way that Viet Nam has outdone itself and so many other countries as a producer of rice so that it is now an exporter rather than an importer of rice, it can very well outdo itself and others in ECCE. Now the challenge is to start the new millennium with a decade of sustained support for young children, their caregivers and their teachers. If the same political will that made such giant strides in agriculture possible is brought to bear on the provision of quality ECCE, the Vietnamese people can be assured that they will have planted seeds of such high quality that they will yield a bountiful harvest – a generation of competent, caring and resilient individuals whose rights to ECCE access were fulfilled.
Introduction

This synthesis draws upon the experiences of ECCE practitioners in the three countries considered in this report, as well as the evidence from research linked to programmes and frameworks proven effective in other countries where a wide range of ECCE programmes are implemented. It begins by establishing the professional and political context for this study and identifying the intended beneficiaries of efforts to improve the quality of ECCE programmes. The second part establishes the fact that multiplicity is crucial to this search for and documentation of best practices: multiple stakeholders and multiple perspectives. Then, suggested frameworks that guide ECCE programming and practices are discussed in the third section, which provides the necessary programming context for good principles of good practice in the final part of the paper.

1. Knowledge-building and Sharing within ECCE ‘Communities of Practice’

It was after 1990 that the international development community and the governments they work with and support began to take a greater interest in ECCD programmes. With the inclusion of the now-familiar phrase “learning begins at birth” and the goal expanded access to early childhood care and development programmes, the search for programme models in their own countries began for those governments who were bent on fulfilling the commitments made in Jomtien and with their partners in the global movement for EFA: UNESCO, The World Bank, UNICEF and UNDP. Thus, ECCD came out from behind the shadows of the elementary school programme and became a distinct and prominent area of study in its own right.

Since then, during the consultative meetings that followed between 1990 and 2000, there were opportunities for ECCD practitioners and partners in the global alliance to share experiences from programmes implemented across many regions, and specifically in countries of the developing world. It was also a prolific period for ECCD-focused groups, such as the Consultative Group on ECCD who produced a significant amount of print and multimedia materials as well as a website. This was often done in a collective fashion through the CG Secretariat, but at the same time member organizations also independently developed and disseminated information about early childhood development programmes and practices.

This is not to imply that before 1990 there was little information about ECCD. Since the 1960s, there has been a steady increase in the documentation of early childhood education programmes and practices, particularly in the west, as well as countries like China and Japan where ECCD programmes had been implemented on a large scale. The professional community in these highly-developed countries produced and read these publications and organized international
conferences, and in doing so exerted a profound influence on the practices and policies of ECCD practitioners, not just in their sphere but also in the developing world.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, however, apart from publications about Headstart in the United States, most of these documented experiences were within programmes in centres or institutions that were attended by children of more affluent families. There was very little information about programmes in developing countries specifically intended for children living in conditions of poverty, isolation or conflict.

“The Twelve who Survive”, by Dr. Robert Myers, commissioned by UNESCO and published by High/Scope press in 1992, was the earliest comprehensive and in-depth look at ECCD specifically intended for children in the developing world who had little or no access to ECCD programmes. The Consultative Group for Early Childhood Care and Development, to which UNESCO belongs, publishes the Coordinators’ Notebook. This is another valuable source of information for international agencies seeking to provide updated and often trend-setting information resources for their partners.

There were also contributions by individuals who worked directly on programmes or conducted research in their respective countries. CG member organizations like UNESCO, UNICEF and Bernard van Leer Foundation, and Save the Children Alliance also developed and disseminated publications or videos about programme experiences in countries of Africa, Latin America, and South and South-East Asia. The ways in which the information has facilitated the beginnings or the expansion of public ECCE programmes in developing countries were evident by the end of the decade.

This distinction is being made because it is from this body of work that governments in search of effective, viable, replicable and affordable programme models and practices drew to inform their own policy and programme development. Three years after EFA 2000 in Dakar, the work continues because the challenge remains: to provide access to ECCE for all children. Thus, the “search and share” efforts for good practices continue.

For the ECCE community, the documentation of good practices within the context of this paper serves at least two purposes: one is pragmatic, for immediate application to programmes providing direct services to children; and the other is inspirational, as it articulates or helps to consolidate a shared vision for the quality of care and teaching that we seek to provide all young children. Both can inform policy.

The first practical purpose is to contribute to the ongoing learning processes that all those in the ECCE community engage in, as well as to facilitate for parents, community members, leaders and policymakers. Learning about the “how”, “why” and “when” of ECCE programmes as children and families interact in a particular social, cultural or political context clarifies thinking and practice for other similar programmes, or else stimulates new ideas for different contexts. Over time, as these practices are validated and reaffirmed, especially in terms of the outcomes for children and their caregivers, these can help to define quality standards in that particular setting.

The second purpose is to celebrate the achievements of the ECCE community, build on these successes and generate more concrete interventions or actions that both expand access to and improve the quality of ECCE programmes. It is similar to building on parental wisdom and experiences, or every teacher’s or day-care worker’s strengths in the process of working with them as individual learners. Highlighting what they are doing that is “right” or effective and using that as a starting point to enrich their knowledge about care giving and teaching works better than simply providing them with information under the banner “all the things you need to know to take care of and teach young children.” It reinforces appropriate practice and it creates positive feelings on which to build and stretch the boundaries of possibility, as this kind of thinking helps them to be open
to new or different ideas. For teachers and day-care workers, it also helps to nurture their sense of ownership for more and possibly different ideas.

Similarly, by magnifying practices that represent the collective success of the ECCE community, we can help the national ECCE programmes as well as the smaller-scale community-based initiatives to grow and improve their quality. This, we hope, will translate into a significantly greater number of children who, by the age of six, seven or eight, will be described as healthy, well-nourished, secure and confident in themselves, interactive and well-adjusted in his or her social context, expressive and eager and able to engage in a variety of learning experiences both in qualitative and quantitative terms. In this way, it can motivate or help to transform ECCE programmes into more effective, culturally and socially appropriate, learning environments for young children.

This particular search is limited at the outset to the three countries that UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education has identified as the focus of this study. So it does not presume to be comprehensive and exhaustive enough for the entire region; rather, it is the first step in a longer and broader process. It is also focused on programmes that are intended for and accessible to the children in these countries whose participation in good-quality, fee-based programmes is not possible because their families are poor, they have disabilities, they live in remote villages or isolated cultural communities, or they have HIV/AIDS.

This does not suggest that there are two or more “sets of standards”, one for rich and another for poor families, whether they are in developed or developing countries. All children deserve the best quality of care and education at home and through a wide range of ECCE services. Unfortunately however, we live in a world where inequalities, both in the distribution of resources and political will to make good on governments’ obligations to young children, combined with a lack of information and misunderstanding about the importance of education in the early years of childhood, deprive millions of young children of that care and education. Yet there is a sense of urgency because this continuing lack of access and the prevailing inadequacy of programme quality will continue to be detrimental to so many young children and pre-empt their optimal growth, learning and development in the future.

Thus, the premise is that working to ensure that all young children will have access to good quality programmes need not be postponed until a time when all families and all countries have the human, material and financial resources to broadly implement programmes with consistently high standards of quality. (These standards can, for example be measured through credible tools like the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale [ECERS], for example.)

The programmes that we observed, learned about and now cite as examples of “good quality” may not even merit the rating “good” when the physical facilities are assessed using the criteria in the ECERS. But they will surely get at least a “good” rating for adult-child interaction. They also fulfil many of the developmentally-appropriate practices that have been promoted by the National Association of Educators of Young Children (NAEYC). At the same time, they may also introduce practices that effectively maximize the limited resources available to them, and may make do with, for example, higher adult-child ratios and less equipment and fewer learning materials yet achieve very positive outcomes for children. It is evident that ECCE practitioners in these contexts understand and apply the basic principles that underpin these practices. In most cases, the value-added feature is the “socio-cultural fit”. This is because they can interpret then translate the

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49 The limitation of the study to three countries is based simply on realistic and practical concerns: the availability of limited resources combined with the current state of ECCE and immediate availability of ECCE stakeholders in the first three countries that comprise the first batch.

50 The NAEYC has developed “developmentally-appropriate practices,” a set of principles and practices to guide ECCE practitioners in various early childhood settings for children aged 0-8. It has been widely disseminated and referred to in many countries, with the notable exception of the United States.
principles into what is both culturally and developmentally appropriate and relevant, and in the process they are able to transcend the barriers or dismantle obstacles to young children’s full participation in ECCE programmes.

Given the diversity in physical, economic, social and cultural contexts, support given to caregivers and teachers through sharing information should be very clear on the “why” and “how” of teaching practice, but not as prescriptive when it comes to the material or physical resources.

This study highlights some of these principles that underpin the practices of effective ECCE providers in Thailand, the Philippines and Viet Nam. It is based on our understanding of what the ECCE practitioners and policy-makers in these countries have tried to accomplish and what they still hope to achieve in order to meet the basic learning needs of children at greatest risk of exclusion. Furthermore, in understanding the stages these countries have reached, we learned about the principles and practices that have resulted in positive outcomes for children and their caregivers. Focusing on whatever has been working well can offer meaningful contributions and can help chart the way forward to achieve quality ECCE for all young children.

II. Lenses and Yardsticks for Defining Good Practice and Measuring Quality in ECCE

“Values and beliefs about quality can be personal, familial, communal and cultural. They can derive from experience, education, family or religious training, as well as from one’s world view and practical considerations or limitations. Thus when we say that quality is embedded in cultures, and when we seek to discuss quality within a ‘cultural paradigm’, it is important to realize that there is more than one culture that needs to be taken into consideration … at least four kinds of culture that have an impact on the process … the local and family cultures within which the child is living … the culture of early childhood programmes as they exist in the world today … the emerging global
In the Best Interests of Young Learners: Striving for Good Practices in ECCE

ECCE programmes have a social and cultural context; thus, at every level of working with and for young children, e.g. from the parent at home to the childcare worker or teacher at the day-care centre and school to programme managers and administrators, national policy planners, advisers and researchers, recurrent questions must be addressed: How will quality be defined and by whom? What criteria will be applied? What is truly essential based on beliefs about the goals and functions of ECCE programmes?

The process is culturally driven and heavily dependent on social, political and economic factors. This is particularly true for government-provided or funded ECCE programmes, which rely on public funds and family and community contributions to operate. But there is general consensus that the quality of ECCE projects must be addressed and intensified, and awareness-raising efforts are needed as well as broad-based and participatory processes which must be activated at various stages, from the ECCE setting, to the community and country levels. One of the more constructive approaches involves identifying what currently works and what is considered as effective practice.

Identifying “good practice” can be defined as a comprehensive, integrated and collaborative approach in the continuing efforts to improve the quality of ECCE programmes. “Good practice” is anchored on principles, understanding, beliefs and values about the world and sound knowledge about how young children grow, develop and the ways that they learn.

Because of this complexity and the resulting diversity of potential criteria for quality in ECCE, constant negotiation and re-negotiation between and among the various stakeholders is required. A unilateral and arbitrary approach is untenable, and as Katz has pointed out, a “healthy antidote is needed to such a top-down perspective”, often driven by programme managers and policy makers who may lock themselves into their own viewpoint (Katz, 1992).

This crucial need for flexibility, sensitivity to context and the application of participatory and inclusive approaches to developing ECCE programmes has been consistently emphasized by Myers and Evans. They have always cautioned against prescriptive blueprints or “one-best-way” approaches that lead to inappropriate application of programme models within certain social and cultural contexts (Evans, Myers, Ilfeld, 2000). They also have elaborated on a framework for programming in ECCE that is anchored on a sound knowledge based on child development as well as the structure and dynamics of family and community life. It is consistent with a human rights framework for childcare and education, and involves complementary strategies and approaches guided by three sets of principles – contextual, social and technical – in response to the rapidly growing interest in high-quality, affordable early childhood programmes.

Effective ECCE programmes have clearly-defined outcomes. Outcomes for children are the intended results of the teaching and learning processes as identified in the curriculum of an ECCE programme. They are expressed as broad, comprehensive, assessable and observable results indicating a child’s achievement. The achievement of outcomes is determined by: 1) individual children’s stages of development; 2) individual children’s learning styles; 3) ECCE service providers’ competencies; 4) the specific early childhood setting e.g. the playgroup, the day-care centre, the kindergarten classroom; and 5) the child in the context of his or her family and community.

Thailand and the Philippines have developed appropriate tools for screening and assessing child development that are consistent with a holistic perspective on child growth and appropriate for use within an integrated ECCD programme. They each have their developmental assessment checklists.

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51 Evans and Myers have refined the Complementary Approaches to Programming in ECCD that has been promoted by the Consultative Group on ECCD. For more information to appreciate the stages of development of this framework see: The Twelve who Survive, by Robert Myers and Early Childhood Counts: A Programming Guide, by Evans, Myers and Ilfeld.
for which national norms have been established. Thailand is further along in terms of widespread use of the checklist by service providers at the grassroots level. In the Philippines, at present the tool has been introduced only through special ECCD projects, such as Kinder Plus in Central Luzon and in ADB/WB-funded projects implemented in seven provinces, all in the southern islands of Visayas and Mindanao. A school readiness assessment tool is also in the process of being finalized by the Department of Education under the ADB-WB ECCD Project.

What is more significant about the Thai experience is the portfolio approach to documenting and evaluating individual children’s development and progress within kindergarten classes, which is adopted throughout the public school system and in demonstration schools for Teacher Training Institutes. This is significant because it appropriately draws attention to the individual child’s emerging competencies, values the child as a whole person, and actively involves the child, parents and teachers in the process rather than arbitrarily limiting it to the teachers’ or central office supervisors’ definition of “achievement”.

Thus the process of evaluation becomes more meaningful as well as functional because it is a collaborative process. Portfolio assessment is also an effective way of weaning the ECCE practitioners away from inappropriately structured quantitative forms of measuring children’s learning and their development. Such paper and pencil tests and scores have been used for so long in many Asian countries where many kindergartens continue to be simplified versions of Grade One classrooms.

This application of more appropriate assessment and evaluation approaches and tools in Thailand is clearly a positive outcome of the education reform programme, which simultaneously addressed capacity-building for teachers through in- and pre-service teacher training.

Child development and learning is a continuum, and each child will achieve identified outcomes in different but equally meaningful ways along the continuum. A set of indicators must be developed for each outcome, which can act as pointers towards a child’s achievement in a particular area. They are not prescriptive or definitive. While there may be consensus reached on national frameworks, standards and indicators, ideally each ECCE setting should develop specific indicators for the individual needs of the children they teach.

On a national scale, Thailand has achieved considerable progress in the process of developing such frameworks, standards and indicators as a result of a serious investment in ECCE during the EFA decade that coincided with the timeframe for the National Education Reform programme. At the same time, there is flexibility for programme managers and service providers in ECCE settings in communities, schools, as well as demonstration schools in teacher training institutes to define their specific indicators for the children in their own ECCE centres.

Defining Quality

On the matter of defining quality in ECCE programmes, Woodhead suggests that beyond simply identifying specific indicators of quality, serious efforts should be invested towards developing “a policy framework that can encompass multiple perspectives, multiple beneficiaries and multiple benefits.”

Based on his participation in a project on the environment of the young child, Woodhead (1996) developed a framework that is based on three key questions that lead to identifying: 1) the

52 From 1993 to 1995, the Bernard van Leer Foundation implemented a project “The Environment of the Child”, which involved the development of a theoretical framework by Terezinha Nunes, case studies in consultants from India, Kenya, Venezuela and France, regional workshops and a published report by Martin Woodhead, Pathways to Quality in Large-scale Programmes for Young Disadvantaged Children.
stakeholders in the “quality” of a programme; 2) the perceived beneficiaries; and 3) the indicators of quality. These provide the three dimensions in Woodhead’s model for examining the quality of early childhood programmes that is more comprehensive and guards against arbitrary and narrow prescriptions.

For Moss and Pence (1994), what is needed is a new “inclusionary paradigm” that would pre-empt rigid prescriptions for good programming, identifying and prioritizing goals and criteria for choosing indicators. Building on these frameworks, Evans took it a step further and proposed a design for an initial workshop that applies this alternative, inclusive paradigm and that involves all the stakeholders (Evans, 1996).

There are examples of how such inclusive and participatory processes are applied by ECCE stakeholders in many developing countries including the Philippines, Viet Nam and Thailand. We found two very interesting examples of how these can be applied in the process of planning ECCE programmes: the Kinder Plus project in the Philippines and the Ethnic Minority Education Project among the Kinh ethnic group that was initiated and supported by Enfants et Developpement in two districts of La Cao Province in Viet Nam.

**Striving for Good Practices in ECCE**

The first phase of this early childhood education project by Enfants et Developpement (ED) began in 1999 with the setting-up of community-based pre-schools for Kinh children aged between three and five years. The objective was to improve their readiness for schools so that they would be able to succeed in and complete their formal primary education. The expected outcomes were: 1) an increase in the number of Kinh children who are successful in school because they are better prepared after being able to participate in home-based pre-schools; 2) improved primary schools that are transformed into supportive physical, cognitive and psycho-social learning environments that encourage active participation by children, parents and teachers; 3) strengthening homes and communities as supportive care-giving and learning environments with parents and community members actively involved in the educational processes; 4) an increase in the number of ethnic minority teachers trained to teach Grades 1-3 classes in primary school.

A total of 319 children aged three to five who participated in the home-based village pre-schools were the principal beneficiaries of the project. Two thousand and forty-eight schoolchildren aged six to 13 were considered indirect beneficiaries as a result of significant investments made, such as improved facilities for the village school, policies to encourage school attendance by providing boarding options for girls, and the recruitment and training of teachers from their own villages.

There are clear signs of increased levels of community involvement in the life of the school and the children’s educational experiences. This required investments in awareness raising, advocacy and education activities for parents and other community members as well as village leaders. Meetings, training activities and informal interaction were crucial for motivating their active participation in the lives of their children as well as supporting the village school. A participatory process involving children as well as adults in the community to plan for and then construct the children’s playground is an excellent example of how this was achieved in the project. Facilitating parent involvement and participation in schools and in community development activities was integral to the project. For the parents and other adults in the community, these came in the form of meetings, training programmes for the teachers and for family members directly involved in farm-based livelihood projects, and active membership in local organizations or networks. This improvement energized the community as a supportive environment for all its pre-school and school children, a feat achieved largely by developing the capacity of parents and other adults in the community, whether as parents and heads of households or caregivers responsible for their children’s health care, education and well-being, or as teachers and agricultural workers who are involved in very important village services and livelihood activities to improve family nutrition and income.

One of the most impressive features of the project is the sophisticated and functional organizational structure that has been established and the innovative networks that were organized: for example, the Early Childhood Education Network and the Vet Education Network. By investing in the organization of a multi-layered training and supervision system from the village, commune and district level, the project ensures that the 32 primary school teachers from the Kinh ethnic communities who were recruited and trained would have a support system in place. This involved several interventions: 1) the organization of a Working Group at the district level, primarily for monitoring and as a means for engaging in community and village-level information activities on education and children’s rights; 2) the training of supervisors and formal studies for teacher educators; 3) a twinning programme involving a commune-level pre-school supervisor and an ethnic minority assistant as a way of addressing the inter-cultural issues that arise within the processes of supervision and training; and 4) training of veterinarians who would provide support for the families engaged in rearing animals and farming.
However, acknowledging the specificity of social and cultural contexts and promoting approaches that respect socio-cultural, political and economic diversity does not mean there are no meeting points on the journey towards a broadly applicable definition of what constitutes “good practice” and that contribute to achieving high standards of programme quality in ECCE across cultures and physical contexts. Programme experiences in ECCE from such diverse cultures and socio-economic contexts have provided us with examples of care giving and teaching practices that constitute “quality care and education”.

Young children all over the world have the same rights and the same basic needs: love and affection, opportunities for interaction, self-expression and communication with others, nourishment and well-being, a sense of security and safety, comfort and relief in times of pain and difficulty, opportunities and resources for play, and use of their senses and growing bodies to explore and learn about their world around them, in terms of people, things and places. Without these, a child will not grow, develop and learn.

Families, communities, service providers and the state through public ECCE programmes share the responsibility for ensuring that these basic needs are provided for and children’s rights are protected. Over time, in the course of fulfilling these responsibilities to children, much has been learned about which practices and conditions promote optimum child development and support learning in early childhood. From these experiences and the ever-growing knowledge base, we can derive effective practices that are shared across the world and serve as multicultural meeting points for good practice.

III. Building Partnerships for ECCE: Prevention, Early Intervention, Laying the Foundations for Lifelong Learning

By its very nature, ECCE involves many stakeholders and duty bearers. Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological framework describes these multiple layers that comprise the child’s learning environment and the factors or variables that affect and define, or are in turn affected and defined by, the interaction between them. Bronfenbrenner refers to these as “systems”, expanding and increasingly complex, starting with the child-caregiver dyad, the community and the immediate environment, the social institutions that directly affect children and families, and the socio-political or ideological framework that affect value systems, policies, resources of families, communities and institutions for care giving and teaching.

**Information, Education and Communication on ECCD for Parents**

In Viet Nam, the government’s Committee for Population, Families, and Children is spearheading a media campaign within the context of an existing programme, Integrated Early Childhood Development (IECD), with support from UNICEF. This also involves in-house collaboration within UNICEF between the Education Section and the Communications Section.

A study on knowledge, attitudes, and practices in relation to ECCD and a survey on media for children were conducted in 2001. Several workshops involving media practitioners and those directly involved in ECCD programmes were convened. In 2001, children’s books and posters for caregivers were developed in an “ECCD and Media” workshop. The books feature child and family interaction, covering such themes as the importance of family support to nurture curiosity; different ways of developing the child’s senses; a grandfather who nurtures his disabled grandchild’s holistic development and works for his inclusion; and gender fairness through the daily routines of two siblings in a family from an ethnic tribal community.

In 2002, another workshop focused on the development of a more detailed communications plan for a media campaign and on designing the prototype materials designed to communicate key concepts and principles to promote holistic child development from birth. The media campaign was launched in early 2003 with the broadcast of radio and TV spots as well as the distribution of printed materials through ECCD service delivery venues. These IECD materials include a series of attractive, colourful posters/flip charts entitled “The Wonderful Years” with culturally-diverse photographs of infants and young children interacting with caregivers (mothers, fathers, grandparents) or playing with peers, as well as spaces for children’s photos in front. At the back are written related principles and suggested care-giving practices to promote whole child development. They also published the children’s picture books, caregivers’ books, and a “newborn gift pack” for families with newborn babies. These materials were developed as a multi-agency and multi-sectoral effort co-ordinated by the Ministry of Education and actively supported by UNICEF Hanoi. The development and pre-testing of the materials involved parents and ECCD service providers from two communes (Tan Thinh and Na Son) and district and provincial offices.
This multi-layered, interactive conception of how young children are cared for and educated is also integral to the ASEAN ECCD conceptual framework. The ASEAN ECCD framework was adapted in 2000 by the ASEAN member countries to provide a basis for national programming and policy development in their respective countries. The governments of Thailand, the Philippines and Viet Nam have been actively involved in the ASEAN ECCD Working Group since its inception.\footnote{It first convened in 1999, when inter-agency delegations from ASEAN member countries met for the first seminar in Singapore. It has since been followed by two more meetings – one in the Philippines and another in Thailand. The composition of the ASEAN government delegations aptly reflects the recognition of this need for multidisciplinary and inter-sectoral collaboration. For most countries, the delegation included officials from ministries of education, health and social welfare or services – all stakeholders in ECCD.} Aside from adapting Bronfenbrenner’s ecological paradigm, there was consensus that practices in ECCD must be developmentally, contextually and culturally appropriate.

Enhancing Parent Education Programmes: Parent-friendly Content

In the Philippines, the Parent Effectiveness Service (PES), which was initiated by the Department of Social Welfare and Development and promoted among the local government units, has been revised to strengthen its modules on early childhood development and expanded to include the child’s later developmental stages and issues affecting parents as caregivers of children from school-entry age to adolescence.

To complement this national parent education programme, the Kinder Plus ECCD Project developed a very simple, easy-to-recall, parent-friendly way of stating seven basic “concepts” that are crucial in ECCD. The implementing partners chose seven Filipino words which all started with the letter K and that happen to precisely represent what young children need: nurture and care (kalinga); companion/caregiver (kasama); health care and proper nutrition (kalusugan); someone to interact and talk with (kausap); play – someone to play with and time to play (kalaro); knowledge and skills (kahayahan at kaalaman); and an environment that enriches experiences (kapaligiran mapagpayaman sa karanasan). In addition, since the word for “rights” also begins with “K” in Filipino, it was easy to link ECCD and children’s rights. They popularized the 7K (seven K words) for Kinder Plus through visual print materials, such as brochures, posters, billboards and dish towels. They had a rap song composed and then ECCD service providers created dance steps to accompany the song. It has become a favourite activity during parent education workshops and even training of ECCD service providers. The rap song was broadcast on the local radio. It was easy for parents and for the ECCD service providers themselves to remember what young children need and their rights in the early years.

A range of ECCE programmes and services as well as numerous advocacy efforts to support young children and their families are underway in the three countries. Evidence from the experiences of effective programmes in these countries point to the fact that ECCE programmes must be conceptualized within the context of providing family support. These effective projects are committed to the notion that to help children, we have to provide education and support for their parents as well. Thus, many include parent education and home visits combined with quality early childcare and education. Parent education can involve highly interactive approaches like home visiting, parent workshops or discussion groups, the use of various forms of media in conjunction with these interpersonal activities or with service delivery as well as stand-alone mass dissemination.

This importance of a family support context for ECCE is backed up by findings from longitudinal studies linked to high-quality ECCE programmes in more highly-developed countries where poverty still persists. One of these is linked to the Carolina Abecedarian Project, which provided sustained services to young children and their low-income families from the first months of life through the early elementary school years. The study found that: 1) young children’s involvement in high-quality pre-school programmes had positive effects on intellectual development and academic achievement; 2) at age 12, participating children had IQ scores that averaged 5.3 points higher than a group of non-participants; 3) at age 15, participants in pre-school showed higher test scores and had 50% higher test scores and had 50%
percent fewer special education placements than a comparison group of students who had not attended preschool (Campbell et al., 2002).

Many of the risk factors, such as maternal malnutrition and substance abuse during the prenatal period; negative experiences (trauma, neglect); the absence of appropriate stimulation; maternal depression which deprives infants of the warm responsive care they need during the crucial stage of infant development, often occur side-by-side, and jeopardize children’s potential for development. Many of these are also associated with or exacerbated by poverty.

Research on brain development helps to explain why poverty can have such a detrimental effect on early development. In these three countries there are still a significant number of Thai, Vietnamese and Filipino children under six who are growing up in poverty. Given the crucial role of environmental factors in early brain development, these children are at particularly high risk of developmental problems. A lack of resources affects the family’s nutrition and access to health care, while the level of stress experienced by family members, especially caregivers, the quality of care that children experience, and the sanitation and safety of their physical environment are all important factors in a child’s healthy development.

Poverty also affects the kinds of stimulation children experience through their interaction with people and their physical environment, and through their exposure to events occurring around them. Studies have shown the potential impact of these conditions: children at the highest risk of poor school readiness and even mental retardation are those from the poorest families. This remains the greatest challenge for these three countries because the children from marginalized groups are the same children who currently do not have access to early childhood development programmes.

The Family Development Programme (FDP) that was implemented by the Thai government in rural villages in 75 provinces starting in 1996 is an example of such a comprehensive programme that provides effective support for families as caregivers. Community volunteers were trained to work alongside the health care providers and support families through home visits and parent counselling at the health centres starting from the prenatal period. Care givers in the village childcare centre then maintained interaction with the parents to provide information about emerging child development issues that would have a bearing on their children between the ages of three and five. Child development posters and record books, audio cassettes and parent education videos were developed from its pilot stage and used during interaction with parents.

Another example of providing family support for a high-risk group is found in Thailand’s National Institute for Child and Family Development. Here, experienced health professionals work with children from the initial stage of screening for developmental problems through to designing and implementing individualized intervention, rehabilitation or treatment, as needed. Parents and caregivers are supported through parent education and counselling.

**Reading for Children, Save the Children-US**

Save the Children’s most widespread education interventions in Asia are the parenting/care-giving programmes. In Viet Nam, Save the Children-US is now integrating a Reading for Children component in its parenting projects. This is designed to enhance the role of parents in supporting their children’s language learning. It is also a valuable contribution to the development of a child’s positive self-image in the process of meaningful interaction between adult and child, or between children through storytelling and as they acquire language skills and learn more about people, places and objects through books and stories. Through Reading for Children, parents and siblings are able to borrow children’s picture storybooks that they can read to young children in their family.

It is a good example of linking early childhood development with literacy programmes for parents and school-support programmes for school-aged children. It is a simple approach with multiple benefits. While young children are being initiated into storytelling as a truly enjoyable experience which provides the all-important foundation for early literacy, parents and older siblings who may be minimally or functionally literate get a chance to practise their reading skills and work towards mastery. Best of all, it provides an opportunity for meaningful interaction among young children and their family members.
Kinder Plus: Participatory Planning with Municipal ECCD Teams

In the Philippines, the local planning process was designed to facilitate the active participation of municipal ECCD teams from each of the eight municipalities involved in the second phase of Kinder Plus. This pilot project was implemented from 2000 to 2003 by the Department of Education in collaboration with Community of Learners Foundation (COLF), an NGO, and the participating local government units in three provinces in Central Luzon. Twelve of the municipalities were in the province of Nueva Ecija. Kinder Plus was designed to demonstrate innovative features of R.A. 8980, which institutionalized the national ECCD programme. These features which promote integration of ECCD services at the level closest to children and parents are also included in the design of a project financed by loans from the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank, which is being implemented in two regions in the southern part of the country.

Building and strengthening local capacity for planning ECCD programmes was a priority for the second phase of Kinder Plus so that local government units would be able to sustain the mechanisms for expanding and improving the quality of ECCD services. Although decentralization is more than a decade-old process in the Philippines, the social workers, municipal health officers and district school officials in most of the country’s municipalities and cities did not have sufficient or updated training on ECCD, especially on integrated and convergent approaches to service delivery and the setting up of a reliable and functional information and monitoring system for ECCD that the law was promoting.

Municipal ECCD teams were organized and training was conducted by COLF on the use of planning tools and mechanisms. They started by gathering accurate, thorough, age- and gender-disaggregated data about the under-six population in their respective municipalities at the household, day-care and school levels. The tools for data-gathering that COLF designed included some which applied principles of Participatory Learning Approaches (PLA) so that the ECCD supervisors would be able to facilitate the participation of the staff and parents at this initial stage. Data-gathering was followed by 1) mapping out households with children aged less than six years and 2) mapping of current village- and municipality-level ECCD services and levels of participation in or access to these by young children and pregnant or lactating mothers.

They were helped to record and organize the information in ways that would be functional for the planning and monitoring of service delivery, identifying trends or patterns, and analyzing the implications for expanding access and improving the quality of their services. This enabled them to create a plan that was based on actual and verified data about children and families. Then they prepared a project proposal that included a work and financial plan that would enable them to access a Local Support Fund that was provided for in Kinder Plus. Up to 80 per cent of the project funds were provided as grants, since these were all municipalities with insufficient resources, with the remainder of at least 20 per cent funded locally.

Participation in this local planning process was intended to act as the initial team-building exercise for the otherwise sectoral and fragmented ECCD team that would be responsible for implementing the project. It was also an essential opportunity for COLF as implementing partner to undertake advocacy with the local chief executive and the municipal council members in order to promote family-focused and developmentally-appropriate ECCD services.

All the ECCD plans involved the organization of home-based programmes, which are one form of service delivery already identified in the national programme but not yet operational. Through Kinder Plus, a home-based parent-child programme was initiated which features 1) a regular children’s playgroup for children aged one to three (four- to six-year-olds like to participate when there are no classes in the school or day care), and 2) parent education activities through small-group workshops, facilitated by members of the municipal ECCD team at the sitio level which is a sub-unit of the barangay. The playgroups were facilitated by parent volunteers who were recruited from their own communities and showed both interest and commitment. COLF conducted training for the parent volunteers and set up opportunities for them and the members of the municipal teams to observe parent-child programmes for ethnic communities that are implemented by COLF in a nearby province.

Training on parent education, including the Parent Effectiveness Service and the Kinder Plus ECCD parent modules which applied highly participatory and interactive approaches, was an important investment. Information, education and communication materials on ECCD in the national language were developed for use in these parent education programmes as it is often the parents who access the health and early education services. Among the innovative materials developed is the parents’ version of the Philippine ECCD Checklist, a developmental screening tool for which national norms for Filipino children are available. There is one brochure for each of the age groups up to six years. These brochures build on the child’s emerging skills and abilities and celebrate their emerging competence. It is pictorial rather than text-heavy, and contains practical suggestions. A Child Growth and Development Book to serve as an integrated record of children’s health and nutritional development status was also introduced. The Philippine ECCD Checklist is designed to improve upon the assessment and monitoring of outcomes based on child development indicators.

54 The municipal/city mayor is the local chief executive and is responsible for the management of decentralized public social services including early childhood development programmes like primary health care, nutrition, and the day-care and parent effectiveness service.
The notion of good practice must be situated within the broader context of ECCE programming and the existing frameworks for defining quality in ECCE, as well as the determination of outcomes for children, which includes the indicators for those outcomes. Rather than develop a long list of “must do” and “should do” elements that can be overly prescriptive, it would be more prudent to generate some basic principles that can be broadly applied by other ECCE practitioners in other cultures and socio-economic contexts.

**IV. Principles of Good Practice**

Research into family child-rearing practices, alongside documentation of the methods used by teachers and childcare workers within ECCE programmes in diverse settings, provides much useful information. Opportunities to observe ECCE programmes in various cultural contexts and to learn from colleagues in different countries reinforce the research findings, namely that there are indeed broadly applicable, multi-culturally-appropriate and relevant principles that underpin effective practices in caring for and teaching young children. This study seeks to look at early childcare through multicultural lenses, and in the process has found distinct but recurrent patterns amidst the rich diversity of “colours, shapes and movements,” just as one would find in a kaleidoscope.

For this study we present five underlying principles for good practice as revealed by programme experiences and enabling policies developed in the three countries discussed. These principles will be linked with the implications of recent neuro-scientific research on young children’s learning. After all, there are significant findings from research into brain development in the past two decades which reaffirm good practice – teaching and care-giving practices long applied – as well as offering new insights through which ECCE practitioners can develop more supportive practices.

1. **Nurturing a positive sense of self is a prerequisite to a young child’s well-being and is a precondition for successful learning.** Achieving positive feelings about oneself is crucial to the individual child’s development. Competent caregivers and teachers in ECCE programmes must be committed to knowing, accepting, understanding and valuing each child as a unique human being within the context of his or her family and socio-cultural heritage.

The different kinds of skills that children learn enhance a child’s feelings of self-worth, increasing knowledge and providing freedom to make choices. Early interactions, how we relate and respond to others, directly affect the way the brain is “wired”. Children learn in the context of important relationships. Brain cell connections are established as the growing child experiences the surrounding world and forms attachments to parents, family members and caregivers. Warm, responsive care appears to have a protective biological function, helping the child weather ordinary stresses and prepare for the adverse effects of later stress or trauma. Non-responsive care, absence of care, drug abuse and trauma can all have an adverse effect on the child’s emotional well-being.
2. *The child is an active learner and requires opportunities to develop mastery of the environment and achieve learning and discovery goals.*

Good practice is determined by the quality of experiences and interactions provided by early childhood educators for the individual child according to the child’s developmental needs. These experiences need to be active, relevant and enjoyable, and foster the whole child’s total development.

Brain development is contingent upon a complex interplay between genes and environment. The debate on whether our learning is more dependent upon nature or nurture is no longer relevant. It is clear from the research that nature lays down a complex system of brain circuitry, but how that circuitry is wired is dependent upon external forces such as nutrition, interaction, stimulation and the child’s environment.

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*This article was written by Louie-An M. Pilapil and published in Newsbreak, May 26, 2003 (reprinted with permission from publisher). It is sometimes interesting to see how a person outside of the ECCD community perceives an ECCD programme or project.*
Brain development is not a linear, step-by-step process. Because of the brain’s capacity to change, parents and other family members, along with ECCE service providers, have many opportunities to promote and support children’s healthy growth and development. Complementary and comprehensive efforts – rather than a single strategy – contribute to achieving optimal brain development. Learning continues across the life cycle. The brain’s ability to change and to recover lost functions is especially remarkable in the first decade of life. The first 10 years are critical not only for language acquisition – for example, children are more receptive to second-language learning during this period – but also for other cognitive functions. Children are particularly in tune with music between the ages of three and 10, and visual processing also requires certain kinds of stimulation at this stage of their lives. These are prime times for optimal development during which the brain is particularly efficient at specific types of learning. These critical periods provide windows of opportunity for developing skills.

Early experiences contribute significantly to the structure of the brain and its capacity for learning. The quality, quantity, and consistency of stimulation will determine to a large extent the number of brain synapses that are formed and how those connections will function. This is true for both cognitive and emotional development, and the effect is life-long.

Thus, the quality and frequency of interpersonal interaction and the nature as well as timing of activities children experience in ECCE settings not only affect their social and emotional development but also their brain development. These findings reaffirm the added value for children’s learning of many developmentally-appropriate practices and curricula already applied in good-quality early childhood education programmes.

A well-planned ECCE curriculum which prominently features social interaction and relationship with peers and adults, play (dramatic play, manipulative play and construction), arts and crafts, music and movement, physical exercise, storytelling, and personal or self-care routines is supportive of optimal brain development.

For example, the studies related to music and brain research provide evidence that listening to music can boost memory, attention, motivation and learning. It also lowers stress, activates both sides of the brain and increases spatial-temporal reasoning. ECCE programmes generally include music through listening, singing and playing rhythm instruments.

Also, while the importance of regular physical exercise for health and fitness are well-known, there are additional benefits worth noting. During exercise there is an increase in the flow of blood and oxygen to the brain, as well as chemical reactions like the rise and fall of adrenaline. All these contribute to heightened perception, faster reaction time and improved short-term memory. Cross-lateral movements with the arms and legs crossing over to the other side of the body have a positive effect on learning. This is because the two sides of the brain are forced to communicate when the legs and arms cross over. In order to learn effectively, children need to engage both sides of the brain. Thus, ensuring there is enough time for daily physical exercise, music and movement activities will be extremely beneficial for children.

Introducing appropriate physical activities, e.g. those involving cross lateral movements, at specific times of the day when biological rhythms affect hormone levels and brain functioning will also be helpful. This was less of a problem for the demonstration kindergartens in Thailand, which had sufficient space and every morning began with whole-school exercises. Similarly, in the rural villages of Viet Nam and the Philippines, centres tended to enjoy open spaces and could use varied terrain for group games involving movement activities. But even in the congested urban communities of Metro Manila or Cabanatuan City, where day-care centres often have to cope with cramped spaces, staff introduce action songs, dance and other activities using outdoor areas or by dividing children into groups.
In addition, using the fingers not only works the hands, it also stimulates the brain. Activities that develop small muscles are generally emphasized in ECCE programmes because of the relationship between fine motor skills and learning to write – an important aspect of school readiness. When children manipulate toys and materials, by touching and feeling different textures their developing brains are stimulated more than just by drawing with crayons or scribbling with pencils. There are many community-based programmes in rural villages of the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam that offer examples of how resourceful ECCE service providers can make the most of low-cost indigenous learning materials for supporting young children’s sensory-perceptual development and emergent early literacy skills.

3. The early childhood setting must be child-centred and adult-supported, physically and emotionally safe, and must actively facilitate the child’s right to learn through play.

Young children are active learners who construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world. Play is an essential aspect of learning for young children and planning for play is a central component in developing a curriculum that integrates all areas of a child’s development. ECCE practitioners have a critical role in responding to children’s play ideas and in establishing an environment which supports and extends children’s learning and development through play.

Play is integral to the learning process; it is not trivial, “just recreational” or a respite from school, nor is it a rehearsal for adult life. Play and firsthand experiences enable the child to explore, struggle, manipulate, discover and practise – helping the child become highly competent in a variety of ways. Through play children understand and express their thoughts and feelings about the world cognitively and affectively.

There are examples of early childhood programmes in the three countries where young children are engaged in active learning through play experiences that allow them to construct, test and apply their developing knowledge. However, unlike Thailand and large cities in Viet Nam, in most public
kindergartens and day-care centres in the Philippines, as well as private pre-schools, a play-based curriculum is not yet widely integrated. This is largely due to an overriding concern about school readiness combined with the prevailing lack of appreciation for the inherent value of play for cognitive, language and socio-emotional outcomes associated with readiness for school.

ECCE practitioners must be sensitive to the way that they use or respond to the elements of young children’s play, which comprise: the child, resources and materials, the environment, and the ECCE teacher or caregiver who is the guide and facilitator. Their intervention in children’s play should enhance, clarify and extend the play. It should not take over and control.

From a western perspective (European and North American), most ECCE settings in these three countries can be considered as too highly-structured and adult-directed with very limited time for child-initiated and directed play. In their context, “free play” in a childcare centre can involve an uninterrupted two to three hours of child-initiated, child-directed play with barely any adult intervention except the preparation of the physical environment and observation and guidance from an unobtrusive spot to ensure their safety.

In fact, this observation is valid for these three countries and applies to the majority of ECCE settings where only a token amount of “free play” is encouraged. This can be explained by cultural and technical considerations. It is cultural because in all three countries, there is still a tendency to emphasize the traditional adult-child relationship i.e. the adults as an authority-protector-dominant figure, and extend this to all social contexts for children whether at home or in the ECCE programme setting and especially in schools. Thus, the ECCE service provider is unable to yield control over the children’s activities.

Another cultural factor relates to traditional expectations about children’s behaviour. Because most of the time adults and children in both urban and rural villages must share physical space that is often limited, in order to promote “harmony” or not to disrupt adult work or conversation, children are discouraged from loud, boisterous play that is usually associated with child-initiated play. While older children are able to create their own spaces and are allowed to move out of the adults’ view, young children below the age of five or six tend to be more sheltered and unless there are older siblings to watch over them, they are expected to stay within sight and earshot. For this reason they are often given either playthings or else assigned activities. Again, this expectation and approach is brought into the ECCE setting and often justified as a way of preparing young children for primary school where they have to spend hours seated in rows of desks.

However, this is, in part, also a technical consideration, because many pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes do not provide updated or expanded information on the values of child-directed play within the curriculum. So to begin with, since it does not become part of the service providers’ knowledge base it does not become part of practice. It is more likely that ECCE practitioners in the three countries will eventually determine what they consider to form an appropriate balance between child-directed play and adult-prescribed or directed activities; between yielding more control and trusting the young children to assume responsibility for their own play. Cultural factors are not static, so adult expectations and practices change. Children themselves are too dynamic to be limited to practices conceived of for previous generations used to a different lifestyle. They will also form part of the balancing act.

Nonetheless, in the three countries in this report, there are some classrooms, such as the model or demonstration kindergartens in Thailand’s public schools and NGO-run independent schools and community-based programmes in the Philippines, where experienced teachers are able to assume a more facilitating stance as opposed to a prescriptive or directive way of managing children’s play. There is an ability to balance children’s initiatives at play with adult guidance or selective intervention.
An effective play-based curriculum requires the provision of affordable, appropriate play space and materials, is conducive to positive social interactions and complements children’s self-initiated and directed play to maximize its possibilities for development and learning.

4. **The curriculum in ECCE programmes must be firmly committed to inclusive practice.** This means ECCE practitioners must be fully aware of and ready to address the factors that contribute to developmental disadvantage and educational exclusion, and be able to take affirmative action to address these.

A curriculum is a plan for learning but it is not limited to what is written in a teacher’s notebook or printed in a curriculum manual. A good definition is provided by the Children’s Services Office (1991) of South Australia:

“Curriculum encompasses all of the interactions, experiences and routines that are part of each child’s day.

- **Interactions** are all of the interpersonal communications that promote learning, caring relationships and positive self-esteem;
- **Experiences** are the result of opportunities that consolidate learning and provide new and exciting challenges, they can be active or passive, planned or spontaneous;
- **Routines** are the regular activities associated with the comfort, health and well-being of the children; routines promote a sense of belonging and security when they are sensitive and responsive to the needs of each child.”

The construction of the ECCE curriculum must depend on a careful and balanced consideration of 1) the child; 2) the content: knowledge, skills and attitudes; and 3) the context, i.e. the social, cultural and physical environment and events.

1) the child – the individual child is the focus in the development of curriculum;
2) the content – what the child already knows and can do; what the child needs to know and learn how to do; what the child wants to know more about or do better and the importance of play in facilitating this;
3) the context – people, culture, race, gender, special needs, materials.

Early childhood curricula should provide for learning experiences and routines that strengthen certain attitudes that are critical for lifelong learning, such as interest, initiative and curiosity. An effective curriculum should always strive to ensure the simultaneous acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes. The challenge for educators is to help the learner with both the acquisition of skills and the desirable attitudes that promote them.

The key areas of learning in early childhood are: communication, creativity, critical thinking, cultural understanding, environmental understanding, health and physical development, and social development. These key areas form the foundation for an integrated approach to learning and development for all young children.

Another challenge for ECCE practitioners is to provide a broad and balanced curriculum, which ensures access for and participation by all children. It should be noted, however, that equality of access does not necessarily mean equality in the achievement of outcomes. While it is important to recognize the value of a child-centred programme with a focus on individual children’s needs, it is also necessary to acknowledge that those same children have different needs. The role of the ECCE worker is to intervene when appropriate to address specific issues that inadvertently limit the opportunities or exclude specific children, for example, the limited access of girls to construction activities or teasing or isolation because of ethnic or religious background or physical appearance.
In the planning and implementation of the curriculum, the issues for these children who are often most likely to be excluded from schools or unable to complete their education must be systematically addressed while remembering that there is diversity within these groups. These specific issues are often the same ones that cause exclusion of young children from ECCE programmes: gender, poverty, disabilities, ethnicity and cultural differences, a first language other than the national language, and rural isolation.

ECCE practitioners must reflect on their methods to ensure that they are not exacerbating these kinds of exclusion but instead are taking proactive steps to work for truly inclusive ECCE programmes. Reflection may be carried out in a variety of ways and the first step may be to look at the emphasis given to specific forms of ECCE service provision, and the kinds of activities and experiences provided for young children. Access to a range of appropriate ECCE programmes and the quality of these rely on the allocation of both human and financial resources specifically intended for children from marginalized groups.

### Inclusive Education in Viet Nam: Save the Children-Sweden

The Save the Children Alliance rightfully takes the position that all the interventions they support that lead to improvements in care giving and teaching practices in children's homes and schools are the most strategic investments for creating inclusive ECCE programmes and learning environments. These interventions include strategies and approaches that promote active learning, enrich language learning, and mobilize active community participation, which are all pre-requisites for building a support system in which disabled children can participate equally. They believe that “issues of extra human resources are usually secondary to those of building the confidence of teachers and schools and a belief that children can learn.”

The Alliance Strategic Framework for Education calls for prioritizing the “inclusion of disadvantaged and hard-to-reach groups”. It is considered an area for joint advocacy with national governments within their respective country programmes.

Since 1991, SC Sweden (SCS) in Viet Nam, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) and the Provincial Peoples’ Committees, has been implementing an Inclusive Education (IE) project in eight districts of two provinces. This project builds on the earlier Community-based Rehabilitation (CBR) programme of the MoET, which SCS supported. Only a few among the estimated one million Vietnamese children with mild to moderate and severe disabilities have access to education. Their social environment is not fully sensitized to or supportive of their special needs and differentiated abilities. Thus promoting the concept of Inclusive Education is both necessary and timely. In terms of policy directions, the Vietnamese government took a positive step in 1995 when the responsibility for the education of children with disabilities was transferred from the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) to MoET. The Vietnamese government recognized that fulfilling its responsibilities to children with disabilities was not simply a matter of rehabilitation but also education and inclusion in school and society. So now the MoET is responsible for the IE process in Viet Nam with close coordination from the Ministry of Health (MOH) and MOLISA.

The SCS-supported project involves several complementary programme activities:

1) awareness-raising and advocacy at all levels that introduce the concept of inclusive education;

2) capacity-building within schools (in-service teacher training on inclusive education and appropriate teaching methods) and ministries to strengthen the human resource base which requires specialized training (graduate studies for selected Vietnamese educators);

3) curriculum development and pilot pre-service teacher training programmes;

4) community education on children's rights to development and participation, and developing community support systems.

An evaluation of the project showed that its most significant impact has been a heightened awareness and understanding that children with disabilities have the same rights as other children, and that includes the right to education. This awareness was manifest at the level of the family, the school and the community. There is now a general sense of responsibility for children with disabilities compared to the discriminating and unaccepting attitudes in the past on the part of schools and communities. However, parents have yet to overcome the feelings of insecurity and embarrassment at having children with disabilities. The greater challenge remains in improving the quality of education: the upgrading of teacher competencies so that their methods of teaching will catch up with the positive attitudes that have been nurtured through this project. It is understandable that teachers will struggle when working with a range of disabilities, compared to only one or two particular conditions as those in special schools are trained to do. But this can surely be accomplished with continued support for teachers through in-service training and guidance and their own resolve to learn how to implement the appropriate teaching and classroom management strategies.

There are critical policy changes that must be made, or new policies developed, in regard to the evaluation of children's school performance and achievement, and their placement and progression though the school system. There is also a need to improve the system by which the resources needed by schools are provided and managed, and to resolve the problem of teacher transfers that result in a high turnover of staff, a lack of continuity and are a waste of training investments. All these understandably take time. What is most encouraging is that this project has successfully demonstrated that it is possible to end the exclusion and isolation of children with disabilities, and to transform the educational climate into a more accepting, caring, and responsive and supportive one.
5. There are optimal levels of meaningful child-child, child-staff and child-environment interaction.

ECCE practitioners provide children with:
- interactions which promote learning, caring relationships and a positive self-image;
- time for active exploration and manipulation of the environment;
- new and exciting challenges which foster children’s learning;
- a variety of appropriate materials and resources;
- opportunities to choose and take control of their own learning;
- continuity of experiences and flexible routines.

ECCE service providers and children interact meaningfully through play. The effective ECCE practitioners enhance the play and learning environment by assuming differentiated approaches as appropriate:

- coordinating and facilitating numerous activities – this includes planning for a curriculum where play is a prominent feature; which takes into account the children’s interests andallots sufficient time for children to explore their own experiences, ideas and feelings through play; and setting up the physical environment, providing props and playthings;
- monitoring children’s social, cognitive, emotional and physical needs – actively collecting, recording and organizing the data which is the content of children’s play: for example, their interaction with other children or adults, their language and their thinking and using this information to assess children’s development, systematically mapping out each child’s growth and development and sharing these observations with parents through various forms and media;
- assisting when needed – modelling and explaining problem-solving skills which children can then practise and apply on their own, and mediating between different children or children and their environment to facilitate their activity;
- encouraging and acknowledging children’s efforts – offering ideas, information and providing materials and organizing time and space for other related activities to sustain or extend children’s play and to enrich the content of their play; taking an active role by joining children at play;
- challenging children to achieve new levels of learning – using the various forms of documentation on children’s play to plan for extensions of their activities, and provide meaningful activity links; and stimulating children’s language learning through appropriate verbal interaction, and using written forms for recording observations of children at play to serve as a model for the writing process.

Designing a curriculum for young children involves deciding what knowledge, skills and attitudes they should learn or develop. Children participating in an early childhood education programme will have the opportunity to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes defined in each key area of learning with early childhood educators developing priorities for individual children. In the context of early childhood education, knowledge can be defined as the “contents of the mind” and includes concepts and information.

Skills are learned actions that can be easily observed, or inferred from observable behaviour. While some children may acquire skills spontaneously others require help and support to achieve and master them. Once children acquire a skill they still need opportunities to practise and to achieve proficiency. Attitudes can be defined as ways of thinking or behaving.

Children need a sense of ownership about the content they learn, and learning should arise from the
needs and interests of the child and should not always be imposed from outside the child’s experience. It is important that the content is meaningful, has integrity and is relevant. The content should be worth knowing and the information accurate and credible. Whether the people the child encounters act as catalysts or not will have the greatest impact on the child’s access to the curriculum.

ECCE service providers must learn to be effective curriculum-makers. To do this they must also undertake a situational analysis, establish goals, develop experiences and evaluate experiences and outcomes. The key to developing an early childhood curriculum is to observe in order to support and extend children’s learning and development. By developing their own curriculum they can ensure that it is relevant and responsive to the specific needs and concerns of the local community to which the children belong, as well as to broader global issues that are also relevant to the child and their family.

In the field visits to the countries in this report, we were searching for ECCE practitioners who were effective curriculum-developers and constructors. We did find them in many places: among the teachers in Thailand’s demonstration kindergartens within the public school system and the teacher training institutes; teachers in model kindergartens in Ha Long Bay and in Hanoi; and staff in independent and inclusive schools, like the Meanprasatwittaya School in Thailand and Community of Learners in the Philippines.

What sets them apart is that they know, understand and accept the child as an individual learner before and above all else. They understand content and are able to translate the broad national goals and objectives into more specific meaningful learning experiences from day to day, that are both child-initiated and adult-facilitated or initiated. They are able to create a learning environment where children can thrive as learners over the two, three or even six years that they participate in the early childhood education programme.

If we seek to reach all children, we must harness the experiences and competence of these pioneers, to reach out to many more teachers, caregivers and even parent volunteers who work with young children in both public and NGO-run community-based pre-schools, day-care centres and playgroups. Facilitating this process and designing viable mechanisms for valuable interchange and meaningful interaction among the members of the ECCE communities in the three countries is crucial and could well be the next most important investment for governments, international organizations and development agencies, as well as partners in civil society.

This cannot be a top-down and prescriptive process. Instead it must build on existing partnerships and nurture new ones on the ground, at the grassroots level where the children who are most likely to be excluded can be reached by those closest to them. There are enough examples of such partnerships that can be reinvented or recreated in as many ECCE settings and communities as needed.
Ten years ago, Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines erupted and 10,200 Aeta families were displaced from their ancestral homes at the foot of this long-dormant volcano. In the aftermath, and in the midst of relief efforts, the Community of Learners Foundation (COLF), an NGO in the Philippines, started its early childhood-focused Pinatubo Family Education Programme in two of the resettlement areas where Aeta families were just beginning the challenging process of rebuilding their lives. The programme was supported by Deutsche Welthungerhilfe (DWHH), a German development agency that wanted to incorporate programmes for children within the massive rehabilitation relief efforts that it was funding, and that were being carried out by the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM).

At the outset, the Pinatubo programme was designed to provide a support system for a total of 1,072 Aeta families from the two resettlement sites in an integrated, community-based way, with a special focus on the early childhood years. COLF’s approach involved working directly with children and their parents, and the programme focused on the provision of basic services, namely health, nutrition and education, for both infants and centre-based programmes for children aged seven to 15, to support their continued schooling and opportunities for a new generation of Aeta children and their own parents – now adult learners – who used to be excluded and isolated, and many learning experiences that are used to reconstruct a curriculum that both celebrates Aeta culture as well as opens up greater very significant outcomes.

As a result, they have created for their own communities a library of family-made books that provide a valuable record of their individual stories, as well as the collective experiences of a tribal community whose lives were changed by the eruption of Mount Pinatubo. This is one of the many learning experiences that are used to reconstruct a curriculum that both celebrates Aeta culture as well as opens up greater opportunities for a new generation of Aeta children and their own parents – now adult learners - who used to be excluded and isolated, and therefore deprived of their rights to education. Today as parents - caregivers and teachers - to their children, their own rights are finally being fulfilled alongside their children’s.
Conclusion

The experiences of these three countries show that there are a wide range of options to consider in order to reach out to families with young children in order to ensure that those who would otherwise be excluded will be able to experience quality care and education in their early childhood years. ECCD practitioners in the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam apply these complementary strategies and approaches for working directly with young children who are at risk or are made vulnerable by difficult life conditions brought about or exacerbated by social, economic, political and cultural factors.

The principles of good practice are clearly operational only when there is a firm commitment on the part of the duty bearers to provide the resources, the policies, and administrative and technical support. It is when the caregivers’ and teachers’ commitment and competence converge with the political will of the state and the public civil servants responsible for basic education programmes and social service delivery that one can expect these good practices to flourish.

There are important recurrent themes that emerge from the experiences of the three countries:

First, there is much to build on in terms of public and private ECCE services, and there exists a broad human resource good for quality early childcare at the grassroots level, among the members of civil society and the various levels of local and national government. However, the main challenge remains: there is a real need to develop the human resource base and expand its outreach.

There is also a need to carefully assess and improve the quality of ECCE services in order to ensure that they will lead to qualitative improvements in the lives of the children, rather than simply provide them access for the sake of meeting targets. Thus, one of the tasks at hand is to review then develop or revise policies, so that an enabling environment can be created for the expansion and improvement of the ECCE human resource base in the parts of the country where they are most needed. The preparation of national plans and programmes of action, such as the National Education for All Action Plans, backed-up by complementary or supportive national and local policies, presents an excellent opportunity to redirect and amplify the importance of expanding access to quality early childhood education programmes and investing in the people who will teach and take care of young children.

Second, there are enough examples of how to translate principles of inclusive developmentally- and culturally-appropriate practices for replication across various contexts. Sharing information through various forms of media, organizing capacity-building programmes and training in a way that facilitates interaction among ECCE practitioners and organizing networks to sustain their working relationships beyond these shared educational experiences are important and strategic investments that can and must be made.

It has been shown through the experiences in these three countries that a multidisciplinary, multi-sectoral approach to ECCE is possible and the convergence of disciplines is achieved through collaborative planning, research, programming and policy development. By keeping the focus on the young child as a whole human being and the family as the context for care giving and teaching, borders are crossed and obstacles to such collaboration are dismantled.

Third, social and cultural diversity, gender sensitivity and equality, and a commitment to inclusion based on respect for and acceptance of human diversity can all be addressed meaningfully and constructively through early childhood programmes and curriculum. ECCE programmes not only establish a strong foundation for literacy and for learning through the experiences that are provided, as well as through the spontaneous opportunities that arise for learning language and cognitive skills;
beyond the learning of skills, concepts and information, through play and the routines of group life, ECCD programmes provide the opportunities to explore freely and build relationships with other children and with adults. This helps them learn to live as responsible and caring members of a community of learners, and to establish a strong foundation for the kind of human interaction that teaches and helps children internalize respect, tolerance and compassion that will in turn prepare them to be creative and critical thinkers, problem solvers and peace-builders.

The collective care-giving and teaching efforts that are made daily by thousands of teachers, day-care workers, childcare givers and millions of parents in these three countries is probably one of the most valuable, albeit less visible, investments for the future that is currently being made. There will come a time when the good practices described here, as well as more that will be identified over time, will be considered as typical rather than exceptional. Then we can be sure that no Filipino, Thai or Vietnamese children will be excluded from the learning process, and all of them shall have access to quality ECCE programmes.

This synthesis does not intend to promote the idea that there is “one best” approach to ECCE, or even “a few good ones”; rather, it is designed to promote plurality and diversity in approach, based on principles that are conceptually sound, coherent, consistent and complementary. In a pluralist society it is impossible to unilaterally impose only one particular approach to early childhood education; more so in a multicultural world where very young children are starting their lifelong journey as learners.

The richness of the knowledge and experience base in the field of ECCE that constitutes best practice should continue to benefit all young children – whether they are in the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, a Montessori school in a residential village of Metro Manila, a demonstration kindergarten in the province of Chiang Mai, a kindergarten in Hanoi or a home-based playgroup in a town in Nueva Ecija province in the Philippines. UNESCO promotes these practices as well as others that help young children develop their active learning capacity, enabling them to adapt within their own social context, as well as adjust to novelty and cope with change. In doing so, these practices serve young children’s best interests as growing, developing human beings.

Finally, the study does not suggest that these practices completely reflect all the standards of excellence that most ECCE practitioners strive for. Many of the ECCE programmes cited as examples should be considered as “works in progress”, always striving for improvement. Nevertheless, they clearly demonstrate the essentials of good-quality care, facilitating appropriate learning experiences that result in positive outcomes for the children.

These are the small yet innovative and effective steps, as well as some significant giant strides, that governments, civil society, communities and families are making because, each in their own way, they are committed to giving young children a “fair start”, not just as future school children and workers, but as learners on a lifelong journey.
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