



RESEARCH REPORT

From Global to Local: How Can International 0-3 Curriculum Frameworks Inform the Development of 0-3 Care and Education Guidelines in China?

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2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The overall aim of this report is to provide an internationally-informed, research-based reference for the development of 0-3 care and education guidelines in China. It firstly compares and contrasts international 0-3 curriculum frameworks (usually 0-5/6 frameworks) in 18 countries/regions with a developed national framework (including for example, England, Scotland, Australia, New Zealand, etc.), in order to identify universal and country-specific quality indicators of a 0-3 curriculum. The effectiveness of those frameworks is also reviewed through empirical literature and reports of effectiveness studies. The project further maps those universal and country-specific quality indicators into the existing 3-6 curriculum framework in China (currently, China does not have a national 0-3 framework), and particularly evaluates to what extent China's 3-6 curriculum framework reflects international patterns. In so doing, the report makes recommendations for what quality indicators China might want to include in its 0-3 curriculum and associated guidelines.

This report concludes that globalised curriculum discourses are strongly evident among the included countries/regions. The discourses are either embedded in the framework content or indicated within recent curriculum reforms and policies. The frameworks are first of all underpinned by shared theories, including both the dominance of developmental and sociocultural theories and the emergence of critical and post-structural theories. Those different theories shape the principles of ECEC pedagogy and practice, as well as the themes and roles of adults. The vision being worked towards by all countries features a curriculum that is child-centred, play-based, socially-just and culturally-inclusive, holistic, collaborative with families and communities, and quality-oriented. Such a curriculum focuses on children's comprehensive development and active learning, positive relationships with the social world, successful transitions between different life stages, and competent and democratic participation as a local and global citizen at all levels of life. It therefore expects adults, including ECEC staff and parents/carers to be responsive 'educarers' (Warin, 2014), collaborators, and supporters. It particularly relies on high-quality staff to implement the curriculum and achieve its aspirations and ultimately, high-quality ECEC.

Country specifics and/or differences in the 18 national frameworks can be summarized into three aspects:

- Whether it is a more social pedagogic curriculum, or one more oriented toward school readiness;
- To what extent assessment focuses on child outcomes;
- Evaluation and national quality standards.

All three aspects relate to debates and/or criticism about standardization, normalization, autonomy and empowerment. National curriculum frameworks that provide prescriptive requirements on how ECEC settings develop their local curriculums, that place a strong focus on assessing child outcomes so as to ensure children's baseline achievements and school readiness and to prove the economic value of ECEC investments by governments, and that are associated with a normative quality assurance system are discouraged. However, it is recognized that these are realities in which many ECEC settings and children across the world live (Ebbeck et al., 2014; Clausen, 2015; Wood & Hedges, 2016; Hayes & Filipović, 2018; Basford, 2019). Instead, an ideal national framework would be flexible and adaptable to local contexts, uses assessment to identify children's needs and to support and to inform planning and implementing pedagogical activities, and encourages self-evaluation and reflective practice by ECEC settings and staff. At the core of an effective ECEC system is autonomy and empowerment at all levels, including ECEC settings, staff, children, and families.

Nevertheless, an empowering curriculum framework relies on high-quality staff who are reflective and confident, and have high-level understanding and knowledge about children and ECEC work. Reports and empirical studies from many countries have pointed out some shared challenges that impede the effectiveness of implementing national frameworks, including:

- Limited funding and resources;
- Staff capacity, workload and work conditions;
- Qualified staff who understand and interpret the national frameworks appropriately, know how to translate the theories and principles into effective practices, and continuously reflect on and even challenge their own practices for better process quality for children.

Improvements on structural characteristics and effective professional development training programmes can help to sustain an effective national curriculum framework and achieve high quality ECEC.

Specifically, China's Guidelines on 3-6 Learning and Development embraces many of the universal quality indicators shared by international frameworks. The major theories, key

principles, aspects of ECEC, roles of adults are to some extent consistent with international patterns. However, some gaps are also identified. For example, critical and post-structural theories are minimally reflected in the framework, as well as the conceptualisations of empowering ECEC staff and children. Equality, diversity and inclusion issues are not yet sufficiently represented, neither are contents linked to the ethnic minority communities. Standardized assessment of children is evident and outcome-oriented, whereas a comprehensive quality assurance system is not established in the country to evaluate and support quality improvement in ECEC. In the lack of 0-3 guidelines in Chinese ECEC policies, a critical question for China to consider is whether to develop a separate 0-3 curriculum framework or to refine the current 3-6 guidelines to incorporate 0-6. In some international 0-5/6 frameworks (e.g. Australia), infants and toddlers are rendered invisible. Countries (e.g. England) that have favoured a split system (Bertram & Pascal, 2016) however, experience challenges for adults that teach across the age range in terms of supporting younger children and ensuring they have access to a high-quality provision in the 0-3 age range.

A detailed summary of how the Guideline reflects international patterns in ECEC curriculum frameworks is presented in the table below:

Quality Indicators	International Patterns	China's 3-6 Guideline
Key theories of ECEC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Developmental theories ▪ Socio-cultural theories ▪ Social-behaviorist/-constructivist theories ▪ Critical theories ▪ Post-structural theories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Dominated by developmental, socio-cultural and social-behaviorist/-constructivist theories ▪ Critical and post-structural theories minimally reflected
Principles of ECEC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Child-centred (including three different constructions: developmental, individualized, and democratic) ▪ Respect for diversity, equity/equality, and inclusion ▪ Relationships ▪ Partnerships ▪ Holistic approach ▪ Play ▪ Intentional ▪ Empowerment ▪ Quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The developmental and individualized constructions of child-centredness are primary principles in the guideline, as well as children's holistic learning and development ▪ Learning is required to be play-based and to build upon real-life experiences ▪ ECEC settings are expected to provide children with rich learning environments <p><u>Areas that are not sufficiently covered in the Guideline:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Child-centred (democratic constructions) ▪ Respect for diversity, equity/equality, and inclusion ▪ Relationships ▪ Partnerships ▪ Empowerment
Aspects of ECEC	<p>Integration of care and education is primary.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Health and wellbeing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The guideline focuses on combined care and education for children's holistic development, both physically and

Quality Indicators	International Patterns	China's 3-6 Guideline
Aspects of ECEC (cont.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Learning and development ▪ Communication and language ▪ Relationships ▪ Environment ▪ Cultural competence ▪ Arts and creativity ▪ Technology ▪ Transitions 	<p>psychologically</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No further discussions on the definitions and understandings of care and education ▪ The 2011, Ministry of Education, PRC notice banned 'schoolification' in Chinese kindergartens ▪ Play-based learning is promoted and developmentally-appropriate practices are emphasized ▪ Five areas of learning and development includes: health, language, society, science, and arts <p><u>Areas that are not sufficiently covered in the Guideline:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cultural competence ▪ Technology
Roles of ECEC Settings and Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Building up relationships with children and their families ▪ Protecting children ▪ Responding to children ▪ Collaborating in partnerships ▪ Planning & identifying ▪ Roles in play (supporters, participants, observers, learners, interveners, inspirers, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ECEC benefiting children's future life and socializing/normalizing children into appropriate Chinese citizens are evident (e.g. moral education and nationality education) ▪ The roles of Chinese kindergarten teachers include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ To create rich, constructive, and secure environments; ○ To be role models for children in positive behaviors and communications; ○ Work in partnership with families;

Quality Indicators	International Patterns	China's 3-6 Guideline
<p>Roles of ECEC Settings and Staff (cont.)</p>	<p>collaborators, and occasionally initiators)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Professional knowledge ▪ Leadership ▪ Preparing for transitions ▪ Promoting participation ▪ Respect for diversity ▪ Ongoing reflexivity ▪ Assessing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Interact with children with love, acceptance and respect; ○ Listen to children and understand children's thoughts and feelings; ○ Support and encourage children's explorations and expressions; ○ Respond to children's interests and needs; ○ Guide and extend children's learning; ○ Challenge children; ○ Promote children's independence, confidence and self-esteem <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teachers are co-learners, supporters, guiders, collaborators, and inspirers ▪ Teachers 'teach' in accordance with individual child's development levels, skills, experiences, and learning characteristics ▪ Supporting children's transitions into schools with collaborations between kindergartens, families and communities ▪ The 2020, Ministry of Education, PRC Guideline on the regulated training of newly qualified kindergarten teachers indicates key areas of training for entrant teachers, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Moral education and professional beliefs (including cultural confidence);

Quality Indicators	International Patterns	China's 3-6 Guideline
Roles of ECEC Settings and Staff (cont.)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Professional knowledge and research-based understanding of children; ○ Integrated care and education; ○ Continuing professional development <p><u>Areas that are not sufficiently covered in the Guideline:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ All the roles summarized from other international frameworks are covered, except those concerning social equality and diversity
Roles of Families and Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Support and participate in ECEC as partners ▪ Involved in the design and implementation of national and local curriculums ▪ Engage with assessment, evaluation and monitoring ▪ Provide resources for ECEC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Parents are important collaborators with kindergartens ▪ Relationships between kindergartens and families should base on respect, equality, and partnerships ▪ Kindergartens support parents to understand ECEC and help them improve their educational skills ▪ Parents support the works of kindergartens and activitely participate in relevant activities ▪ Kindergarten education should make full use of the natural environments and the educational resources in communities to extend children's life experiences and learning space ▪ Kindergartens are expected to serve for the early education in communities <p><u>Areas that are not sufficiently covered in the Guideline:</u></p>

Quality Indicators	International Patterns	China's 3-6 Guideline
Roles of Families and Communities (cont.)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Involved in the design and implementation of national and local curriculums ▪ Engage with assessment, evaluation and monitoring
Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Approach 1 (e.g. Nordic countries): Only provides the theoretical, sociocultural, and political foundations that local curricula build upon, with no further requirements on local practices or expectations on outcomes ▪ Approach 2 (e.g. most countries): In addition to the fundamental theories and goals, they offer detailed support guidelines on how to put the theories and goals into practices meanwhile making it clear that these guidelines are examples that need to be adapted for local considerations ▪ Approach 3 (e.g. UK & US): Local practices start with overarching goals and objectives and end by meeting expected outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The guideline seems to fit with the approach 3 of frameworks in that it also sets standardized expectations for children, with defined goals and objectives on the whole and broad suggestions on meeting the expectations ▪ Adaptations to the local realities are briefly mentioned

Quality Indicators	International Patterns	China's 3-6 Guideline
Implementation (cont.)	and standards. As long as the two ends are satisfied, how each setting navigate the journey can be flexible and locally variable.	
Assessment, evaluation and monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assessment of child outcomes informs planning and implementation of curriculums ▪ Evaluation combines self-evaluation and external inspection against national quality standards ▪ Children's and their families' active participation in assessment and evaluation ▪ Established monitoring system only in some countries (e.g. New Zealand, Norway) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Structural quality is current focus and process quality increasingly emphasized ▪ Assessment is an ongoing process with multiple strategies (e.g. observations, conversations, and document analysis) ▪ Children's behavior performance and developmental changes inform assessment and planning ▪ The purpose of assessment is to understand children's developmental needs and provide support and guidance accordingly ▪ Assessment must be holistic and should not only focus on knowledge and skills ▪ Managers, teachers, parents and children themselves are all participants and collaborators in the assessment process ▪ Teachers' self-evaluation is core for the implementation of kindergarten education, with participation from others including the management team, other teachers, and parents ▪ No monitoring of the guideline itself is in place in China <p><u>Areas that are not sufficiently covered in the Guideline:</u></p>

Quality Indicators	International Patterns	China's 3-6 Guideline
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ National quality standards and inspection system<li>▪ Monitoring of the effectiveness of national curriculum frameworks

3. INTRODUCTION

0-3 early childhood education and care (ECEC) provisions outside the family home are limited in China in the past decades (He, 2018; Jiang, 2020), possibly due to decreased birth rates under the one-child policy and the economic constraints on Chinese governments' and families' affordability on such provisions. In 2016, China replaced the one-child policy with a universal two-child policy, which will likely lead to the growth of new-born babies in the coming decade (Xu & Woodyer, 2020; Hong & Zhu, 2020). In the meantime, the importance and quality of early care and education is increasingly recognized for Chinese children, starting from birth-to-three years old (Jiang, 2020). In the additional contexts of supporting more women to participate in China's labour force and emerging issues of cross-generational parenting, expanding 0-3 care provisions is a pressing need in Chinese ECEC (Hong & Zhu, 2020).

In 2019, the PRC Government's annual report points out that the country needs to 'speed up in providing multiple forms of infant and toddler care provisions.' An effective and quality 0-3 ECEC system comprising scientific guidance and regulations, high quality professionals, and appropriate monitoring and assessment is believed by Chinese scholars to be a top priority (Pang et al., 2019). In response to this, this report presents findings from a systematic review on international 0-3 frameworks in selected countries with an established 0-3 ECEC system. The aim is to identify universal and country-specific quality indicators of a 0-3 framework that can inform China's development of its own. The following research questions are addressed in this report:

1. What are the universal and country-specific quality indicators of international 0-3 curriculum frameworks in selected countries?
2. What empirical evidence exists concerning the effectiveness of those frameworks?
3. How does China's existing 3-6 curriculum framework reflect international patterns?
4. What recommended quality indicators might be possible for a Chinese 0-3 curriculum framework from this review, and whether a 0-6 framework is possible in China?

3.1 0-3 ECEC in international contexts

The importance of ECEC is internationally recognized as benefiting children's short-term and long-term development, wellbeing, and learning (OECD, 2017). The first years of life are theorized as foundations for children's future (OECD, 2018) and quality care and education in early childhood promotes their full potential and lifelong opportunities (United Nations, 2015). Beyond individual benefits for children, ECEC has wider social, economic, and political significance (EOPUS, 2014; OECD, 2019; Paull et al., 2020). The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 of Quality Education specifies a target to 'ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and preprimary education so that they are ready for primary education' by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). However, realizing this ambition in all ratified countries of SDGs across the globe (193) remains a challenge.

Within ECEC, provisions provided to children aged 3 years old and above are relatively more developed than those for under 3s, particularly in affluent societies. According to the Education at a Glance 2019 report, over 90% of 4-5 year-olds are enrolled in education across the 36 OECD countries and more than 1/3 of 3-year-olds accessed ECEC services in 2017 (OECD, 2019). The percentages of children accessing ECEC services were 40% for 1-year-olds and 62% for 2-year-olds in those countries on a whole, but gaps are significant between high-income countries and the rest (Ibid).

The types of ECEC services vary from country to country and are beyond the scope of this report to discuss. However, in countries where a national framework/guideline is in place, all providers of ECEC services follow the framework/guideline to a various extent. Bennett (2005) categorizes national curriculums into two traditions: pre-primary tradition and social pedagogy tradition. Key characteristics of a pre-primary curricular framework include centrally defined goals and outcomes, prescriptive standards of practices and assessments, and a clear focus on school readiness. By contrast, a social pedagogy curriculum provides broad principles, goals, and orientations, with flexibility of developing local curriculums subject to their characteristics and conditions. Assessment is not required in a social pedagogy curriculum and child outcomes are set collaboratively by educators, parents, and children themselves. Although Bennett's (2005) categorization was based on curricular frameworks from almost two decades ago and countries may have updated their curriculums since then, his theories can still be used to describe the approaches adopted in national curriculums nowadays. In fact, the

curriculum frameworks included in this report all reflect features of the two traditions and stand on a spectrum that has pre-primary and social pedagogy traditions at its two ends.

3.2 0-3 ECEC in China

ECEC in China is a rapidly growing field with increased birth rate, government support, and recognition of its importance (Qi, 2019; Bullough & Palaiologou, 2020). Despite challenges that Chinese 3-6 ECEC face (for example, quality improvement for preschools on a whole and quality disparities that exist amongst kindergartens across the country; lack of qualified ECEC workers), the accessibility of 3-6 ECEC services in China is improving and has achieved an overall enrolment rate of 83.4% in 2019 (Ministry of Education PRC, 2020). Whereas, 0-3 ECEC provisions are underdeveloped and only 4.1% of Chinese children under 3 years-old currently attend some forms of ECEC services in Chinese cities (Jiang, 2020). There exists a *3-6 Early Learning and Development Guideline* issued by the Ministry of Education, PRC in 2012, but no curriculum frameworks for 0-3 care and education is available.

At the same time, the needs for 0-3 ECEC services outside family home is urgent. A survey conducted with 11,453 families from 12 cities of six provinces in China suggests that Chinese families suffer considerable stress in childrearing (Hong & Zhu, 2020). The costs are high to raise a child, educating young children is challenging for many parents, and over one-third mothers have to pursue a career break during the first few years after their children's birth. A significant portion of families also rely on grandparents as the main care providers for young children if both parents have to work. The situations are even more difficult when families have a second child in the context of China's new two-child policy (Pang, et al., 2019). Based on research about current situations and challenges, Pang and her team have proposed key principles and priorities in developing 0-3 ECEC system in China (Ibid), including: 1) a non-profitable and publicly accessible system led by central and local governments, with clearly defined responsibilities across departments and multi-form support from various sources; 2) integrated care and education services that emphasize the educational values for 0-3 years-old children; 3) diversified forms of ECEC services and providers, but with universal guidance on structural requirements, staff qualifications, quality standards, and assessment framework.

3.3 Structure of this report

In the above-mentioned global and local contexts of 0-3 ECEC, this report focuses on reviewing 0-3 national curriculum frameworks in selected countries and compares them with the current 3-6 early learning and development guideline in China. In the remainder of this report, the

selection of international frameworks is described in Chapter 4, together with the data analysis processes. Chapter 5 presents the major quality indicators of reviewed ECEC curriculums, including key theories, principles, key aspects, the roles of ECEC, staff, families and communities, and implementation. Similarities and differences across the frameworks are discussed and are particularly compared with the Chinese framework. In Chapter 6, the report reviews the effectiveness of selected frameworks in terms of assessment, evaluation and monitoring. Conclusions are drawn from findings of this report and recommendations to the development of a 0-3 ECEC curriculum in China are made.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the documentary analysis qualitative method (Bowen, 2009; Frey, 2018) to analyze national 0-3 curriculum frameworks in selected countries. The method is complemented by a systematic review of related literature that provides empirical evaluation of those frameworks. Content and thematic analyses were used in analyzing the documents.

4.1 Sampling and inclusion of international 0-3 frameworks

Inclusion of international frameworks are based on three groups of countries/regions that have established and evidence-based 0-3 curriculum frameworks or share similar socio-cultural contexts with China.

Group 1: Frameworks in OECD countries where 0-3 ECEC services are relatively more developed than other parts of the world according to OECD reports (OECD, 2019). There are many international reports (e.g. OECD reports) on ECEC in those countries, offering rich references for informing 0-3 ECEC globally. Within OECD countries, major English-speaking countries such as Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, UK, and USA are included and are the key frameworks analyzed - due to substantial literature and evaluation reports being available in English. The importance of and reliance on English publications is both a selection criterion and a limitation in the study. In addition to analyzing the frameworks, evaluation studies carried out by government bodies and on national levels are also reviewed.

Other non-English-speaking OECD countries such as Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden have English versions of their curriculum frameworks available, but not any evaluation reports. Those four countries' curriculum frameworks are included in the analysis because they are recently updated (between 2017-2020) and thus can inform updated developments in the field. However, it is acknowledged that the analysis is only limited to the content in those frameworks and does not include any evaluation reports¹.

Group 2: The South African National Curriculum Framework for Birth to 4 (2015) is included. South Africa has recent developments in ECEC under the National Development Plan 2030 and is one of the five 'GOLD BRICS' countries together with

¹ Evaluations of those new frameworks is currently ongoing in the respective countries. For example, the [Evaluation of the implementation of the framework plan \(2018-2023\)](#) is taking place in Norway.

China. Its framework can inform the development of one in similar countries with growing economies like China. However, again, the analysis is only limited to the framework itself as no evaluation studies have been carried out in the country yet. The other three 'GOLD BRICS' countries do not have an ECEC framework covering 0-3 and/or one available in English. For example, India has frameworks for 4-8 year-olds children; Brazil's Base Nacional Comum Curricular (2017) covering early childhood and elementary education stages is in Portuguese.

Group 3: Frameworks in other Greater China regions including Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan (Rao, Zhou, & Sun, 2017) are included. Those countries/regions share similar Chinese cultures with Mainland China but also embrace their own and different socio-cultural contexts. In Hong Kong, recent ECEC reforms included free quality kindergarten education and an updated *Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide* for 2-6 years old, both introduced in 2017. Singapore has a separate *Early Years Development Framework for Childcare Centres* (2013) covering children aged 0-3, in addition to *Nurturing Early Learners: A Curriculum Framework for Kindergartens in Singapore* (2012) for 4-6 years-olds. Taiwan's *Curriculum Framework for Kindergarten Education and Care Activities* (2012, available in Chinese) is for 2-6 years-old children and their care and education. No national studies are carried out to evaluate the effectiveness of those frameworks in all three countries/regions.

In the process of selecting international frameworks, one or more ECEC scholars in the above-mentioned countries were consulted within the researchers' academic networks. The consultation complements our research on curriculum frameworks, national evaluation studies, and key literature through Google, Google Scholar, UCL Explore, and each country's government websites, informing the decisions on inclusion and exclusion of countries described in this report. In particular, as Canada's and US's multiple states each has their own 0-3 curriculum framework, the ones from Ontario (Canada), New York State, and California (US) are chosen to 'represent' the two countries, as suggested by the Canadian and American ECEC scholars consulted. A summary of all selected frameworks including China's *3-6 Early Learning and Development Guideline* is listed in *Table 4.1*.

Table 4.1 National curriculum frameworks in selected countries/regions

Country/ Region	Framework	Year of Publicat ion	Age Group	Associated Frameworks/Guidelines	Effectiveness Study	Evaluation Reports	English Version
Australia	Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework	2009	Birth to 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Educators' Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia ▪ The Early Years Learning Framework in Action ▪ National Quality Standard 	Baseline Evaluation of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)	Y	Y
Canada	Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework	2017	Under age 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Early Learning for Every Child Today: A framework for Ontario early childhood settings (2007) ▪ How does learning happen? Ontario' pedagogy for the early years (2014) ▪ Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An Analysis of the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework and the Early Learning and Child Care Bilateral Agreements ▪ Ontario's Renewed Early Years and Child Care Policy Framework (2017) 	Y	Y
China	Guidelines for 3-6 Children's Learning and Development	2012	3-6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trail) 	N/A	N	N
Denmark	The strengthened pedagogical curriculum: Framework and content	2020	0-6	N/A	N/A	Y	N
England	Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)	2017	0-5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Development Matters in the EYFS ▪ EYFS Profile: 2020 Handbook 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Study of early education and development (SEED) ▪ Getting it right in the Early Years Foundation Stage: a review of the evidence 	Y	Y

Country/ Region	Framework	Year of Publicat ion	Age Group	Associated Frameworks/Guidelines	Effectiveness Study	Evaluation Reports	English Version
Finland	National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care	2018	0-5/6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 2018 	Evaluation of the implementation of the national core curriculum for early childhood education	N	N
Hong Kong SAR	Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide	2017	2-6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Performance Indicators: Kindergartens Operational Manual for Pre-Primary Institutions 	N/A	N	N
Ireland	Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework	2009	Birth to 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Early Childhood - How Aistear was developed: Research Papers 	Aistear in Action initiative: Final report A collaboration between NCCA and Early Childhood Ireland 2013	Y	Y
New Zealand	Te Whāriki (Updates)	2017	0-6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update of Te Whāriki: Report on the engagement process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Education Review Office (ERO) Reviews Report of the advisory group on early learning 2015 	Y	Y
Northern Ireland	Learning to Learn: A framework for early years education and learning	2013	0-6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education Early Years (0-6) Strategy 	N/A	N	N/A
Norway	Framework Plan for Kindergartens	2017	0-5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reports on the previous framework (summaries available in English) Current evaluation ongoing from 2018 	N	N
Scotland	Pre-Birth to Three: Positive Outcomes for	2010	Pre-birth to 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Early Years Framework Building the Ambition: National Practice Guidance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Growing up in Scotland Scottish Study of Early Learning and Childcare 	Y	Y

Country/ Region	Framework	Year of Publication	Age Group	Associated Frameworks/Guidelines	Effectiveness Study	Evaluation Reports	English Version
Scotland (cont.)	Scotland's Children and Families			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ on Early Learning and Childcare ▪ Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 ▪ Getting it Right for Every Child ▪ Curriculum for Excellence 3-18 			
Singapore	Early Years Development Framework for Childcare Centres	2013	0-3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Nurturing Early Learners: A Curriculum Framework for Kindergartens in Singapore ▪ SPARK Quality Rating Scale 	N/A	N	N
South Africa	The South African National Curriculum Framework	2015	Birth to 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ National Development Plan 2030 	N/A	N	N/A
Sweden	Curriculum for the Preschool Lpfö 18	2019	1-5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and school-age educare 	N/A	N	N
Taiwan	Curriculum Framework for Kindergarten Education and Care Activities	2012	2-6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ N/A 	N/A	N	N
US (California)	Infant/Toddler Curriculum Framework	2012	Birth to 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ DRDP (2015): A Developmental Continuum from Early Infancy to Kindergarten Entry 	N/A	N	N/A
US (New York)	Early Learning Guidelines	2012	Birth to 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The New York State Prekindergarten Learning Standards: A Resource for School Success ▪ Core Body of Knowledge: New York State's Core 	N/A	N	N/A

Country/ Region	Framework	Year of Publicat ion	Age Group	Associated Frameworks/Guidelines	Effectiveness Study	Evaluation Reports	English Version
				Competencies for Early Childhood Educators			
Wales	Early Years Outcomes Framework	2015	0-7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Building a Brighter Future: Early Years and Childcare Plan ▪ Foundation Phase Framework (Revised, 2015) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Early Years Outcomes Framework: Consultation Document ▪ Evaluation the Foundation Phase: Final Report 2015 	Y	Y

4.2 Analysis

All frameworks were firstly analyzed and coded using thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). A hybrid of inductive and deductive approaches was adopted in developing major themes, including: 1) Skim reading each framework to yield an initial list of themes; 2) The research team reviewed the list and added/revised themes/subthemes; 3) In-depth coding was conducted through NVivo and adjustments to the themes were made. After the thematic analysis, content analysis (Erlingssona & Brysiewicz, 2017) was carried out to identify the similarities and differences across frameworks within each theme. The analyses are complemented by reviews of national evaluation reports to indicate the overall effectiveness of the frameworks, as well as to capture issues concerning any particular themes. Empirical research concerning the frameworks and the ECEC systems in each country was also reviewed, benefiting culturally-sensitive understanding and interpretation of the themes. Nevertheless, the limited knowledge of the researchers about ECEC in some (if not all) countries is acknowledged as a limitation in and beyond the scope of this report.

Alongside the analyses and reviews, a particular mapping exercise was conducted to compare China's 3-6 framework against the universal and country-specific quality indicators identified in all themes. Gaps are identified and recommendations are made regarding the development of a 0-3 curriculum framework in China.

5. FROM GLOBAL TO LOCAL: 0-3 CURRICULUM FRAMEWORKS IN SELECTED COUNTRIES AND CHINA

5.1 Overview

Among the 18 curriculum frameworks reviewed (excluding China), the majority (11/18) cover care and education for children from birth to pre-primary school age (0-5/6). There are a few exceptions. Ontario (Canada) has both early learning frameworks for 0-6 years olds issued in 2007 & 2014² and a more recent kindergarten program exclusively for 4-5 years old children introduced in 2016³. Scotland's 0-3 framework is separate from a 3-18 *Curriculum for Excellence* and the former '*lays a sound foundation*' for the latter (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010, p.8). Both frameworks follow the four key principles set in the *Getting it Right for Every Child* policy. In South Africa, formal schooling starts from the Foundation Phase (above age 4) and a separate curriculum policy is in place. Therefore, its ECEC frameworks targets children aged 0-4. In California (US), there is a curriculum framework specially for infants and toddlers (0-3), in addition to the *California Preschool Curriculum Frameworks*. Specifically, Wale's early years outcomes and foundation phase frameworks serve children up to 7, who attend Year 2 of primary education.

The reasons for the different age segregation of ECEC curriculum frameworks are not well documented but may link to four considerations: separation from formal schooling, age- and development-appropriateness, provisions available in the education system, and transition. For example, in Hong Kong and Taiwan where organised provision for ECEC start from age 2, their frameworks cover 2-6 years olds. Recently in England, a petition to extend the 0-5 Early Years Foundation Stage to 0-7 is ongoing, for more developmentally-appropriate and less formal schooling before 7/8 and better transitions (Gaunt, 2020). Notwithstanding the slight variations, a 0-5/6 curriculum framework that supports children's care and education in the early years of life and before more formal primary schooling appears to be a global trend. Whether China

² The 2007 framework is recognised as a fundamental document in Ontario's ECEC system and is still in use. The 2014 framework builds upon the 2007 framework. Both frameworks are analyzed in this report.

³ This report excludes this 4-5 program as its aim is to prioritize frameworks that cover 0-3 years olds.

follows this trend or not is subject to local contexts, bearing in mind the four aforementioned factors.

In this chapter, universal and country-specific quality indicators including key ECEC theories, principles, key aspects, the roles of ECEC staff/families/communities, and implementation are presented. A particular note is given to how China's current 3-6 framework share similar quality indicators to and/or differ from other countries' frameworks.

5.2 Key theories of ECEC

There is a strong indication that ECEC frameworks draw upon multiple theories. It is almost impossible to perfectly group those theories though, as many overlap and sometimes link to one another. However, a broad categorization summarized by Nolan and Raban (2015) helps to gain an overview of them, including developmental theories, socio-cultural theories, socio-behaviourist/-constructivist theories, critical theories, and post-structuralist theories. Different theories enable and limit understandings of ECEC and children, providing competing and complementing discourses that shape pedagogies and practices.

5.2.1 Developmental theories

Developmental theories have long been influential in (early) childhood studies (Blaise, 2005; Wood & Hedges, 2016; Gabriel, 2020), including the often-associated brain theories and neurosciences. Key understandings of child development include that children follow shared patterns of development at different stages of their growth; that the development is predictable and earlier-stage development provides the basis for later stages; that development spans across five main domains such as physical, cognitive, communication/language, social, and emotional; and that development must be holistic and cover all domains. Those key understandings are largely prevalent in the frameworks reviewed. To illustrate, all frameworks emphasize the importance of early development for future learning and the acquisition of skills. Whilst key aspects of the curriculums vary in terms, all have included the domains of development. Countries like Australia, Canada (Ontario), England, New Zealand, US (California) have provided detailed guidelines on 'typical' characteristics of development for children at different ages, even though they also stress that individual children may develop differently within the continuum of development (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007; California Department of Education, 2015). Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Gestwicki, 2013) appears dominant in shaping pedagogies and practices in ECEC, providing universal standards for child development across the world (see

for example, Developmental Characteristics of Children from 2 to 6 Years Old [Appendix 2, pp.105-108] in Hong Kong's Kindergarten Curriculum Guide 2017).

Nevertheless, such dominance has received increasing criticism in recently years (Edwards, 2009; Edwards, Blaise, & Hammer, 2009; Nolan & Raban, 2015; Gabriel, 2020). Developmental theories were constructed in particular contexts (e.g. Western) and histories, thus not necessarily reflecting the diversity of childhood experiences in contemporary societies and in countries of the Global South (Nolan & Raban, 2015). The normative guidelines on what children are expected to develop at every stage/age may also disadvantage and marginalize children from various backgrounds, such as those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), those from a language background other than the main instructional language in a society, and those with other socio-cultural diversities and differences. As Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) pointed out, developmental theories prescribe and constrain childhood experiences.

Understanding ECEC beyond developmentalism is evident in the reviewed frameworks, both by directly addressing its limitations and drawing on other theories (in particular, socio-cultural theories). For example, all frameworks specify that children develop 'in different ways and at different rates' (Department for Education, England, 2017; The Curriculum Development Council, Hong Kong, 2017). Further, child development (including brain development) 'takes place in the context of families and communities and is shaped by the day-to-day experiences and environments of early life' (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007). Therefore, individual children's development is unique and subject to interactions with the contexts they are in.

Other theories that complement the limitations of developmentalism are described below. Nonetheless, developmental theories still significantly underpin international ECEC frameworks albeit to various extents (much less so in the Nordic countries than in others). The expectations that ECEC prepares children's future learning and life and that all children become developmentally ready for more formal schooling at the end of ECEC seem universal across countries. Even if individual differences are acknowledged and 'allowed', a universal goal for all children to ultimately develop into able and capable individuals is a powerful discourse amongst all countries.

5.2.2 Socio-cultural theories

Socio-cultural theories complement developmental theories by explaining why differences in child development exist within a society and across cultures. As such, the influences of families, communities, and cultures (local, national, and global [Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 2017]) are emphasized in ECEC practice and children's interactions with the social world become a significant part of their development and learning. Socio-cultural theories seem to have become the new 'norm' as all curriculum frameworks in this report focus on the collaborative partnerships between ECEC settings, families, and communities. All parties provide support in forms of relationships (e.g. love, attachment), resources, and stimulation (Vygotsky, 1962; Edwards, 2003) to enable children's full potential for development (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007). At the same time, cultural understandings and expectations of childhood shape the support provided. Amongst the countries/regions that this report concerns, shared and culturally specific images of childhood are presented.

5.2.2.1 Perspectives of children's rights

Globally, children are recognized as independent right holders and citizens, under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). All states including China have ratified UNCRC, except the US. Therefore, many frameworks (Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Scotland, Sweden & Wales) explicitly refer to the UNCRC and portray all children as having rights to the best possible childhood (their best interests), education and care, play, protection, and active participation in all matters affecting their lives. ECEC thus should respect and enable children's rights through practices that promote children's awareness of rights and responsibilities. In the Danish framework, it mentions that 'ECECs should provide children with co-influence, co-responsibility, and an understanding and experience of democracy' (Ministry of Children and Education, Denmark, 2020, p.7), which are similar to the statements in *Aistear* (the Irish ECEC framework), the framework plan for kindergartens in Norway, and the Curriculum for the Preschool in Sweden. This means that children should have a say in their daily life and activities and embrace the democratic values of their societies. The Finnish national framework even suggests that 'children are provided with an opportunity to participate in preparing and developing the local curriculum for ECEC' (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018, p.17).

5.2.2.2 Images of childhood

The universal agreement on children's rights has also led to other shared images of childhood amongst those countries. Australia's Early Years Learning Framework summarizes early childhood into three connected dimensions: being, becoming and belonging (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace, 2009); which are reflected in almost all frameworks. Being a child is first of all life on its own, in addition to preparing for future life (Thorne, 1993). Childhood embraces happiness, security, relationships with others, confidence, creativity, curiosity, other complexities and even challenges. Children actively engage with and respond to those complexities of life, with their competence, capacity, curiosity, ability, agency and resilience. Even young babies are competent and not merely vulnerable. At the same time, children's ideas, interests, knowledge and skills evolve and flourish as they gain experiences through their engagement with the social world. In the processes of being and becoming, children develop their sense of self and belonging to their families, communities, and societies. They construct their own values, identities, and understandings of the world through interacting with the social world surrounding them; actively participate in and contribute to the community.

5.2.2.3 Culturally-specific discourses of ECEC

In reviewing the sociocultural perspectives of ECEC, this report finds that cultural constructions and expectations of children are highly consistent in different countries and in a globalized world; although bearing in mind that the majority of countries are from 'Western' cultures in this review. Where some culturally-specific descriptions of children are presented, they are fundamentally resonant with the universal understandings. For example, New Zealand's understandings of children significantly reflect Māori traditions. In its *Te Whāriki - Early childhood curriculum* (Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 2017), it states that '[i]n Māori tradition children are seen to be inherently competent, capable and rich, complete and gifted no matter what their age or ability' (p.12). This statement is consistent with the shared images of children described in 5.2.2.2. In Taiwan's *Curriculum Framework for Kindergartens* (Ministry of Education, Taiwan, 2012), cultural expectations of children are founded upon the value of *Ren* [仁] (benevolence). Children are expected to inherit filial piety and fraternal duty in Taiwanese society; love and be kind to themselves and others; protect the environment, confront challenges, and build up cultural competence. The ultimate goal is for Taiwanese children to become future citizens who value communications and principles, are capable of thinking and collaborating, and are

confident and inclusive. All those goals are shared by other countries and cultures to a high extent.

In Hong Kong, a few culturally-specific discourses are directly addressed in its new 2017 curriculum guide. Parental expectations that children should perform high in academic studies (Wong & Rao, 2015) are challenged and the guideline particularly requires that kindergarten education should not encourage any forms of comparison among children. The role of Information Technology (IT) is also mentioned, in a growing discourse of more Hong Kong children coming into contact with IT products at an early age. There are expectations that children should take advantage of using IT to support their learning and development, meanwhile not being deprived of real-world experiences and physical health due to over-reliance on IT. Although those discourses are specific to the Hong Kong context, they are underpinned by developmental theories (e.g. developmentally appropriate practices, domains of development) that other countries also agree with.

Overall, sociocultural theories have significantly influenced contemporary ECEC frameworks. Acknowledging that sociocultural contexts at micro, meso, and macro levels can be dynamic and complex, countries share universal understandings of childhood and broad significance/goals of ECEC. Even if culturally-specific discourses exist in each society, there is a trend for ECEC to embrace and respect multiculturalism that is growing in all societies (see 5.2.5. 1).

5.2.3 Social-behaviorist/-constructivist theories

Whilst sociocultural theories attend to the ecological system of ECEC, social-behaviorist and -constructivist theories put the influence of such a system in day-to-day contexts of children's learning and teachers' pedagogy and practice. All frameworks draw on some social-behaviorist and -constructivist theories and agree that children learn through experiences and within cultural contexts. Allowing children to explore and experiment with things in their surrounding world and to interact and exchange views with peers and adults are key principles of how learning occurs. Social-behaviorist theories emphasize that adults reward and reinforce children's positive behaviors that emerge from the explorations, experiments, and interactions. Adults also provide a learning environment that promote and enable children's interests/motivations to learn. In some frameworks (e.g. Canada, Finland, Hong Kong), there is particular mention of children observing and imitating adult behaviors and learning from adults as role models. This understanding of learning is informed by Bandura's social learning

theory (Bandura, 1971). However, the theory is criticized for failing to explain the complex and dynamic behaviors of children (Nolan & Raban, 2015). It also places learning as more teacher-directed than child-centred.

Indeed, the focuses on reinforcement of behaviors and children observing and imitating adults imply that children passively accept the influences of adults on their learning and development (Woodrow; 2001; Blaise, 2005; Crivello, Vu, & Vennam, 2014), ignoring children's active participation at all levels of life. Reflecting contemporary images of children as agentic and actively interacting with social environments (see 5.2.2.2), all frameworks incorporate constructivist theories and emphasize that children are active learners who can initiate, act and reflect on, as well as challenge dynamic forms of learning. Therefore, a learning environment as described in the Danish framework embraces a hybrid of play, adult-initiated activities, spontaneous activities, child-initiated activities, and everyday routines (Ministry of Children and Education, Denmark, 2020). Adult teachers and children are co-workers in learning, through a reciprocal relationship that the Irish framework suggests.

Social-behaviorist and -constructivist theories contribute to ECEC by proposing that children learn and develop through real-life and first-hand experiences. Children's prior/existing knowledge and experiences are also as important in the process of new learning. In the current sociocultural contexts of childhoods, international ECEC frameworks further recognize children's active learning and thinking, positioning children in a reciprocal relationship with adults in developing children's learning.

5.2.4 Critical theories

Thus far, the three major groups of theories that dominate in ECEC have been introduced in this report - which considerably frame and underpin ECEC curriculum frameworks internationally. As discussed, all theories have their limitations and no single theory is able to fully understand the complexities and dynamics of childhood and children. On the one hand, drawing on multiple theories may complement each other and enhance understandings of ECEC; on the other hand, there are also emerging appeals to challenge existing theories, to continually reflect on taken-for-granted practices in working with young children, and to become aware of the 'hidden curriculum' that exists in ECEC (Nolan & Raban, 2015; Cohen & Waite-Stupiansky, 2017; Apple, 2019). Although termed as 'critical theories', this group of theories promotes liberty and democracy in understanding the world and is critical of the dominance of certain forms of knowledge (Bohman, 2019). Employing critical theories in ECEC for adult

teachers means to reflect on their pedagogy and practice, including on the reasons for certain approaches they adopt, whether alternative approaches exist, how different approaches may lead to different experiences, and how their own personal experiences and subjectivities form part of the curriculum. Children also demonstrate critical thinking in their activities, with and without adult's support. The frameworks of the four Nordic countries specifically mention that adults should challenge children and inspire them to 'make new discoveries and acquire new knowledge' (Skolverket, 2019, p.7). Informed by critical theories, teachers' reflective practices are advocated in the professional development of ECEC workforce (Altrichter, Feldman, Posch, & Somekh, 2007; Hayes et al., 2014; Lindon & Trodd, 2016) and are frequently mentioned in international ECEC frameworks reviewed in this report (see 5.5).

5.2.5 Post-structural theories

In Nolan and Raban's (2015) review of ECEC theories, post-structural and critical theories are discussed separately. However, Ryan and Grieshaber (2004) claim that critical theory is an umbrella term for a range of perspectives including post-structural theories. Adding to the criticisms of dominant knowledge, poststructuralism attributes the dominance to power and seeks ways to challenge power at all levels of social life. For ECEC, the sociocultural contexts in which ECEC is situated consist of various discourses (Foucault, 1980) that powerfully shape understandings of children, pedagogy and practice in ECEC, and policies and values toward ECEC. Dominant discourses (such as major theories of child development and learning, [in]equalities, cultural values of a community) are either reproduced or challenged through ECEC. As a result, ECEC functions as a venue for reinforcement of social structures and norms. At the same time, poststructuralists argue that ECEC offers opportunities for social transformations that challenge social inequalities and injustice in the wider society (Butler, 1990; Connell & Pearse, 2015; Warin, 2019; Xu, Warin, & Robb, 2020; Xu, 2020a).

5.2.5.1 Equality and diversity

The intention for states to tackle social inequalities and injustice through ECEC is well documented in the reviewed ECEC curriculum frameworks. In the first place, all frameworks state that ECEC supports young children to have a best possible start in their life and to achieve their full potential. This is believed to be particularly important for children from disadvantaged and/or vulnerable backgrounds (e.g. poverty, special education needs and/or disabilities, second language learners, indigenous groups). Therefore, the inclusion of all children is a key principle in an ECEC curriculum. As New Zealand's Te Whāriki - Early childhood curriculum

describes, 'Inclusion encompasses gender and ethnicity, diversity of ability and learning needs, family structure and values, socio-economic status and religion' (Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 2017, p.13). Inclusion is achieved through promoting equality and diversity. The former is about making sure all children can 'participate equally with the opportunity to fulfil his/her potential' (NCCA, 2009, p.8); whereas diversity means to welcome and value individual and group differences, and to understand and celebrate difference as part of life (Ibid).

Aspects concerning equality and diversity of children and their families/communities are multiple. They include but are not limited to: abilities and needs, culture, gender, ethnicity, race, language, sexual orientation, religion, and socio-economic status. All frameworks require that ECEC curriculums take those differences into account and act against discrimination of any forms. More importantly, the diversity of children, their families and communities, and even those who work in ECE, is an asset and resources that enrich children's experiences in ECEC environments (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Although a variety of differences and diversity is mentioned in all frameworks, the degrees of elaborations on selected aspects vary. The following aspects are ones that the majority of frameworks particularly refer to:

- **Abilities and needs:** All frameworks recognize that children have different abilities and needs, as underpinned by developmental and sociocultural theories. Those differences need to be considered when planning the curriculum and activities.
- **Cultural diversity:** Cultural diversity is an increasingly universal element in globalized societies (Woodward, Skrbis, & Bean, 2008). Incorporating cultural diversity into ECEC curriculums comprises two dimensions: celebrating multiple cultures and promote understanding of local cultures. On the one hand, ECEC pedagogies and practices must respect culturally-specific ways of knowing, seeing and living that children bring to ECEC. Staff members must endeavor to embed children's multiple cultures in ECEC environments and promote children's cultural competence both in honoring their own cultures and respecting others'. On the other hand, in some curriculums, the inclusion and understanding of local cultures is key. For example, in Australia, understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being is pivotal in ECEC. Canada requires ECEC systems to 'recognize the unique needs of French and English linguistic minority communities and those identified by provinces and territories in their action plans, and of Indigenous peoples' (Canada, 2017, p.2). South Africa emphasizes that indigenous and local knowledge, skills

and behaviours should inform programme design and activities for children and their families. In Hong Kong, there is a new agenda to help Non-Chinese speaking (NCS) or newly-arrived children to understand and adapt to local cultures and lifestyles. Northern Ireland's Intercultural Education Service (IES) and Supporting Newcomer Pupils policy similarly offer support and advice to meet the needs of newcomer children. In Taiwan where globalization is recognized, the uniqueness of local cultures is also important in kindergarten education. Local identities and traditional values are stressed when allowing young children to explore and construct their own identities. Other local cultures specifically mentioned in ECEC frameworks include Sámi cultures in Finland and Norway, Pasifika cultures in New Zealand, and Welsh cultures in Wales (UK).

- **Languages:** Multilingualism links to multiculturalism and is thus respected in ECEC frameworks. In addition to supporting children's mastering of the main languages used in the society and in ECEC settings, children are also encouraged to develop their mother tongues (if different from the main languages) and other multilingual skills. It is widely agreed among frameworks in English-speaking countries that children's home languages benefit their learning of English and other areas of learning and development. Hong Kong's kindergarten guide addresses the learning of Chinese for NCS children, through for example designing activities and learning content that are beneficial for Chinese language learning. The protection of local languages is mentioned in many frameworks, such as the French and Aboriginal languages in Ontario (Canada), the Sámi and Roma languages in Finland, the New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) in New Zealand, Sami and other national minorities languages in Sweden, and Welsh in Wales. There is also specific guidance in some countries for settings where a different language-medium is used, such as Irish in Northern Ireland and Sami language in Norway.
- **Special education needs and disabilities (SEND):** The inclusion of children with SEND is also a major concern in international ECEC frameworks. This means that children with SEND should be provided with and benefit from participation in quality ECEC together with other children (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007). Meanwhile, tailored supports must be in place to cater for their needs. In England, a progress check at age two for all children is particularly relevant for early identification and intervention of children with SEND. Similarly, other frameworks such as those of Hong Kong and Northern Ireland mention the usefulness of assessment information in identifying children's SEND. A profile is kept for each English child and informs plans for supporting children's additional needs, which is similar to the Individual Education Plan implemented in Ireland and Taiwan. ECEC

settings in England are also required to identify a Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO). In Hong Kong, the kindergarten guide specifies that ‘kindergarten teachers should have professional knowledge to identify children with special learning needs, know how to communicate and co-operate with their colleagues and parents, and refer cases for further professional advice in a timely manner’ (The Curriculum Development Council, 2017, p.80). It further clarifies that the role of teachers is to identify and make referrals. There is no expectation of teachers to advise on the special needs children have and other professional supports are signposted instead. In Northern Ireland (NI), a separate SEND supplement for practitioners is produced and an established system of support for both ECEC settings, children and their families is available. Specifically, the needs of gifted children are also mentioned in the NI curriculum framework, which points to the awareness and significance of gifted education in ECEC (Sutherland, 2012). In California (US), children under 3 with SEND have individualized family service plans (IFSPs) informed by the infant/toddler learning and development foundations. It is evident from reviewed ECEC frameworks that multi-agency collaborations (Cheminais, 2009) are core for supporting children with SEND in ECEC contexts.

- **Socio-economic status:** In some frameworks (e.g. Taiwan, Scotland), children who live in poverty and other socio-economic disadvantages are covered in supporting children with SEND. Individualized plans and multi-agency working apply when identifying needs and support for those children. More broadly, regional gaps are accounted for in for example, the Ontario framework. As it suggests, rural and remote communities can flexibly adapt to the challenges of geographic distances and isolation in their local contexts; whereas ECEC programmes in the state aim to provide children in rural and remote communities the same opportunities as their peers from more urban regions.
- **Gender:** Gender equality and diversity seems to be an under-addressed aspect among international ECEC frameworks. Although the majority mention gender alongside other aspects of equality and diversity when claiming inclusion of all children, few expands on it or details any practical guidance. There are three exceptions - the frameworks of Northern Ireland, Sweden, and Taiwan, in which elaborative statements are found. All propose that gender stereotypes/patterns that limit children’s development, choices, participation and learning should be explicitly challenged, in terms of the organization of education and care, the treatment of children, and the expectations of boys and girls. Practical suggestions made by the three frameworks include for example, promote positive role models that challenge traditional perceptions of gender (e.g. roles of men and women); encourage all

children to participate in all activities (e.g. play with full range of toys available to them) and take on different roles (e.g. take part in all types of role play, take on leadership roles); and organize non-gender-specific routines (e.g. mix boys and girls in groups). Nevertheless, challenging gender binary and dualism is yet mentioned in any frameworks (Nolan & Raban, 2015; Xu, Warin, & Robb, 2020).

- **Religion:** Similar to gender, statements on equality and diversity related to religions is also limited in the frameworks. In Norway, the framework allows kindergartens run under particular religious values to ‘adopt special objectives regarding their world view as a supplement to the objectives clause contained in the Kindergarten Act’ (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017, p.12). In Wales where Religious Education is statutory for children in maintained schools, younger children in ECEC are encouraged to be given opportunities to explore different beliefs and viewpoints. That said, parents/carers have the right to withdraw their children from religious education if they wish.

The different aspects of equality and diversity usually intersect with each other and shape the vulnerabilities and disadvantages of young children jointly. A sensitive ECEC curriculum framework that captures all those aspects is transformative in tackling social inequalities and injustice based on poststructuralist theories.

5.2.5.2 Child agency and empowerment

In challenging dominant discourses and social inequalities and injustice, critical and post-structural theories also view young children as agents of change and social transformers (Ebrahim, 2011; Xu, 2020b). ECEC in this regard serves to empower young children and enable their agency in challenging social norms and structures that disadvantage themselves and others. This theory is reflected in several curriculum frameworks, as they demand that children participate in the planning of curriculums, assessment, and the creation of learning environments in ECEC (e.g. Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, Scotland, Sweden). ECEC settings are expected to be democratic contexts and empowering environments that enable children to challenge dominant knowledge, norms, and practices; as well as to incorporate local, national and international perspectives in constructing new worldviews and values (Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 2017; Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017).

5.2.6 How does Guideline on 3-6 Learning and Development (China) reflect international ECEC theories

Having reviewed the five main theories that international ECEC frameworks are based upon, we now review the extent to which China's 3-6 framework incorporates each theory. On a whole, the three major theories (developmental, sociocultural, and social-behaviorist/-constructivist) dominantly underpin the goals, values, pedagogies and practices described in the Chinese framework.

The guideline suggests that its key aim is to lay the foundation for children's future learning and lifelong development. There is also mention of children living a happy and meaningful childhood. The development domains include physical, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic. Those domains can all be connected to the domains of physical, cognitive, communication/language, social and emotional. The focus on age-appropriate learning and development is overarching, so that care and education for children follow scientific principles. The guideline further emphasizes respecting individual differences in development, whilst acknowledging that child development is a continuous and gradual process with certain patterns at each stage. According to the guideline, every child follows similar patterns of development and meanwhile they may arrive at the same level at different times and with different speeds.

Sociocultural theories are reflected in the Guideline when it recognizes the role of adults as supporting and guiding children to develop beyond their existing levels (the zone of proximal development). Besides, the guideline states that children's rights and individuality should be respected in kindergarten education, though not much is stated about the nature of those rights. Neither has the guideline signposted to the influences of children's wider families, communities and cultures on their development. A specific aspect noted in the guideline is the culture of collectiveness that is promoted among Chinese children. Children are encouraged to participate in group activities so as to develop their sense of belonging to groups. Furthering this, the collective sense of honor towards children's communities, home towns, and the nation needs to be developed through daily activities such as finding out where the child comes from on maps, discussing photographs of landscapes, architectures, and other local specialties across the country, and learning about national flags, songs, and significant inventions and creations of China. In stressing collectivism, there is a brief mention of inviting children to discuss and decide on big events and plans in the kindergartens and classrooms. This could potentially be a sign of democracy that other frameworks frequently mention regarding children's participation in a democratic society.

Mirroring other frameworks in terms of social-behaviorism/-constructivism, the guideline also emphasizes children's active participation in activities and learning, as well as that children learn from first-hand and real-life experiences. It particularly points out that children are encouraged to explore and experiment with their imagination and creativity. It is thus myopic and harmful to ignore cultivating children's characters of curiosity, interests, exploration, creativity, and bravery, or to merely focus on acquisitions of knowledge and skills. The guideline also forbids education and training that is beyond children's limits (as informed by age, learning characteristics, etc.)

Critical and post-structural theories are minimally reflected and are related to differences. The guideline states that children should be guided to view differences with equality, acceptance, and respect. The differences mentioned include individual interests, hobbies, strengths, and cultural differences within and beyond China. As clarified in the document, children can be 'adequately' introduced to the cultures of major ethnicities in China, as well as those in other countries and nations - so that children know about and respect cultural differences and diversity. Additionally, the guideline requires that children should be provided with a language environment that supports them to familiarize, understand, and speak Chinese Mandarin (*Putonghua*). At the same time, children living in minority ethnic regions⁴ need to learn their own languages. The guideline also attends to children with language difficulties, saying that collaborations with parents and other bodies are needed to improve those children's language skills. No other difficulties or disadvantages are referred to in the document.

5.3 Principles of ECEC

The five theories that underpin ECEC curriculum frameworks inform the principles. Although different wording is used, the principles of all frameworks reviewed can be summarized into the following overarching terms:

- **Child-centred** - A primary principle of ECEC reflects conceptualizations of child-centredness, although only the frameworks of Hong Kong, Scotland and Taiwan explicitly refer to this term. There are three competing and complementing constructions of child-centredness, including developmental, individualized, and democratic (Chung & Walsh, 2000). Developmental constructions of child-centredness support that pedagogies and practices in ECEC should be age- and developmentally-appropriate.

⁴ There are 56 ethnic groups in China. The majority are *Han* Chinese and others are minority ethnicities.

These define how learning should be delivered (e.g. through play and real-life experiences) and adults have a say in judging and deciding the appropriateness. Individualized constructions of child-centredness point to the differences among children and recognize children as having different needs. Adults have a role to respond to those needs and adapt their interactions with each child. Democratic constructions of child-centredness allow children freedom in active learning and exploration. Children have the rights to decide what, when and how to learn; as well as to participate in decisions concerning their own life and the wider society. Despite that all three constructions of child-centredness are to various extent embedded into international ECEC curriculum frameworks, how they are practiced and prioritized in day-to-day ECEC environments depend on local contexts and cultural interpretations (Campbell-Barr, 2019).

- **Respect for diversity, equity/equality, and inclusion** - This is also a universal principle in the reviewed frameworks, linking to the various aspects of equality and diversity discussed in *5.2.5.1*.
- **Relationships** - All frameworks situate children in the contexts of relationship with others, such as parents/carers, ECEC staff, communities, and peers. Secure, responsive and overall positive relationships with the primary carers and with ECEC staff are particularly emphasized.
- **Partnerships** - ECEC relies on close collaborations between ECEC settings and the families and communities.
- **Holistic approach** - ECEC takes a holistic approach to support children's comprehensive development and full opportunities. Whilst all frameworks have specified areas/themes of learning and development, those areas/themes are integrated and interconnected.
- **Play** - ECEC is play-based and incorporates real-life experiences. This principle speaks to developmentally-appropriate practices and theories of learning. Play is widely emphasized as the means through and contexts in which learning and development take place.
- **Intentional** - Acknowledging that learning takes place all the time with planned and unplanned activities and scenarios, ECEC frameworks are mostly intentional and curriculums are planned with inputs from ECEC staff, children, and parents. In this regard, an enabling environment that promotes learning (particularly children's active learning) and development is pivotal and fundamental according to some frameworks (e.g. Canada, England, & Finland).

- **Empowerment** - A particular principle adopted by New Zealand's framework and is also mentioned in the Scottish curriculum, underpinned by post-structural theories of child agency and empowerment (see 5.2.5.2). Although other frameworks have not used this term, the ideas are echoed to some extent.
- **Quality** - Overall, bringing the above principles together, international ECEC frameworks are guided by the principle of quality education and care for all children, promoting their life-long development and learning opportunities.

5.3.1 How does Guideline on 3-6 Learning and Development (China) reflect international patterns in ECEC principles

The developmental and individualized constructions of child-centredness are primary principles in the guideline, as well as children's holistic learning and development. Learning is required to be play-based and to build upon real-life experiences. ECEC settings are expected to provide children with rich learning environments. In summary, the principles are:

- Appropriate for children's existing levels, and at the same time allowing for some challenges;
- Meeting children's current needs, meanwhile beneficial for their long-term development;
- The resources and questions chosen are close to children's real life, but also extend children's experiences and horizons.

5.4 Aspects of ECEC

The content of ECEC covers a broad range of areas across the reviewed frameworks. But before listing all those specific areas, the division and integration of education and care in ECEC is discussed. ECEC has long been regarded as 'women's work' across societies due to its strong association with 'care' (Laere et al., 2014; Xu, 2020a). Meanwhile, the growing recognition of ECEC for social and economic benefits has led to the promotion of its educational values (Peeters, Rohrmann, and Emilsen, 2015). Nevertheless, due to gendered constructions of care and education, 'caring' work in ECEC is often instrumentalised for educational activities (Xu, 2020a). The division and hierarchy between care and education in ECEC is criticized for its narrow views on both care and education and is in breach of the principle of providing children with holistic and comprehensive ECEC services (Laere et al., 2014; Warin, 2014). As such, quality ECEC might benefit from challenging the binary of and integrating care and education. The conceptualisations of and boundaries between care and education can be difficult to define in a holistic approach to ECEC, nor indeed do they need to be defined.

In some frameworks, ‘care for education’ is still implied. For instance, in the Ontario framework (2007), it says that a caring, nurturing environment supports learning and early development⁵. The Finnish framework (2018) has defined education (to communicate, shape and update cultural values), instruction (to promote learning and understanding) and care (physical basic need and emotional caring) separately, whilst stressed that education, instruction and care form a coherent entity. It further adds that the three elements are given different emphases in activities and services subject to children’s age. Whereas in some other frameworks, education and care are integrated and equally valued. The South African framework (2015) points out that its key feature of integrated care and education differs from ECEC programs in other countries and is deemed to be important for social transformation in the country. Taiwan views the division of care and education in its ECEC system as a major barrier and becomes the first Asian system to run an integrated education and care system. In Sweden, care is integrated into education. As its framework explains, ‘education should be characterised by care for the child’s well-being and security’ (Skolverket, 2019, p.5). According to Warin (2014), the concept of ‘educare’ is derived from the Swedish pedagogy and may potentially conceptualise education and care via a holistic approach.

In the remaining countries’ frameworks, a direct discussion on care and education is not documented. However, this can be interpreted as a sign of integrated care and education and/or educare. In the Singaporean Early Years Development Framework for Child Care Centres (0-3 years old), ‘professional educarers’ are used to describe those who care and educate young children (2013). Summarizing from all frameworks, key aspects of an ECEC curriculum framework that integrates education and care are listed below:

- **Health and Wellbeing** - including children’s physical and psychological health. Children explore and understand bodies, senses, food and nutrition so as to live a health and sustainable lifestyle. Children feel secure, protected and respected, gain self-confidence and self-esteem, and express their emotions properly.
- **Learning and development** - learning and development in their broadest sense cover all aspects of ECEC and in developmental terms include physical, cognitive, social and emotional aspects. However, a narrowed understanding of learning and development tends to prioritize acquisitions of knowledge and skills and is outcome-driven (Hayes & Filipović, 2018). The ‘schoolification’ of ECEC (Clausen, 2015) has shaped some

⁵ Recent reforms across Canadian provinces and territories (including Ontario) have moved towards the integration of education and care (Cleveland & Colley, 2013).

countries' ECEC policies although not explicitly reflected in the frameworks. **Mathematics (numeracy) and literacy skills** are deemed to be fundamental to other areas of learning and development. The new Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide in Hong Kong (2017) particularly discourages overt 'schoolification' in ECEC. It does not allow children in nursery classes (3-4) to hold a pencil or write, nor should 4-6 years old children do mechanical copying and calculation. In a context of high academic expectations from children's parents (Ma, Siu, & Tse, 2018), the Hong Kong guide explicitly states that '[a]fter school, children should have sufficient time to rest and enjoy family life, or to enjoy their leisure time, cultivate a wide range of interests and develop good living habits.' (The Curriculum Development Council, 2017, p.72).

- **Communication and language** - Communication starts from birth with gestures, sounds, language, and assisted communication (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace, 2009). The bases of communication are language, literacy, and numeracy. Children acquire and develop communication and language through relationships and in rich learning environments. In the majority of frameworks, linguistic identities and multilingualism are emphasized in young children's development of communication and language skills. Children are provided opportunities to develop competence in their home languages, the major languages used in their societies, and any other languages of interests to them.
- **Relationships** - Relationships include those with parents/carers, ECEC staff, peers, and any others that children may have contacts with in the wider social world. All other aspects of learning and development can happen through secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships. A universal focus on relationships among the frameworks is the recognition of young children's competence, independence and agency. Relationships (particularly between children and adults) are thus built upon equality, mutual respect, and responsibility.
- **Environment** - Both natural and social environments (including the ECEC environments) that children live in are important sources for children's learning and development. Other areas of learning and development happen in rich environments, too. In the frameworks of the four Nordic countries, sustainable environment is particularly mentioned as an aspect of ECEC curriculum. In the international context of achieving Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 (United Nations, 2015), sustainability education and children's active participation in and contribution to a sustainable society form a

significant element of ECEC curriculum (Someville & Williams, 2015; Samuelsson, Li, & Hu, 2019).

- **Cultural competence** - In a number of frameworks such as those of Australia, Denmark, Finland, New Zealand, & Norway, cultural competence is raised as an aspect of ECEC curriculum beyond awareness of and respectful for multiple cultural differences. In globalised and multicultural societies, cultural competence encompasses understanding, attitudes, knowledge and skills that enable children to effectively interact with people across cultures and to become a global citizen. **Arts and creativity** are of vital relevance to cultural competence, enabling young children to express their views and understanding of the world in creative ways.
- **Technology** - In an increasingly digitized world, knowledge and skills of technology have considerable implications for social inequalities in/through education and among young children (Halford & Savage, 2010; Tawfik, Reeves, & Stich, 2016). Technology education is critically engaged with in some ECEC curriculum frameworks. In the Hong Kong framework, understanding the use and influence of technology and its relationship with the society is important, but only on the conditions that children's health and experiences of natural and real world are not compromised. In Sweden, a critical and responsible attitude towards technology is developed among young children, in order for them to understand both the opportunities and risks that technology brings.
- **Transitions** - Transitions in ECEC include from home to ECEC settings, from ECEC to primary education, between different stages of education and care, and sometimes between ECEC settings. The consistency and continuity of provisions for children are emphasized. Successful transitions rely on close cooperation between the families and ECEC settings. Different ECEC systems run different programmes for transitions, especially concerning transitions from ECEC to primary schooling. However, a key strategy found across systems is effective information sharing with privacy and child protection in mind.

The aspects of ECEC described above are only broad indications of key considerations for children's education and care, drawn from international ECEC frameworks reviewed. They overlap with each other significantly and more concrete definitions and interpretations are subject to cultural and local contexts.

5.4.1 How does Guideline on 3-6 Learning and Development (China) reflect international patterns in aspects of ECEC

The guideline focuses on combined care and education for children's holistic development, both physically and psychologically. There are no further discussions on the definitions and understandings of care and education. In 2011, the Ministry of Education, PRC issued a notice to all kindergartens and required them to ban and reform 'schoolification' that were prevalent in Chinese kindergartens. Play-based learning is promoted and developmentally-appropriate practices are emphasized. There are five areas of learning and development in the guideline, including health, language, society, science, and arts. The majority of aspects above are incorporated into those five areas, except technology and cultural competence.

5.5 The roles of ECEC settings and the staff

The role of ECEC, or more broadly education, can be two folded. On the one hand, it supports (or at least is meant to support) children's development and potential, promoting their life prospects and benefiting their families, communities and ultimately the societies. All international ECEC frameworks recognise this and have highlighted it prominently in their documents. On the other hand, dominant social norms and structures are reinforced through education and oftentimes inequalities are reproduced, explicitly or inexplicitly (SÜNKER, 2004; Reichelt, Collischon, & Eberl, 2019). As discussed in *5.2 Theories of ECEC*, many frameworks engage with critical theories and intend to critically reflect on the role of ECEC. Such criticality is expected to immerse into the daily environments of ECEC settings and is to a large extent reliant on ECEC staff members who work on a daily basis with children. That said, there are also powerful social structures and norms that staff members are subject to themselves (Davison & Frank, 2006; Estola, 2011). Empowering ECEC staff members (and ECEC sectors on a whole) is parallel to empowering children in the process of social transformations and in challenging dominant discourses that disadvantage certain groups of children and individuals.

In this report, ECEC staff members refer to all those working directly with children and cover a variety of job titles in different ECEC systems (e.g. teachers, educators, workers, practitioners). Shaped by the two folds of ECEC, the roles of ECEC staff members as required by international ECEC frameworks include:

- **Building up relationships with children and their families** - The importance of relationships is consistently addressed in the principles and aspects of ECEC. The relationships between children and staff members are mutual, reciprocal and interactive, instead of being hierarchical or directive. Trust, respect and a sense of security are

developed through positive relationships and benefit children's comprehensive development and happy experiences in ECEC.

- **Protecting children** - Safeguarding and child protection policies and procedures are a significant part of ECEC policies and are rigorously followed in ECEC settings. Staff members need to be trained to be able to identify signs of possible abuse and neglect as early as they can and to respond timely and appropriately (Department for Education, England, 2017). In many countries, staff members are also subject to criminal records check before being allowed to work with children and young people (e.g. England and Scotland). Details on safeguarding and child protection are either included in the framework or in a separate documentation among the reviewed countries.
- **Responding to children** - Responsive ECEC staff are agreed to be essential for quality ECEC. Children's learning is dynamic and takes place all the time. Children also have fluctuating emotions and various needs in everyday context. Staff need to be responsive to those needs and emotions, as well as to children's new ideas and evolving interests. Overall, staff members respond to all situations initiated by the children and the needs of children's families.
- **Collaborating in partnerships** - ECEC staff actively collaborate with children's families, communities, other professionals and service providers concerning children to ensure comprehensive provisions for children. The collaboration happens throughout ECEC processes, including planning of curriculums, implementing, and assessment. ECEC staff also support families with children's learning at home and share information with families on every aspect of their children's ECEC.
- **Planning & identifying** - ECEC staff take overall responsibility for the planning of curriculums, the creation of learning environments, the implementation of activities, the assessment and evaluation, and the identification of supports that children need in short-term and long-term. The planning and identification are premised on the principles of ECEC, in response to children, and through collaborations with families and beyond.
- **Roles in play** - The roles of ECEC staff in play depend on the forms of play and the situations, and are multiple and flexible. Staff can be supporters, participants, observers, learners, interveners, inspirers, collaborators, and occasionally initiators.
- **Professional knowledge** - Professional knowledge includes fundamental understanding of child development and learning, pedagogy and theories, and the operation of a curriculum framework and the broad ECEC system. More importantly, in-depth knowledge of each individual child and their families and communities informs all

aspects of ECEC staff roles. The professional knowledge is an ongoing process and requires continuous professional development and in-service training.

- **Leadership** - The overall leadership and organization significantly affects the effectiveness of ECEC in a setting. Additionally, distributed leadership at all levels of an ECEC institution is encouraged, including leadership by children. In so doing, both ECEC staff and children are empowered and all parties can benefit from it (Heikka, Waniganayake, & Hujala, 2013).
- **Preparing for transitions** - ECEC staff support children to cope with changes such as moving from home to the ECEC setting, changing rooms/settings, and particularly starting primary schooling. Successful transitions engage all parties of relevance in the transition process.
- **Promoting participation** - This role particularly refers to creating an inclusive environment that all children and their families can be involved. Any barriers and low confidence that result from children's age, ethnicity, abilities, SEND, gender, language, socio-economic status, religion and possibly others should be addressed by ECEC staff and children regardless of their backgrounds should be supported with accessibility to all opportunities that benefit their learning and development.
- **Respect for diversity** - Similarly, differences and diversity of children and their families should be respected and celebrated by ECEC settings. ECEC staff promote respectful understanding of and attitudes toward children's different backgrounds among all ECEC participants and support children's corresponding needs where appropriate.
- **Ongoing reflexivity** - As part of ECEC staff's continuous professional development, ongoing reflexivity is core as they continue to aim for higher quality ECEC. Whilst a curriculum framework signposts to the directions and considerations of everyday activities, ECEC staff consistently challenge assumptions about curriculum and reflect on how their decisions may affect children differently. More concretely, ECEC staff become aware of their own subjectivities, values, pedagogy and practice, understand how those influence ECEC and children, and come up with possible changes. Reflexivity links to all other roles of ECEC staff and can take places both spontaneously and systematically, individually and as a team. To facilitate reflective practice among ECEC staff, the Australian Early Years Learning Framework suggests a list of questions that can be asked from time to time and throughout ECEC processes (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace, 2009, p.13).

- **Assessing** - ECEC staff also take the role of assessing children and evaluating the effectiveness of the curriculum. Details of assessment and evaluation are followed in Chapter 7. The purposes of assessment are to better plan the curriculum, to respond to children's needs, to improve children's learning, development and agency, and to ultimately provide quality ECEC.

The roles of ECEC settings and especially staff are key in quality ECEC. The implementation of those roles and their effectiveness are subject to power relations (Jobb, 2019) between staff and children/parents, within staff team, and at all levels of the ECEC system.

5.5.1 How does Guideline on 3-6 Learning and Development (China) reflect international patterns in roles of ECEC and the staff

The roles of benefiting children's future life and socializing/normalizing children into appropriate Chinese citizens are both evident in the Guideline (e.g. moral education and nationality education). Chinese kindergarten teachers are expected to create rich, constructive, and secure environments, be role models for children in positive behaviors and communication, work in partnership with families, interact with children with love, acceptance and respect, listen to children and understand children's thoughts and feelings, support and encourage children's explorations and expressions, respond to children's interests and needs, guide and extend children's learning, challenge children, and promote their independence, confidence and self-esteem. The guideline specifies that teachers are co-learners, supporters, guides, collaborators, and inspirers. It also points out that teachers 'teach' in accordance with individual child's development levels, skills, experiences, and learning characteristics. Supporting children's transitions into schools is mentioned, and the collaborations between kindergartens, families and communities are emphasized in this regard.

In 2020, the Ministry of Education, PRC issues a new guideline on the regulated training of newly qualified kindergarten teachers. In the document, key areas of training for entrant teachers include moral education and professional beliefs (including cultural confidence), professional knowledge and research-based understanding of children, integrated care and education, and continuing professional development. All the roles summarized from other international frameworks are covered, except those concerning social equality and diversity.

5.6 The roles of families and communities

Families are primary and essential venues for children's learning and development. All frameworks emphasize the importance of collaborating with families in ECEC. In particular, the involvement of parents and families in the development and implementation of local curriculums, as well as in assessment, monitoring and evaluation are discussed in some frameworks (e.g. Australia, Canada [Ontario], Finland, Norway, Sweden, US [California]; see Chapter 6 for details). Within the families, parents'/carers' sensitive interactions with children and responsiveness to children's needs start from pre-birth/birth and benefit children significantly. Their roles in children's education and care mirror to a high extent those of ECEC staff. Therefore, as the Hong Kong Kindergarten Guide and the Irish *Aistear* framework suggest, parents can also read the national curriculum framework and gain an understanding of ECEC. In the Hong Kong context there is a specific requirement that parents should not exert pressure on children's academic learning by enroll them on extra activities and tutorials outside the home and school learning environment.

Parents' active engagement with ECEC settings, other families, and the communities can support them to develop effective parenting. As summarized in the Ontario framework, family involvement in ECEC could include diverse forms such as parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making and collaborating with the community. In the Nordic countries, a parent committee/council is also required in each ECEC setting to effectively involve parents throughout the ECEC processes.

In extension to children's families, the communities that children live in are important resources for ECEC. The cultures and values of children's different communities are also essential for an inclusive ECEC curriculum and for developing children's sense of being, belonging, and becoming. These are particularly significant for children from aboriginal and indigenous communities in the Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, and South African contexts, as well as for children from multiple cultural backgrounds in all countries/regions.

Considering the differences across communities, the Ontario (Canada) framework points out that communities can influence child outcomes. The Singaporean framework expands on this point and explains how communities link to quality ECEC. On a whole, respectful interactions and relationships with various community members provide consistency, continuity and support in children's lives. Further, the different resources available in communities impact on children

directly (e.g. play spaces, parks, medical care, children's services) or indirectly (e.g. financial assistance for families, family-friendly workplaces, marital counselling agencies).

To summarize, children are closely connected to ECEC settings, families and communities. Their experiences in each of the venue are interdependent and shape the overall learning and development of children.

5.6.1 How does Guideline on 3-6 Learning and Development (China) reflect international patterns in the roles of families and communities

The roles of families and communities are recognized by the guideline. It states that parents are important collaborators with kindergartens. Relationships between kindergartens and families should base on respect, equality, and partnerships. Kindergartens support parents to understand ECEC and help them improve their educational skills. Parents support the works of kindergartens and actively participate in relevant activities.

The guideline also suggests that kindergarten education should make full use of the natural environments and the educational resources in communities to extend children's life experiences and learning space. At the same time, kindergartens are expected to serve for the early education in communities.

5.7 Implementation

The implementation of a national framework in local ECEC settings as required in different countries/regions varies and falls onto the spectrum between social pedagogy and pre-primary curriculums (see 3.1; Bennett, 2005). The four Nordic countries follow more of a social pedagogy tradition (Ringsmose & Kragh-Müller, 2017) and allow each ECEC setting to develop its local pedagogical curriculum according to local challenges, strengths and competences. Only broad principles, requirements and themes are set. The Finnish framework further suggests that there are three levels of curriculum, comprising the national core curriculum, the local curricula, and children's individual plans. A significant part of the national core curriculum concerns how the three levels of curriculum work in coherent and consistent manners. The Norwegian framework proposes a model of working methods that adapt for individual children, the group of children and the local community. This model echo the 'working theories' suggested by Wood and Hedges (2016) as they question the content, coherence, and control in ECEC policy frameworks.

The Australian framework claims itself to underpin curriculums that are more specific to each local community and setting. In Canada, a recent national framework across the country provides guiding principles and objectives; whilst allowing provincial and territorial governments to develop their own ECEC systems. The New Zealand framework ‘provides a basis for each setting to weave a local curriculum that reflects its own distinctive character and values’ (p.7) and suggests the factors that local curriculum should consider. Although a more detailed list of learning outcomes is provided, it is informed by the broad patterns of child development and is used to inform curriculum planning and evaluation and support for children.

In Hong Kong, the curriculum guide is claimed to be flexible and adaptable and provides a comprehensive framework for the development of a local curriculum with school-based characteristics. Nonetheless, the guide also suggests detailed recommendations on each aspect of ECEC (including a list of children’s developmental characteristics). Similarly, the Irish framework offers concrete ideas and suggestions as sample learning opportunities under the curriculum aims and goals. At the same time, it signposts to the necessity of local adaptations where relevant. The South African framework also provides guidelines for observation and planning, but it underscores that the activities documented are examples rather than prescriptions. They provide ideas on opportunities for learning but are subject to the specific context of the child and to effective indigenous, local and global practices.

The English framework has clear definitions of areas of learning, characteristics of effective learning, and early learning goals that are statutory for ECEC settings and for children to achieve. A recent policy of baseline assessment is also in its pilot phase and is subject to significant criticisms in the sector. Such standardisation is also evident in the two US frameworks. The California framework for infants and toddlers adopts a universal design for learning, so that it applies to all young children. Under this universal framework, there are however multiple means of representation, expression and engagement. In other words, there are desired outcomes for all Californian young children to achieve, whereas the realisation depends on various factors concerning each individual child. The New York framework is intended to enable children to meet the standards set according to the guiding principles, relevant literature, and developmentally appropriate practice in ECEC.

The reviewed frameworks are broadly divided into three groups in terms of their autonomy in localising national frameworks. The first group as represented by the Nordic countries only

provides the theoretical, sociocultural, and political foundations that local curricula build upon, with no further requirements on local practices or expectations on outcomes. The second group includes the majority of countries/regions in this report. In addition to the fundamental theories and goals, they offer detailed support guidelines on how to put the theories and goals into practices meanwhile making it clear that these guidelines are examples that need to be adapted for local considerations. The third group is formed by the UK and US, where local practices should start with the overarching goals and objectives and end by meeting expected outcomes and standards. As long as the two ends are satisfied, how each setting navigate the journey can be flexible and locally variable.

5.7.1 How does Guideline on 3-6 Learning and Development (China) reflect international patterns in implementation

The guideline seems to fit with the group 3 of frameworks in that it also sets standardized expectations for children, with defined goals and objectives on the whole and broad suggestions on meeting the expectations. Adaptations to the local realities are briefly mentioned.

6. ASSESSMENT, EVALUATION AND MONITORING

Having reviewed the major quality indicators in international ECEC curriculum frameworks and their similarities and differences, this chapter focuses on assessment, evaluation and monitoring. We adapt the conceptualizations from the Ontario early learning framework (2007) and define assessment as focusing on children and their development, evaluation as how ECEC settings implement the national framework and support children to meet the goals and outcomes set in national frameworks, and monitoring as the appropriateness, impact and effectiveness of the framework.

6.1 Quality ECEC

Underpinning assessment, evaluation and monitoring is the quality of ECEC as an umbrella concept that covers all quality indicators described in Chapter 6. Internationally, there is a consensus that quality ECEC can be broadly categorized into structural and process characteristics (Slot, 2018). Structural quality is distal and regulable factors such as accessibility and affordability of ECEC provisions, staff qualifications, staff-child ratios, facilities, classroom/group sizes, and organizations of ECEC; whereas process quality is more proximal elements that relate to interactions and relationships between children and staff, children and children (peers), and among staff (workforce environment and cultures). The associations between structural and process quality are well noted in empirical research (Løkken, Bjørnstad, Broekhuizen, & Moser, 2018), such as that staff-child ratios can impact on their interactions. Further to this, child outcomes are also arguably important indicators of quality ECEC - normally resulting from positive structural characteristics and high process quality. That said, direct assessment towards child outcomes is increasingly discouraged in some ECEC systems and is discussed below in 6.2.

All countries have specified requirements/expectations on the structural and process quality in ECEC settings. The specifications on structural characteristics are usually set in other policy documents than the national framework⁶, whereas national frameworks focus largely on process quality. Academic studies point out that structural quality depends on funding, policy,

⁶ An exception in the reviewed frameworks is England's EYFS (2017), in which detailed requirements on staff qualifications, staff-child ratios, space, and the key person system are available.

and legislation (Slot, 2018), therefore are subject to central and local governments' political priorities and economic situations. This report is not intended to detail the different structural characteristics in each ECEC system but bears them in mind when presenting on evidence of the effectiveness of international ECEC frameworks.

6.2 Assessment

Assessment as described in the majority of ECEC frameworks appears to follow a capability approach (Robeyns, 2006) that attends to both children's current abilities and the support and opportunities needed to develop their abilities (Buzzelli, 2018). As many frameworks phrase (Australia, Canada, England, Hong Kong, Ireland, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Scotland, South Africa, Taiwan, US), assessment for children's learning and development is an ongoing and circular process that includes elements of planning, documentation, and evaluation. Information on children's knowledge, skills and understanding is collected through documentation and analyzed, so that it informs planning of curriculums. Documentation is conducted throughout implementing the planned curriculum, in order to evaluate its effectiveness and children's progress. The planning of curriculums takes into consideration children's assessed abilities, identified needs and supports, barriers to progress, and sources and environments needed for the progress. Collaboration with children's parents and families are also essential in assessing children's learning and development and in providing support. There are multiple strategies of documentation that can be used subject to individual children (e.g. bilingual children, children with SEND) and local contexts, including but not limited to observations⁷, learning stories, video or audio recordings, photographs, conversations, and on a whole individual profiles/individual action plans/Portfolios.

It is particularly pointed out in some frameworks (Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, South Africa, Taiwan) that assessment on child learning and development outcomes are not ending points, should not become a barrier for children to access ECEC or be used to compare between children. The Irish framework further states that assessment is for learning rather than of learning. In relation to this, there are assessments explained in other frameworks for both short-term and long-term purposes. For example, in England a system that includes a progress check at age two and an EYFS profile for the end of the early years foundation stage (EYFS) is in operation to inform long-term planning of individual children's learning and development needs. Wales follows a similar system and requires a Foundation Phase Profile (Welsh Government,

⁷ The framework of Northern Ireland offers detailed guidelines on effective observations.

2015b) for children throughout the Foundation Phase. A cultural-specific discourse is reflected in the Hong Kong curriculum guide, specifying that standardized criteria should not be used to assess children's performance and achievements, nor can it assess children against their academic readiness for primary schooling.

A prescriptive requirement on assessment for children at each age stage is evident in some systems such as England, Wales, and the US, where documentation includes children's achievement against a list of expected learning outcomes (e.g. the early learning goals in England; the Foundation Phase Profile Handbook in Wales; the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) in California and the Foundation Phase Outcomes in New York). In Hong Kong, prescriptive assessment scales and 'checklists' are available but not the only means of assessing children's performance or development. Some other countries (Australia, Canada, Scotland, Singapore, South Africa) offer broad statements on learning outcomes that are not necessarily age-specific, and interpretations of and judgement on those outcomes are open to children's individual differences, cultural and social backgrounds, and other related children's contexts.

In the four Nordic frameworks (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden), assessment that focuses on individual children is not mentioned or is forbidden and the emphasis is placed on evaluation (see 6.3). In the Danish framework where there is mention of individual children, it assesses "the relationship between the pedagogical learning environment in the ECEC setting and children's wellbeing, learning, development and formation" (Ministry of Children and Education, Denmark, 2020, p.50). This aspect of assessment relates to how the curriculum reflects children's perspectives, various needs, and diverse backgrounds. In Finland, the assessment is directed at a child's individual ECEC plan (as part of the curriculum), focusing on how the activities are arranged and how pedagogy is implemented. Whilst the Norwegian framework suggests that every child's wellbeing and development needs to be continuously monitored and assessed (based on individual circumstances), this is phrased as 'knowledge of the children' that informs the adaptations of the national kindergarten plan at local levels. Even the documentation in Norwegian kindergartens concerns pedagogical practices rather than individual children (documentation on individual child or group of children is only necessary when adapted provision is needed, in which case data protection rules are followed). The knowledge of the children is similarly addressed in the evaluation of preschools in Sweden.

Buzzelli (2018) points out that the capability approach offers a normative framework for both children and ECEC institutions, as underpinned by developmental, sociocultural, and social behaviorist theories. Children's active participation in their learning (and thus in the assessment) is ignored and the autonomy of ECEC institutions and staff is suppressed. The frameworks described above rely on the capability approach to a various extent and some even challenge it (e.g. in the Nordic countries), reflecting the conceptualization of assessment as a moral practice that critically engages with how ECEC and its assessment influences children's current and future life (Buzzelli, 2019). The moral approach to assessment reflects critical and post-structural theories (see 5.2). According to Buzzelli (2018 & 2019), there are two dimensions of assessment including one that focuses on children's agency in learning and development and one that attends to enabling environments that promote child and staff agency. The moral understanding of assessment seeks to empower both children themselves and ECEC staff/institutions.

Many frameworks (Australia, Denmark, England, Finland, Hong Kong, Ireland, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Scotland, South Africa, Sweden and Taiwan) incorporate the morality of assessment, albeit to different degrees. A key reflection across the frameworks is that children's (and their families') involvement and/or participation in the assessment is emphasized. Their perspectives are considered in regard to what and how assessment is conducted. Assessment also enables children to understand their own learning and come up with strategies as active learners - who know their own strengths and areas for improvement and make progress agentically. In the Irish framework, detailed guidance on children's self-assessment is provided (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009, p.80). The New Zealand framework also refers to self- and peer assessment, although actual participation in the assessment and planning of their own learning is mostly suggested for older children. This is in common with the Scottish framework, which indicates that children's involvement in assessment is based on developmental appropriateness and knowledge of individual children.

Moral practice is also embedded into the evaluation of staff practices. This links to the ongoing reflexivity described in 5.5⁸. For instance, in the Scottish framework, it suggests that staff need to become aware of their possibly judgemental or biased interpretations of observations and consistently reflect upon them. Working in close partnerships with children's parents and

⁸ See *Table 11: Thinking about assessment* in the Irish curriculum framework (*Aistear*) for a list of reflective questions related to assessment.

families, and other professional bodies involved in the care and support for young children promotes reflexivity and comprehensive assessment.

In addition, some frameworks such as England and Sweden denote that assessment should not sacrifice staff time towards interactions with children, and paper work is only limited to that necessary. Further discussions on evaluation are followed in *6.3*.

6.3 Evaluation

The Canadian framework suggests that evaluation of how ECEC settings and staff implement the national curriculum and achieve the curriculum goals are affected by structural characteristics. With this in mind, this report presents how international ECEC frameworks provide guidelines on evaluating process quality and the content of local practices.

The majority of guidelines that this report includes on evaluation come from the Nordic countries. This is because their focus of assessment is on local curriculums rather than on individual children (see *6.2*). Other ECEC systems normally have separate policies and documents on quality evaluation of ECEC settings (for example, the National Quality Standard in Australia [2018]; the Quality Assurance Framework in Hong Kong [2018]; Síolta - the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education in Ireland [2006]; SPARK - Quality Rating Scale for 4-6 year olds in Singapore [2020]). All four frameworks emphasize the importance of an evaluation culture in ECEC settings, in which continuous reflections on pedagogies and practices are essential. The evaluation includes how local curriculums reflect the national framework and the relationships between pedagogical learning environment and child wellbeing and development. Documentation on the evaluation is important and must be shared with parents, local authorities, and the wider community. Parents are also involved in the evaluation process, as well as children.

As already said in *6.2*, a moral approach to evaluation is reflected, focusing on empowering local ECEC settings and staff reflexivity. The Finnish framework stresses that how evaluation is conducted is subject to local decisions, whereas the Danish framework emphasizes that the resources spent on documentation and evaluation shall be critically reflected against staff capacity of implementing those activities. Staff reflexivity is encouraged at both individual and group levels, and relates to pedagogical curriculums, practices, and evaluations long-term and short-term. To support staff reflexivity, Hong Kong and New Zealand provide hands-on reflective questions relating to evaluation. Scotland provides a comprehensive self-evaluation

framework entitled *How good is our early learning and childcare?* (Education Scotland, 2016). In this framework, reflective questions and indicative themes are divided into three categories of quality indicators, including leadership and management, learning provision, and successes and achievements.

In addition to internal and self-evaluation within ECEC settings, countries such as Australia, England and Ireland have external, officially designated bodies that evaluate ECEC settings against national quality standards (e.g. the Regulatory Authority in Australia, the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills [Ofsted]; & the Early Years Education Inspections [EYEI] and Tusla in Ireland). In Australia, the national quality standard (2018) sets a national benchmark for the quality of ECEC services, including 7 areas of educational program and practice, children’s health and safety, physical environment, staffing arrangements, relationships with children, collaborative partnership with families and communities, and governance and leadership. Those areas reflect the roles of ECEC institutions and staff summarized in this report (see 5.5) and are linked to both structural and process quality. The Early Years Inspection Handbook for Ofsted Registered Provision (2019) illustrates five broad areas of inspection, covering quality of education, behaviour and attitudes, personal development, leadership and management, and actions and/or recommendations for improvement. The handbook also details how inspections are carried out. Ireland has an EYEI (2018) inspection framework for funded preschool services (2 years 9 months to 5 years), informed by the national curriculum and quality frameworks (*Aistear & Síolta*). Additionally, all registered 0-6 services are subject to inspections by Tusla’s Early Years Inspectorate. Where available, the effectiveness of those external, national evaluations is discussed below as part of the effectiveness of national frameworks (see 6.4). In addition to national/official evaluations, international evaluation tools such as ECERS, ITERS, and CLASS are also popularly used among international ECEC settings to support quality improvement. Research on the cultural adaptations and local practices of using those tools is extensive in various contexts including China and is beyond the scope of this report.

6.4 Monitoring

The monitoring of national frameworks is only mentioned in the Finnish framework. As it states, the purpose of national-level monitoring is to find out how the framework serves the development of ECEC at local, regional and national levels. It may also be adopted for international comparisons on the effectiveness of ECEC systems. However, not all countries have conducted government-initiated, national-level monitoring on the effectiveness and

implementation of national frameworks. Reports on ECEC also predominately present achievements on structural characteristics, particularly accessibility, affordability, and accountability (Meisels, 2007; Li & Wang, 2017). In this report, available findings on the effectiveness and implementation of national frameworks beyond structural outcomes are presented from countries including Australia, Canada, England, Ireland, New Zealand, Scotland, and Wales.

6.4.1 Australia

In order to establish a baseline for assessing the effectiveness of the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) in promoting quality ECEC, a national project was commissioned by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) in January 2010 and a final report was published in 2011. Adopting a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods, the project was able to identify five key areas of issues (DEEWR, 2011):

- Firstly, the dominance of developmental theories shaped Australian educators' practices as being limited to Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP). Few educators were aware of other theories that underpin the EYLF. Their understanding of key pedagogies principles also varied as a result from their different abilities and experiences.
- In addition to a dominant child development discourse, sociocultural considerations were growing and individual children's cultural diversity and individual needs were given increasing attention. However, the practicing of 'holistic' was still compromised by the gaps between pedagogical approaches implemented by educators and the EYLF curriculum.
- Reflective practice was evident as part of educators' commitments to professional development. They endeavored to draw on multiple resources and effectively worked in partnerships with families. That said, more systematic and comprehensive reflections of the overall implementation of EYLF were missing. Family engagement was also understood and implemented inconsistently in different local contexts.
- Variations in the understanding and theoretical interpretations of EYLF was significant among educators, which was a major influence in the implementation of quality ECEC under EYLF.
- Understanding of quality ECEC among educators reflected a strong focus on adult-child relationships. At the same time, there was a normative interpretation of 'quality' that emphasized preparedness for transitions, including both transitions from home to ECEC settings and from ECEC settings to school contexts - both transitions were found to face many challenges.

Recommendations were made according to those key findings, including focusing on professional development on theoretical approaches to ECEC, developing pedagogical leadership to ensure consistencies between principles and practices, systematic approaches to reflective practice in daily contexts, reconceptualizing transitions within the EYLF, and identifying best practices that support successful transitions.

Although this report was published in 2011, the findings and recommendations still inform effective implementation of national curriculums in both the Australian contexts and beyond (for example, the dominance of development theories in shaping ECEC pedagogies and practices is still evident [Gabriel, 2020]). A more recent article published by White and Fler (2019) follows up with the baseline evaluation report and indicates that Australia educators' familiarity with EYLF is high; whereas the translation of professional concepts in EYLF into everyday practice is still ongoing. A co-constructed approach to professional knowledge and practice applications is thus proposed.

In addition to the national evaluation report, several empirical and review studies were conducted by Australian scholars in the past decade since the introduction of EYLF (Krieg, 2011; Sumsion & Wong, 2011; Leggett & Ford, 2013; Cheeseman, Press, & Sumsion, 2015; Davis, Torr, & Degotardi, 2015; Selby et al., 2018; Sumsion et al. 2018; Sumsion, Harrison, & Bradley, 2018; White & Fler, 2019). Particularly relevant in this report are those concerning the education and care for infant and toddlers. According to Davis, Torr, and Degotardi (2015), the visibility of infant and toddler in EYLF is critical and the six educators who work with children under 2 years interviewed in their study revealed difficulties in interpreting and implementing EYLF in the work with infants. Davis, Torr, & Degotardi (2015) thus suggest that more specific information about pedagogy and learning experiences for infants and toddlers is needed. On a different but related note, Cheeseman, Press, and Sumsion (2015) argue that the knowledge about infants being growingly included in education policy and curricula might potentially narrow definitions of educators' responsibilities working with infants. They draw on Levinas' ideas about 'said' and 'saying' and point to the need of recognizing that policy and curricula texts can offer only partial understandings of the possibilities for infants' learning. More importantly, infants shall be viewed as competent and agentic, who might be influential and intentional in their own learning through 'saying'; in addition to educators acting in the best interests of infants and with knowledge about infants in a 'said' curriculum.

Sumsion and her colleagues have also written substantially criticizing the ‘belonging’ element in EYLF. Whilst on a whole pointing out that the political dimension of belonging is missing in the framework (Sumsion & Wong, 2011), they also identify that the conceptualization of belonging in EYLF leads to both risks and opportunities (Sumsion et al. 2018). The co-production of knowledge and understanding about belonging as subject to local and cultural contexts is suggested, especially for decolonizing ECEC curriculums in Australia. The team (Selby et al., 2018) specifically analyzes whether ‘belonging’ is observable and demonstrable among infants and toddlers; and concludes that an alternative conceptualisation is through the prism of infants’ proven capacity to participate in groups.

6.4.2 Canada

Despite the power of each Canadian province/territory in issuing their own ECEC frameworks, a nation-wide Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework was introduced in 2017 with overarching goals and principles that should be reflected in provincial/territorial-level frameworks. The framework is situated in a national context of various challenges that ECEC sectors face, including ‘a severe shortage of spaces, unaffordable fees, poor working conditions for ECEC staff, service gaps that have led to the expansion of for-profit services, and programs of questionable quality’ (Child Care Now, 2019, p.3). Therefore, an analytical report (Child Care Now, 2019) on the framework suggests that the aims to provide universal, inclusive and diverse ECEC programs across the country is welcomed. However, the report is critical of whether the framework will be able to promote high-quality ECEC nation-wide. The reasons for this doubt are listed below:

- The framework does not require a national, universal ECEC system in all provinces and territories, despite its targeted approach to focusing on vulnerable families.
- The principles of quality, accessibility, affordability, flexibility, and inclusivity may not be ensured in all provinces and territories without an accountable system.
- Matched funding by the federal government to implement the framework is insufficient;
- Many quality indicators that are proved to be influential by studies are not considered in the framework, such as wages, staff training, and the crucial issue of auspice.
- The develop of the framework lack transparency, which may disengage multiple stakeholders like ECEC staff, families, and researchers.

The report further analyzes how different provinces and territories respond to the national framework. Taking Ontario as an example, its action plan is detailed in the Ontario’s Renewed

Early Years and Child Care Policy Framework (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017) and includes seven priorities (p.7):

- Increasing access to ECEC programs and services;
- Ensuring a more affordable ECEC system;
- Establishing an ECEC workforce strategy;
- Determining a provincial definition of quality in ECEC;
- Developing an approach to promoting inclusion in ECEC settings;
- Creating an outcomes and measurement strategy;
- Increasing public awareness of Ontario's ECEC system.

The effectiveness of those plans is yet to become apparent. There is also no evaluation of the more recent Ontario ECEC pedagogical framework, *How Does Learning Happen?* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014).

6.4.3 England

In England, the Department for Education's Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) is an ongoing project that evaluates the effect of early education and child outcomes, the quality of ECEC provision, and the value for money of providing funded ECEC (Department for Education, 2020). Although published reports so far have not directly evaluated the effectiveness of the EYFS framework (instead, the findings inform revisions of framework), it is evident in the *Good practice in early education* report (Callanan et al., 2017) that EYFS supports process quality in ECEC to meet international standards. Using international assessment tools including ITERS-R, ECERS-R, ECERS-E, and SSTWE to assess the process quality in sixteen case study ECEC settings, the study particularly found that good practice in relation to curriculum planning is grounded in the EYFS framework.

In 2019 & 2020, the British Association for Early Childhood Education published two reports on the EYFS framework, as a joint response from the early years sector in England and with support by a coalition of major English charities and organizations in ECEC (Pascal, Bertram, & Rouse, 2019; Bamsey, Georgeson, Healy, & Caoimh, 2020). These reports respond to the 2018 review of Early Learning Goals (ELGs) by the Department of Education - which was deemed to be a comprehensive rewrite of the EYFS statutory framework. Nevertheless, such a major change in the sector engaged minimally with sector representatives and experts. In this context, the two reports include a literature review on available research evidence from the past decade and an empirical survey study on practitioners' views of the current EYFS respectively.

Some key messages regarding the effectiveness of EYFS, from the literature review report entitled *Getting it right in the Early Years Foundation Stage: a review of the evidence*, are:

- Greater prominence should be given to the Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning and Personal, Social and Emotional Development to ensure the foundational skills, understandings and knowledge in these areas are securely in place before more advanced, challenging learning is introduced to the children.
- The current EYFS Early Learning Goals should be extended to cover a wider range of learning dispositions and capacities, including self-regulation.
- The value of a balanced teaching approach which incorporates play-based and relational pedagogic approaches, alongside more structured learning and teaching, needs to be recognised more fully, especially when children are in transition between EYFS and Key Stage.
- Additional guidance and support needed in some areas of teaching (i.e. Understanding the World, Expressive Arts and Design).
- More time and attention should be given to supporting creativity (along with problem-solving) in children's development as a capacity which underpins all areas of learning.
- The features of effective pedagogic practice for disadvantaged children are congruent with those found to work for all children and there is no evidence that a different or more intense teaching approach is required.

Based on those messages, four recommendations are made in the report:

- Recognising the central importance of the Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning.
- Emphasizing the foundational nature of Prime Areas within the EYFS.
- Acknowledging that all Areas of Learning are interconnected, demonstrating the holistic nature of young children's development.
- Noting there is no evidence to support giving mathematics and literacy greater emphasis than any other areas of learning within the EYFS.

The empirical survey study report is named *Mapping the Landscape: practitioners views on the Early Years Foundation Stage*. Its key findings are that:

- Practitioners generally endorse EYFS in supporting children's learning and development;

- The EYFS, Development Matters, and the Early Learning Goals are inseparable in guiding practitioners' practice;
- The lack of resources in the sector is chronic and is insufficient to support for working with parents, inter-professional working or continuing professional development.

The report further points out that practitioners criticized the misuse of guidance documents as 'checklists', the lack of resources to engagement with families and communities, and limited opportunities for professional development.

Lastly, a report commissioned by the Education Endowment Foundation's NatCen Social Research (Husain et al., 2019) presents findings from an evaluation project on the EYFS Profile Pilot. Participants from 24 pilot schools reported their experiences using the revised Early Learning Goals and key findings include that:

- Participants endorsed the revisions and thought they are clearer, although some practical suggestions were made;
- Workload was reduced with reduced expectations for assessment and evidence-gathering, which benefits more time interacting with children;
- Supplemental supporting materials like exemplification and curriculum guidance were desired;
- The influence on children's preparedness for primary schooling was unclear at this stage, further research is needed;
- Space for teachers' own judgement is enabled through the new framework and teachers felt empowered. At the same time, some still support the idea of external moderation so as to ensure consistency in the sector and to get outsiders' alternative perspectives for improvement.

6.4.4 Ireland

The Irish ECEC system has gone through significant reforms in recent years, including for example the introduction of the Tusla inspectorate system to measure compliance with the preschool regulations amongst different types of providers. Empirical research suggests that although the importance of *Aistear* is endorsed in the ECEC sector, its influence on daily ECEC practice is limited due to its non-statutory status (Gray & Ryan, 2016). Mannion (2019) adds that governmental commitments to fully implement *Aistear* and *Síolta* in all ECEC settings are critical in achieving the goals and aspirations the frameworks outline. With the new Early Years

Education Inspection system by the Department of Education and Skills being introduced only recently, the implementation and effectiveness of the Irish frameworks is to be investigated.

In the above contexts, the evaluation reports published in 2011, 2013 & 2014 on *Aistear* and *Síolta* are discussed in this current report bearing in mind their publication dates. In the 2011 report (Goodbody, 2011) which presents findings from an evaluation project on initial implementation of *Síolta* for quality improvement in 134 settings across Ireland, the quality improvement process was found to differ from setting to setting. According to the different experiences, settings can be categorized into three broad groups: those that have developed their understanding of quality ECEC and implemented quality improvement developments; those that started to consider quality issues but have yet commenced any quality improvement work; and those that are at the very early stage of understanding quality of ECEC. Factors that contribute to those differences among settings consist of staff capacity, staff motivation and commitment, availability of support (time, financial, and resources), leadership in the setting, and the knowledge base of the settings pre- *Síolta*. In addition, barriers identified across settings to the implementation are staff time, interpretations of the guidance (as related to staff qualifications and the open-ended nature of *Síolta*), costs and resources, and a lack of writing/computer skills among some staff as required for implementing *Síolta*. The overall principles and contents of *Síolta* are welcomed by the settings, although some overlaps across quality indicators were criticized because they result in repetitive documenting and evaluating. Other issues concerning the reliability and validity of adopting *Síolta* as a self-assessment tool were considered, and recommendations were made:

- Clearer guidelines and more precise languages to be adopted in the framework (including changing from a 3-level rating scale to a 5-level), to support better understanding of each items and avoid confusions;
- The standards should be individualized and achieved step by step for each setting taking into account local capacities;
- The role of a coordinator for the quality improvement process to be further enhanced.

The 2011 evaluation on *Síolta* and its associated quality improvement programmes has led to improvements of the framework. Later in 2014, a further evaluation report (McKeown, Haase, & Pratschke, 2014) was published from a study that included a larger sample size of settings, children, and their families. This study focused on child outcomes using the Early Development Instrument (EDI) and found that outcomes are influenced by children's characteristics (gender,

age, non-native English-speaking background), family and social system (social class, parent-child relationships), and pre-school system. The report points out that accessible and quality ECEC provision have important implications for improving child outcomes and tackling social barriers that impede positive child outcomes. The effectiveness of a quality assurance system framed by *Síolta* is recognized and endorsed in enhancing child outcomes in the country.

Another report published in 2013 (NCCA & Early Childhood Ireland, 2013) relates to an *Aistear* in Action initiative that intended to support and enable curriculum change across the Irish ECEC sector. The report recognizes the potential changes that *Aistear* may promote, through ECEC staff engagement with the framework's principles, themes and guideline, their reflections on philosophies and practices, and development of local curriculums that build on children's interests and competence. The emphasis on environment is particularly praised, because it 'provided a practical and non-threatening entry point to the curriculum framework and one that ultimately led practitioners to ask some fundamental questions about their practice' (p.21). To make those changes happen, the report proposes the following actions:

- A multi-strand mentoring model that includes on-site visits, CPD cluster group meetings and CPD seminars;
- Understanding the process of change and commitment to it;
- Taking advantage of professional stories and share examples of best practice among the sector;
- Establish a coherent system that comprises inspection, standards, and quality regulations;
- Sustaining reflective practice;
- System-level changes needed in regard to for example, staff workload and involvement of parents and the wider communities.

Considering the publication dates of those reports, some recommendations are already adopted into the recent ECEC reforms in Ireland. However, they can still inform the effectiveness and issues of national frameworks and benefit continuous development of the ECEC system in Ireland and other countries.

6.4.5 New Zealand

New Zealand's world-famous *Te Whāriki* ECEC framework was recently revised and updated in 2017, as results of the Education Review Office (ERO) reviews, the Early Years Advisory Group report (MoE, 2015), research changes in ECEC field, and societal changes in New

Zealand (McLachlan, 2018). The fundamental principles, strands and goals remain unchanged in the framework, whereas stronger focus on bicultural practice, culture, language and identity, and inclusion of all children are reflected. The revised framework embeds closer links to other national frameworks in order to facilitate coherent and consistent learning when children transit to primary schools. The learning outcomes are also reduced from 118 to 20, so that local decisions on assessment are encouraged.

Although bit dated, an evaluation report published in 2007 (ERO, 2007) on the quality of assessment in early childhood education provides some rationale for current understanding of assessment and new changes. The report suggests that good quality assessment ‘is related to the processes and support structures in the service, the shared understanding and practice of educators, and active and meaningful participation in assessment by children, parents, whānau (communities) and other educators’ (p.1). By that time, half of the services in New Zealand failed to involve children, parents and the communities in the assessment process, neither have they effectively used assessment to inform learning and development support for children. This report therefore recommended that educators involve multiple stakeholders in the assessment process, engage with children’s active participation in assessment and learning, and strength the links between assessment and planning. It also pointed to the needs of clearer guidance on assessment and ongoing professional development. Development of learning communities and shared professional dialogue were encouraged. Educators’ self-evaluation was also emphasized.

The 2013 report on working with *Te Whāriki* evaluated ECEC settings’ use of the framework (ERO, 2013a). It found that settings engaged highly with the framework but concerns were also raised in some areas of implementation. For example, the broad nature of the principles and strands were interpreted and practiced differently in local settings, and some poor quality practice is thus accommodated under the framework (e.g. highly teacher-directed activities). More problematic is the fact that the framework was regarded more as a ‘given prescription’ than a catalyst for reflective practice. It was not used by many settings to reflect on, evaluate or improve practice. At the same time, the framework does not provide clear standards of practice for high quality curriculum implementation. The gaps between the two thus resulted in a misuse of the framework and a failure in many settings to achieve the intended purposes of *Te Whāriki*. This report made the following recommendations:

- A formal review of *Te Whāriki* as informed by the findings of this report;

- Strengthen the alignment between the prescribed curriculum framework and the regulated Curriculum Standard and associated criteria;
- Identify areas where additional guidance and support is needed to assist early childhood services to design and implement a curriculum that is consistent with *Te Whāriki* and responsive to all children at their service.

As a follow-up of this report, another report on Priorities for Children's Learning in Early Childhood Services: Good Practice (ERO, 2013b) was published to exemplify key characteristics of good practice from five ECEC settings. The strong alignment between learning and assessment was identified in those settings, as well as the integration of self-review into practices.

A report published in 2015 (ERO, 2015a) particularly targets the quality of services for infants and toddlers in 235 ECEC settings. It found that priorities were given to establishing warm and nurturing relationships with infants and toddlers and less emphasis was placed on communication and exploration. This gap was however not related to structural varieties across settings. The report indicated that a responsive curriculum for both high quality relationships and interactions is characterized by high quality leadership, a highly reflective culture among educators, and whole-staff professional learning and development.

Since the publication of the updated 2017 framework, ERO conducted several studies to understand the implementation of it, including ECEC services' awareness and confidence to work with the new framework (ERO, 2018a), engagement with it (ERO, 2018b), and preparedness to implementation (ERO, 2019a). A summary of findings from all the reports is provided in a joint 2019 report (ERO, 2019b). Major findings from those reports are that:

- There is a high level of awareness towards the updated framework across services;
- Confidence is growing in the implementation but services are 'less confident to work with *Te Whāriki* (2017) to support Māori children to enjoy educational success as Māori' (ERO, 2019b, p.5);
- Over half of the services are not well prepared, especially for reviewing and designing a local curriculum;
- Understanding of a local curriculum varies among leaders and educators;
- Professional learning and development and internal evaluation that support the development of local curriculums are not sufficient;

- Involvement of and engagement with parents and whānau (communities) throughout the curriculum development processes is a challenge as many leaders and educators do not understand how to weave a local curriculum in partnership with parents and whanau.

Apart from all general reports on the effectiveness and implementation of *Te Whāriki*, there are also specific reports published on the bicultural aspect of the curriculum and how to weave Māori and Pasifika theory and practice in early childhood education (Rameka, et al., 2017); on the transitions from early childhood services to schools⁹ (ERO, 2015b); and on quality indicators for ECEC (ERO, 2020).

6.4.6 Scotland

There is no specific monitoring project on the 0-3 framework in Scotland. However, several national projects are ongoing with regard to the effectiveness of Scottish ECEC system and children's outcomes. The longitudinal Growing up in Scotland (GUS) project (GUS, 2012) researches the lives of children and their families from birth through to teenage years, and particularly focuses on the early years and child outcomes. The study contributes to policy making at both national and local levels in Scotland, and informs the work of practitioners, other service providers, parents, communities and academics in relation to young children. Further details of this project are not included in this report but can be found in the study [website](#).

Another project, the Scottish Study of Early Learning and Childcare, assesses whether and how the expanded government-funded ECEC for children aged 3-5 and some eligible 2 years olds improves outcomes for children and their families. The study particularly targets children at risk of disadvantages (Bradshaw, Hinchliffe, & Scholes, 2019). By the time this report was written, a phase-1 report was published out of three phases (Hinchliffe, Scholes, & Paul Bradshaw, 2019). The phase-1 report focused on eligible 2-year-old children and sought to gather robust baselines of child and parent outcomes as a result of the expansion. The quality of the ECEC setting that provides services for those children and parents is also considered using the Infant / Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS-3). Again, further details of this study are available via its [website](#).

⁹ The report talks about schools to be ready for the child, instead of children being ready for schools.

Whilst there are no available reports on the effectiveness of Scotland's national ECEC frameworks, a recent article published by Dunlop (2015) signposts to some possible indications, including:

- Scotland's political visions to tackle inequalities among children's lives and childhood experiences are strong, by ensuring all children's wellbeing and improving outcomes;
- *Getting it right for every child* is the lead document connecting policy with practices. The outcomes as expected in policy documents need to be viewed in long term for both the best interests of children and the society;
- Understanding each other's functions better improves collaborations between multiple agencies (e.g. ECEC settings, families, communities, and other professional bodies) and links to consistency in ECEC services;
- The expectation for ECEC staff and workforce to act as agents of changes needs to be facilitated.

6.4.7 Wales

Wales' Early Years Outcomes Framework (0-7) and the revised Foundation Phase Framework (3-7) were both launched in 2015. There are no available evaluation reports on the two frameworks yet, but a 3-year (2011-2014) evaluation on the previous Foundation Phase program was published in 2015. There are four aims of the evaluation, including the implementation process of the framework, the impact and outcomes it has led to, the economic values, and the development of an established evaluation framework for future use (Taylor et al., 2015). A mixed-method approach was designed to include the perspectives of multiple stakeholders (e.g. centre managers, practitioners, parents/carers, & pupils), as well as to cover various sources of evidence (for example, policy documents, national census data, and observations). The evaluation comes up with the following key findings:

- The Foundation Phase pedagogies support children to achieve the Foundation Phase Indicator (Welsh Government, 2015b) effectively;
- Pupils were observed to have higher levels of involvement and wellbeing during learning, where schools engaged with the Foundation Phase pedagogies to a higher extent;
- Pupils are more likely to achieve higher levels of English after attending the Foundation Phase;
- However, although attainment of those who are eligible for free school meals has also improved, there is no evidence that the Foundation Phase benefits reducing inequalities among children with different social characteristics (e.g. as related to gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status);

- The Foundation Phase influences positively on the overall school attendance;
- The positive impacts of the Foundation Phase on children's learning, development, wellbeing and attainment are endorsed by the majority of practitioners.

Whilst those findings are highly outcome-oriented, the report further makes recommendations on how to continue more effective implementation of the framework across ECEC providers. There are 29 key recommendations, which are summarized into the following major areas:

- Practitioners' and stakeholders' awareness of the positive impact, which can lead to better engagement with the framework;
- Clear guidance and further training on the implementation, for example in terms of developmentally appropriate practice and expected levels of achievement, and in other specific areas of the framework;
- Information sharing with parents/carers and enhancing their roles in the delivery of the Foundation Phase;
- Further research on the impact of the Foundation Phase on low-achieving groups of pupils;
- Funding and support for the improvement of structural quality across settings;
- Ongoing monitoring and measurements of quality and standards for Foundation Phase settings.

6.4.8 Summary

The monitoring of national frameworks is underdeveloped in many countries/regions, whereas New Zealand is leading the way with a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system in ECEC. The available monitoring reports from seven countries focus on three areas of effectiveness, including:

- Whether there are any gaps in the framework and if revisions/updates are needed;
- How the framework is implemented by ECEC settings and in local contexts;
- What child outcomes are achieved through engaging with the framework.

It appears that the content of the frameworks is largely welcomed and supported by ECEC providers and staff, particularly in terms of the fundamental theories, principles, strands and themes. On the one hand, this may link to the international universality of understanding about ECEC that this report finds across countries; on the other hand, the engagement and consultancy with multiple stakeholders throughout the development of a national framework highly likely facilitates its acceptance (for example in New Zealand, Northern Ireland, and

Wales; and the resistance to new changes in England when consultation with the sector was not followed). As all those frameworks are evidence-based (e.g. the SEED project informed the ongoing versions of EYFS in England, the ERO reviews informed the 2017 update of *Te Whariki* in New Zealand) and research-informed (both locally and internationally), the reliability and validity is relatively high amongst the majority of countries; although ongoing revisions of the frameworks are continuous subject to changing societies and contexts.

The main issues are reflected in the implementation of national frameworks, instead of the content of them. Effective implementation of a national framework is first of all linked with structural factors such as funding, resources, staff time, staff qualifications, and staff-child ratios (Melhuish & Gardiner, 2019). Therefore, the calls for increased funding and resources, system-level support in workforce development, and improved work conditions are prevalent in the recommendations drawn upon national monitoring reports and empirical research findings (Murphy, 2015; Lim, 2019). More importantly, the implementation relies significantly on the understanding and interpretation of leaders and staff in ECEC settings. Most countries/regions (beyond the seven countries above [Lin, 2016; Bautista, Habib, Eng, & Bull, 2019; Lim, 2019]) reveal that this is a major challenge in assuring quality implementation of the vision and aspirations set in their national frameworks. It is widely recognized that continuous professional development and staff training is essential, particularly in relation to reflective practice and self-evaluation. A systematic quality assurance program/system that guides and supports ECEC providers to continuously improve quality of their services is also necessary. That said, such a system should also embrace flexibility and alignment between universal standards and local conditions.

Lastly, the effectiveness of ECEC systems is also assessed against child outcomes in some countries, although assessing child outcomes is itself controversial (see 6.2). On a whole, positive relations between an established national curriculum and improved child outcomes are observed. Whereas, social justice issues remain persistent and require long-term initiatives. Those issues are mostly related (but not limited) to gender, social class, language backgrounds, ethnicity, religion, SEND, and cultural differences.

6.5 How does Guideline on 3-6 Learning and Development (China) reflect international patterns in assessment, evaluation and monitoring

Government policies and kindergartens in China are found to focus largely on structural quality of ECEC, whilst process quality is increasingly noticed and emphasized (Hu et al., 2016; Yang & Peng, 2017; Zhang, Wang, & Hua, 2020). In the guideline, assessment reflects the capability approach to a high extent. This is supported by statements suggesting that assessment is an ongoing process with multiple strategies (e.g. observations, conversations, and document analysis) and that children's behavior performance and developmental changes inform assessment and planning. Additionally, the purpose of assessment is to understand children's developmental needs and provide support and guidance accordingly. Assessment must be holistic and should not only focus on knowledge and skills. Other aspects such as emotions, social and practical skills are considered. Assessment also takes into account children's individual differences and there is no single standard for all children, although universally defined expectations and developmental outcomes are provided. Comparisons between children should be cautiously employed.

The moral approach is somehow evident, as the guideline points out that managers, teachers, parents and children themselves are all participants and collaborators in the assessment process. The assessment process is also regarded as ways to improve themselves for teachers.

Teachers' self-evaluation is core for the implementation of kindergarten education, with participation from others including the management team, other teachers, and parents. The evaluation of implementing kindergarten education is based upon the theoretical understandings of children and learning, including five aspects: 1) Plans and activities are informed by the knowledge of children (as a group); 2) The content, methods, strategies and environments promote children's active learning; 3) The process of educating provides meaningful learning experiences for children and meets children's developmental needs; 4) The content and requirements take into account both group needs and individual differences, so that every child develops and achieves; 5) Guidance from teachers enables children's active and effective learning.

No monitoring of the guideline itself is in place in China. Considering that the guideline was launched in 2012 and sociocultural changes in the Chinese societies have been significant,

revisiting and revising the guideline according to current ECEC contexts in China is recommended.

7. CONCLUSION

To inform the development of a 0-3 ECEC national curriculum framework in China, this report presents findings from a systematic analysis of 18 national frameworks. It concludes that globalised curriculum discourses (Sumsion & Grieshaber, 2012; Yang & Li, 2019) are strongly evident among those countries/regions, which are either embedded in the framework content or indicated with recent curriculum reforms and policies. The frameworks are first of all underpinned by shared theories, including both the dominance of developmental and sociocultural theories and the emergence of critical and post-structural theories. Those different theories shape the principles of ECEC pedagogy and practice, as well as the themes and roles of adults. A curriculum that is child-centred, play-based, socially-just and culturally-inclusive, holistic, collaborative with families and communities, and quality-oriented is the vision for all countries. Such a curriculum focuses on children's comprehensive development and active learning, positive relationships with the social world, successful transitions between different life stages, and competent and democratic participation as a local and global citizen at all levels of life. It therefore expects adults, including ECEC staff and parents/carers to be responsive educarers (Warin, 2014), collaborators, and supporters. It particularly relies on high-quality staff to implement the curriculum and achieve its aspirations and ultimately, high-quality ECEC.

Country specifics and/or differences in the 18 national frameworks can be concluded into three aspects:

- Whether it is a more social pedagogic curriculum, or one more oriented toward school readiness;
- To what extent assessment focuses on child outcomes;
- Evaluation and national quality standards.

All three aspects relate to debates and/or criticism about standardization, normalization, autonomy and empowerment. National curriculum frameworks that provide prescriptive requirements on how ECEC settings develop their local curriculums, that place a strong focus on assessing child outcomes so as to ensure children's baseline achievements and school readiness and to prove the economic value of ECEC investments by governments, and that are associated with a normative quality assurance system, are discouraged but realities that many ECEC settings and children across the world live in (Ebbeck et al., 2014; Clausen, 2015; Wood & Hedges, 2016; Hayes & Filipović, 2018; Basford, 2019). Instead, an ideal national framework is flexible and adaptable to local contexts, uses assessment to identify children's needs and

support and to inform planning and implementing pedagogical activities, and encourages self-evaluation and reflective practice by ECEC settings and staff. At the core of an effective ECEC system is autonomy and empowerment at all levels, including ECEC settings, staff, children, and families.

Nevertheless, an empowering curriculum framework relies much on high-quality staff who are reflective and confident and have high-level understanding and knowledge about children and ECEC work. Reports and empirical studies from many countries have pointed out some shared challenges that impede the effectiveness of implementing their national frameworks, including:

- Limited funding and resources;
- Staff capacity, workload and work conditions;
- Qualified staff who understand and interpret the national frameworks appropriately, know how to translate the theories and principles into effective practices, and continuously reflect on and even challenge their own practices for better process quality for children.

Improvements on structural characteristics and effective professional development training programmes can help to sustain an effective national curriculum framework and achieve high quality ECEC.

Specifically, China's Guideline on 3-6 Learning and Development embraces many of the universal quality indicators shared by international frameworks. The major theories, key principles, aspects of ECEC, roles of adults are to some extent consistent with international patterns. However, some gaps are also identified. For example, critical and post-structural theories are minimally reflected in the framework, as well as the conceptualisations of empowering ECEC staff and children. Equality, diversity and inclusion issues are not yet sufficiently represented, neither are contents linked to the ethnic minority communities. Standardized assessment of children is evident and outcome-oriented, whereas a comprehensive quality assurance system is not established in the country to evaluate and support quality improvement in ECEC. In the lack of 0-3 guidelines in Chinese ECEC policies, a critical question for China to consider is whether to develop a separate 0-3 curriculum framework or to refine the current 3-6 guidelines to incorporate 0-6. In some international 0-5/6 frameworks (e.g. Australia), infants and toddlers are rendered invisible. Countries (e.g. England) that have favoured a split system (Bertram & Pascal, 2016) however, experience challenges for adults that teach across the age range in terms of supporting younger children

and ensuring they have access to a high-quality provision in the 0-3 age range.

7.1 Limitations

A limitation of this report is that it considerably relies on global discourses that are dominated by ‘western’ and/or high-income countries. Rudolph (2017) criticizes that the South African National Curriculum Framework’s uncritical acceptance of global taken-for-granted discourses make the poorest children and their families invisible and silence other visions of childhood(s). Therefore, this limitation should be taken into consideration when China and other countries draw on findings from this report to inform the development of their own ECEC national frameworks. Indeed, the globalization effects on national policy making should be critically reviewed (Dale, 1999), unravelling and disentangling the intersectional influences of global, national, and local contexts and discourses (Ball, 2012).

7.2 Key findings

Last but not least, key findings of this report in relation to the development of a 0-3 national curriculum framework in China are summarized below in bullet points:

- The key theories, principles, aspects of ECEC, and roles of ECEC settings, staff, families and communities can be adopted as the fundamental elements of a new framework; some evidence-based revisions and adaptations to Chinese cultures may be necessary;
- A 0-6 national curriculum framework is suggested under the current ECEC system and following international trends and research evidence (Dallimore, 2019). However, the visibility of infants and toddlers needs particular attention;
- A balance between detailed national guidelines and local flexibility is advised, so that ECEC settings and staff have clear ‘instructions’ to follow meanwhile are able to make localized decisions. Supplementary materials and guidance that are evidence-based and research-informed can be developed at provincial and local levels;
- A coherent and consistent national quality standards framework needs to be developed alongside the national curriculum framework, which includes guidance on assessment and evaluation for the purpose of quality improvement rather than standardization. An external, government-led inspection system may be helpful in supporting local settings to meet national quality standards;
- Development of the framework should particularly consider children’s transitions into compulsory schooling, and a combined approach of both ‘child being ready for school’ and ‘school to be ready for child’ may be considered (ERO, 2015b);
- Professional development training programmes closely linked to the national curriculum

and quality frameworks need to be developed accordingly at national and local levels, focusing on reflective understanding and interpreting the frameworks and critical sharing of possible best practice;

- Matched structural quality, including funding, resources, and workforce development is key in realizing quality ECEC in China, as in all other countries across the world;
- **All the above recommendations are subject to further empirical studies in the Chinese contexts and a consultancy process that gives voices to multiple stakeholders (i.e. children, parents, ECEC staff and leaders, academics and experts, and policymakers).**

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