



# Education International's commitment to quality Early Childhood Education

## ECE Strategy Paper

### 1. *Preamble*

The fundamental right of every child to learn and develop to his or her full potential, through equal access to quality education, regardless of their age, gender, origin, ethnicity and/or social background, provides the foundation for Education International's (EI) policy and commitment to Early Childhood Education (ECE)<sup>1</sup>.

EI's policy on ECE is derived from a resolution adopted at the 2nd World Congress held in Washington DC in 1998. The resolution states that all children have a right, as expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to receive education and ECE must be considered part of this right. The fundamental principles of EI's ECE policy may be summarized as follows:

- ECE should be a public service and an integral part of a country's education system;
- ECE should be provided free of charge and be available to all children, including those with special needs;
- The same status of pedagogical training should be provided for all teachers<sup>2</sup>, including early childhood teachers;
- Teachers in early childhood education should have the same rights, status and entitlements as teachers in other sectors; and
- Both men and women should be recruited and trained as early childhood teachers.

EI's commitment to ECE was further reinforced when the 5th World Congress, held in Berlin in July 2007, mandated the Executive Board to establish a Task Force on Early Childhood Education. The Task Force's mandate was to advise EI on various aspects of early education, including strategies for the effective implementation of the Washington Resolution, ECE policy, practice, programmes and activities.

Since its establishment, the Task Force has organized several seminars, enabling EI member organizations to meet, share and exchange information and experiences on pertinent issues affecting the sector. Furthermore, the Task Force produced publicity and advocacy materials and conducted a

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<sup>1</sup> Early Childhood Education might be considered to be education which takes place before compulsory education. The term refers to education in its broadest sense, including childcare and development. This includes early childhood services provided in kindergartens, nurseries, pre-school classes, child-care centres and other similar institutions. It goes beyond what some refer to as pre-school education, as it is an education in its own right, having not only the purpose of preparing children for school, but for life in the same way as all other parts of the education systems contribute to this process.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'teacher' is used in its generic form to refer to professional staff comparable to educated teachers in schools, and includes various categories of early childhood professionals, such as pre-school teachers, pedagogues and other professionals working in various categories of ECE centres described in the 1<sup>st</sup> footnote above.



study investigating ECE policies, programmes and activities across the globe (entitled, Early Childhood Education: A Global Scenario). Some of the key findings of this study show that access to ECE services, particularly those of the youngest children, remains low in many parts of the world. The sector is highly privatized and characterized by multiple providers, sometimes with little state coordination or regulation. The qualifications of teaching staff are varied, ranging from nonexistent in certain countries, to a tertiary level qualification in others. The sector is highly feminized and remains nonunionized in a number of countries.

The general lack of sufficient progress and adequate investment in early childhood education across the globe shows that ECE remains a neglected Education for All (EFA) goal, barely four years before 2015, the target date agreed to achieve this and the other EFA goals. EI insists that the commitments made by the international community in Dakar in April 2000 to achieve all the EFA goals, including the first goal (ECE), must be met. Concrete steps ought to be taken to address the challenges besetting the sector and to ensure that all young children have access to quality ECE.

***The purpose of this Strategy Paper is to provide a framework for implementing the 1998 EI Congress Resolution on Early Childhood Education, in order to ensure that all young children have access to quality ECE.***

***The Strategy gives key priorities that will be pursued by EI, including its regional structures and its member organizations (teachers' unions).***

#### **ECE has enormous individual and social benefits**

Early childhood is the most critical period in human development. Comprehensive and quality early childhood education can make a significant contribution to the physical, psychomotor, cognitive, social and emotional development of the child, including the acquisition of languages and early literacy. Children are active learners from birth, and the early years are vital to their success in school and later in life. In addition, ECE has an important role in securing all children a good childhood. Childhood years are important in themselves and ECE can contribute to many positive and valuable experiences which form a solid basis for future life and learning. This is supported by the 2007 edition of the EFA Global Monitoring Report (GMR), which provides evidence that children's experiences in the first years create a solid foundation for subsequent learning. In addition, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)'s Starting Strong II (2006) argues that ECE addresses issues of child poverty and educational disadvantage, as well as promoting women's labour market participation. Recent OECD studies looking at the long-term impact of ECE also reveal that 15-year-olds who had attended pre-school were, on average, a year ahead of those who had not in reading literacy. Education International thus insists that no child should be denied the many benefits of good quality early childhood education.

A rich and fruitful life begins with quality early childhood education.

#### **ECE is of particular benefit to disadvantaged children**

Quality ECE is especially important to disadvantaged children – girls and boys from poor families, indigenous children, children of ethnic minorities and migrant children. ECE is also of great benefit to disabled children and those with special educational needs. Comprehensive and quality ECE services can meet the educational, developmental, health and nutritional needs of



disadvantaged children and help to equalize opportunities early in life. ECE can also expose migrant and other children to the cultures of their host countries and facilitate language acquisition and integration.

### **...but access and quality remains low and uneven**

The 2010 edition of the GMR indicates that early childhood education remains a neglected EFA goal. The Report observes: “Though participation in pre-primary education [usually for children aged 3 and above] has been increasing, the expansion has been slow and uneven, with the pre-primary Gross Enrolment Rate remaining at 41%”. This means that the majority of the world’s youngest children do not have access to ECE. In Sub-Saharan Africa, only one in 7 children aged three or above, is enrolled in ECE. These findings are confirmed by the EI study (Early Childhood Education: A Global Scenario), which revealed that ECE access and quality remains generally low and uneven, particularly for the zero to 3 age-group. Current trends clearly indicate that the ECE and other EFA goals will not be achieved by 2015, unless significant investment is made in education and in early childhood education in particular.

### **...and there is a serious shortage of qualified teaching staff**

There is a general shortage of professionally trained and qualified ECE teachers and support staff across the globe. More than 90% of teaching staff in ECE are female. While it must be emphasized that a teacher’s professional knowledge and skills are more important than gender, efforts must be made to attract more men to the profession. In addition, combating the gender pay gap is an absolute necessity.

Teachers’ working conditions vary greatly across the globe, as well as within countries, and this is especially true in ECE, hence the need to monitor and improve the conditions of early childhood teachers.

## **2. Key Issues for Strategic Intervention**

### **a) Access, quality and equity**

Noting that the majority of young children across the world have no access to quality ECE, advocating for access to quality services, particularly for the youngest children, will remain a key strategic area for intervention by EI and its member organizations. EI and its member organizations will continue to lobby governments to expand public provision of ECE and to remove physical, socio-economic and other barriers that might hinder access to services for young children. EI and its member unions will also continue to advocate for the provision of adequate, suitable and relevant facilities and equipment for young children, including well-equipped play grounds and indoor spaces, suitable toilets, toys, books and other teaching-learning resources. Furthermore, the unions will campaign for inclusive, holistic well-coordinated services, catering for the educational, developmental, health and nutritional needs of young children. The ministry of education should, as far as possible, be the lead agency in charge of early childhood Education and concerted effort should be made to ensure that ECE is enshrined in relevant national legislation and considered an integral part of a country’s education system. EI and its member organizations will lobby for equitable access to ECE for girls and boys, marginalised and vulnerable groups, including disabled children, children with special educational needs, children from poor families and neighborhoods, minority groups, indigenous populations, migrant families and rural communities.



## **b) Teachers, support staff and leaders**

Recognizing the importance of teacher education, motivation and retention, EI and its member organizations will urge governments to provide quality initial preparation and induction programmes for new teachers, in-service training and continuous professional development. Better qualifications are likely to lead to higher salaries and improved working conditions, thereby increasing the attractiveness of the profession to more qualified teachers and retention of those already in the sector. Efforts should also be made to attract more men into the early childhood sector. Unions will also lobby for the provision of upgrading programmes for under qualified teachers and for the overall improvement of the professional status of ECE teachers and betterment of their conditions of service. In addition, the unions will urge their governments to ensure that ECE centres are provided with sufficient numbers of different categories of early childhood professionals and support staff. EI member organizations will organize, unionize and mobilize teachers and support staff (where appropriate) in the sector and help address their professional, trade union and labour needs. EI and its member organizations will also campaign for full recognition of the leadership function in ECE and lobby governments to provide training and support to leaders of ECE centres.

High quality educators are the most important prerequisite for quality ECE.

## **c) Curricula, Content and Methodology**

While recognizing and valuing diversity and acknowledging different country contexts, EI and its member organizations will advocate for an ECE curriculum or framework that is holistic and designed to meet the educational, developmental, nutritional, health and individual needs of children. Such a curriculum should be flexible and put the child at the centre of the learning and developmental process, valuing all kinds of activities that contribute to physical, psychomotor, cognitive, social and affective development. Play, creativity and exploration should be valued and promoted as important means of learning and development, while ensuring the prevention of risks and ensuring safety of all the children. EI and its member organizations will campaign for an inclusive process of policy development and curricula design involving teachers and other practitioners, through their representative organizations.

## **d) Research and Advocacy**

EI and its member unions will conduct further research into various aspects of ECE, including access, quality, equity and the situation of teachers and support staff. EI will particularly consider carrying out a study on privatization in early education and its impact on access, quality and equity. Research findings will be widely disseminated and be shared with union leaders and professional staff in the sector. Research evidence will also be used as an advocacy tool by EI and its member unions. At global level, EI will also engage in advocacy, and where appropriate, collaborate with various intergovernmental organizations, including UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and OECD and with other organizations, to urge and support national governments to provide quality ECE. National level campaigns will be undertaken in order to persuade governments to invest more resources in ECE and to expand and improve services for young children.

EI will continue to facilitate the exchange of information and sharing of experiences between its member organizations.



### **3. Summary of Key Priority Areas for Action**

#### **a) Strategic priorities for EI:**

Noting the progress made so far and desirous to strengthen and consolidate ECE work within EI and to keep early education high on the agenda of national governments, intergovernmental agencies, NGOs and other organizations and stakeholders, EI will:

- Maintain a global Task Force or Working Group on ECE and this group will continue to advise EI on various aspects of ECE, including policy, legislative framework, practice and conditions of teachers and support staff in the sector;
- Facilitate the establishment of Regional Working Groups (Action oriented) to spearhead the promotion and develop of ECE across the world;
- Prioritize ECE in development cooperation and encourage EI member organizations to come up with programmes that promote the organization and unionization of staff in the sector and the promotion of their professional development and conditions of service;
- Continue to provide a platform (e.g. through workshops, seminars and conferences) for EI member organizations to meet and share information and experiences on ECE;
- Continue to advocate for public provision and more investment in ECE and teachers (teacher training-pre and in-service, continuous professional development, improved conditions of work, infrastructure, teaching and learning resources etc) and to engage with intergovernmental agencies such as UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP, the World Bank and OECD;
- Participate in, establish or facilitate the establishment of ECE networks in order to promote information exchange and the strengthening of the sector; and,
- Carry out further research into various aspects of ECE, including the impact of privatization on access, quality and equity and conditions of service for teaching and support staff and disseminate the findings as widely as possible.

#### **b) Strategic priorities for EI Regional Structures:**

Cognizant of the need to prioritize ECE in the region and in various regional initiatives, EI Regional Committees and Offices will:

- Establish ECE regional Task Forces or Working Groups (these will work in close liaison with the global Task Force);
- Develop regional ECE policies and strategies, in close collaboration with EI member organizations;
- Consider developing an ECE Handbook, in collaboration with EI member organisations;
- Include ECE in regional conferences, meetings and other relevant initiatives;
- Organize ECE seminars, workshops, meetings or conferences in order to enable member organizations to share information and exchange experiences;
- Carry out research into various aspects of ECE within the region; and,
- Engage in advocacy with intergovernmental organizations, NGOs and other stakeholders and collaborate with civil society and other partners in order to promote universal public provision of quality ECE and the conditions of teachers and support staff in the sector.

#### **c) Strategic priorities for teachers' unions (EI member organizations):**



Convinced that ECE is essential for young children, their education and development and has enormous social and economic benefits to society, EI member organizations will:

- Organize, unionize, recruit, mobilize and represent ECE teachers and support staff (where appropriate);
- Put ECE high on the union agenda, including union policies, programmes, budgets, communication etc;
- Support and facilitate the professional development of ECE teachers and support staff (where applicable);
- Where applicable, include ECE in development cooperation programmes;
- Ensure that school leadership development and other programmes include the ECE subsector;
- Lobby governments and advocate for public provision and more investment in ECE, including the provision of appropriate facilities, infrastructure and equipment for young children (play grounds, toilets, furniture, toys, books etc) and investment in teacher training (pre and in-service training), induction and mentoring, continuous professional development and support;
- Lobby governments and advocate for the recruitment and retention of qualified teachers and other early childhood professionals and support staff, including men;
- Collaborate with relevant government ministries/organs, UN agencies (e.g. UNESCO and UNICEF), parents and other stakeholders to promote a coordinated and holistic approach to ECE, delivery of quality services and better conditions of service for teachers and support staff (where applicable) in the sector; and
- Carry out research into various aspects of ECE, including access, quality and equity and the conditions of service of early childhood professionals.

#### ***4. Call for action***

**Education International and its member organizations call upon governments and public authorities to:**

- Ensure that ECE is an integral part of the country's education system;
- Develop comprehensive policies and programmes that increase access to ECE and improve the quality of services provided;
- Provide adequate financial, material and other resources to ensure the effective implementation of ECE policies and programmes;
- Come up with policies and programmes that ensure the training and professional development of teaching and other ECE staff, as well as the improvement of their conditions of service;
- Involve teachers and their representative organizations in ECE policy development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation; and,
- Bilateral and multilateral institutions such as UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and the OECD need to support governments, particularly in developing countries, achieve the ECE and other EFA goals.





**Education International and teachers unions will continue to:**

- Be active participants in, and initiators of, the debate on high quality ECE as an inherent part of basic education and thus every child's right;
- Promote ECE that is publicly funded and universally accessible;
- Advocate for the integration of ECE into education systems under the auspices of the Ministries of Education or their equivalents;
- Counteract the split between education and care that results in inequality, instability for children, and low quality provision;
- Seek high standards of teacher education in ECE, at the same academic and professional level as teacher education for other levels of basic education;
- Work to achieve pay and working conditions for early childhood teachers, which are on a par with those of their counterparts in other sectors/levels of education;
- Seek improved opportunities for continuous professional development and better career opportunities for early childhood teachers;
- Seek to attract more men to early childhood teacher education, and more qualified male teachers to ECE;
- Undertake further research on ECE in order to have a strong knowledge-based position on its quality, on the status of the teachers delivering ECE and on the programmes being established;
- Encourage the strengthening of co-operation and communication with parents; and,
- Facilitate collaboration and information sharing with other organizations and with each other.

Investment in quality Early Childhood Education is an investment in the future.

## ***5. Systematic and coordinated action necessary***

Systematic and coordinated action, within the union and the education sector is necessary, if quality Early Childhood Education is to be achieved. Ensuring that ECE is high on the union's agenda and part of its overall policy and strategy on education is a necessary precondition for success. Unions can, and will continue to use every available opportunity such as the Global Action Week, World Teachers' Day and local events and activities to advocate for quality ECE, the professional development of staff and improvement of their conditions of service. Joining hands with civil society organizations, parents and other stakeholders to promote ECE can yield positive results.

Ministries responsible for education ought to take the lead in ensuring coordinated action and provision of comprehensive early education services. Such services should include education, health and nutrition and encompass children's holistic development and learning, where care forms an integral part of a child's development and education.