



Context Matters

Lessons Learned from the World's Highest-Performing Early Education Systems

Sharon Lynn Kagan

It is sad but true that throughout the world, many countries are doing a far better job than the United States of serving young children. However ominous, this statement is not made frivolously: it is based on a wide array of empirical data, including international quality rankings for early childhood education (Economist Intelligence Unit 2012), systemic analyses (Kagan & Gomez 2015; Bertram & Pascal 2016), and international assessments of student performance (OECD 2012).

Discerning why this is the case and what other countries are doing to better serve young children and their families was the motivation behind this exhaustive Early Advantage study of six very different countries/jurisdictions: Australia, England, Finland, Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea. The study revealed that there were many commonalities among the countries as well as many important differences; both similarities and differences provide

lessons for improving services and systems for young children in the United States (and other countries). This article focuses on three major findings: the importance of context, the importance of comprehensive services, and the role of governance in providing effective services for young children.

Although these findings may appear remote from the typical focus of early childhood teachers, consider the following:

It's Monday morning, and 4-year-old children in the United States, Sri Lanka, Ghana, and Denmark wake up ready to go about their day. Whether or not these children are likely to be enrolled in preschool differs by country; for those who are enrolled, what they are learning differs, as do their environments for learning. The nature and amount of the services these children have received prior to their fourth birthdays has also differed, as have the services and supports their parents received to ready them for the tough job of parenting. How much their parents pay for these services differs, along with the roles that their governments play in the oversight and provision of those services. In a world that professes that all children should be treated equally and possess inalienable rights, why should such variation exist?

This article examines how and why countries differ in their approaches to serving young children and their families. In doing so, it delves into three key elements that drive service delivery. It also seeks to analyze how and why context, services, and governments exert influence on the lives of children, teachers, and families, drawing on examples from high-performing countries about ways to do it well. It shares critical lessons that can inform how the United States and other countries conceptualize early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. Most importantly, it provides new and inventive ways of thinking about what countries can and should do to improve such services.

Context

Some scholars have long acknowledged the importance of context in influencing early childhood education (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence 1999). Less clear, however,

is what is actually meant by context, and precisely how context contours what countries do for and with young children and their families. The Early Advantage study suggests that two types of context have fairly profound influence on programs and policies for young children (Kagan 2018). One is made up of demographic, economic, and political variables and includes social movements, governmental turnover, and changes in economic conditions. We call it the *econo-political* context. The other consists of deeply embedded factors such as values, belief systems, and cultural and religious heritages. We call it the *socio-cultural* context. Compared with elements in the socio-cultural context, those in the econo-political context fluctuate more; both are potent in influencing countries' commitments to young children.

The role of the econo-political context

In the United States, policies related to ECEC have long emphasized the primacy and privacy of the family. This generally means limited government involvement in family life. Yet history reveals that social, political, or economic crises can recontour such commitments, with the country often embracing more interventionist policies to meet pressing needs. Large-scale examples include expanded services for young children in response to World War II (e.g., the Lanham Act) and the War on Poverty (e.g., Head Start and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965).

Such is the case in the study countries as well. Each has devised ways to honor their historic contexts while establishing structures, services, and mechanisms that are responsive to contemporary needs. For example, Australia, known for its durable ECEC governance structures that lend considerable continuity to services for children, has dealt with economic constraints that have reduced fiscal investments in young children. In South Korea, on the other hand, low birthrates led to concerns about future workforce strength and economic development, resulting in increases in funding for ECEC for all young children birth to age 5. South Korea now has among the most generous government subsidies for young children in the world.

In addition to country-specific fiscal and demographic changes, three widespread contextual variables shape the ECEC policy environment. First, throughout most of the world, changes in thinking about the role

of women in society have altered policies related to children. For example, women's increased participation in the workforce in recent decades has led countries to expand child care services considerably. Among the study countries, this is especially true in Australia and Hong Kong. Such shifts in thinking have also precipitated the advancement of family leave benefits in all study countries.

Second, rising immigration has fueled new thinking about and commitments to diversity, with efforts to reduce social inequities taking hold in almost all study countries. Finland, for example, provides comprehensive services for all children and also a municipal bonus to communities serving immigrant populations. In some cases, these bonuses have been used to support the development of bilingual education for young children.

Each country's values influence how it trains teachers, teaches children, and views the purpose of early childhood education.

Third, as new evidence makes the potency of investments in high-quality early childhood education nearly irrefutable, governments are shifting their thinking about the necessity of their engagement in ECEC. These examples suggest that countries do adapt their policies to address changes in their political, economic, demographic, and even ideological contexts.

The role of the socio-cultural context

However responsive policies are to the econo-political context, ultimately they are durably encased, if not cemented, in the more deeply embedded values and beliefs that shape countries' commitments to young children. Two value orientations seem to especially impact ECEC policies. The first focuses on whether the country espouses a more individualist or collectivist ideology. For example, the Anglo and Nordic study countries (England, Australia, and Finland) place a high value on individualism and on the advancement of the autonomous self. In contrast, the Asian study countries (Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea) emphasize a more collectivist orientation, in which

individual achievement is pursued in service to the family and society as a whole. These distinct values exert a powerful influence over how teachers are trained, how children are taught, and how the country views the purposes of early childhood education. Moreover, they are deeply engrained. Even when there are changes in the econo-political context, these values fluctuate very little.

The second influential value orientation is the relative priority given to egalitarianism versus meritocracy. This dramatically influences how governments conceptualize the rationales for their public services. In Nordic countries, which are profoundly egalitarian in orientation, social benefits are offered to all people (i.e., there are educational, health, and welfare benefits for everyone, regardless of age, income level, race, or other factor) as a means of underscoring those countries' commitments to social justice. In meritocracy-oriented countries, including many Asian societies, governments tend to offer public services as a means of promoting economic development and overall global competition, so that investing in children is merited as a means to greater societal production. Interestingly, these deeply embedded and quite different value orientations have both translated to broad-based commitments to ECEC service provision.

Contemporary contexts and impacts

In many ways, the six countries share common contexts. They all enjoy considerable ideological and financial support for ECEC from their governments (stemming from the econo-political and socio-cultural factors discussed earlier). At the time of the study, they all had long enjoyed generally stable, peaceful political contexts that divide authority among branches of government and engage the public as they create and adapt policies. They all have well-functioning structures and institutions (e.g., governmental ministries or departments and professional preparatory institutions) that are stable and supportive of young children's development and education. Finally, they all have clear policy strategies that are articulated in consistently applied documents, giving some coherence to their early childhood services.

Beyond these common contextual features, however, the study countries vary in important ways. The table on the next page presents some of these differences,

delineating distinct Nordic (Finland), Asian (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea) and Anglo (Australia, England) approaches. There are notable distinctions in public funding levels and in approaches to pedagogy and monitoring.

Within these three approaches, individual countries vary as well. For example, while the spirit of innovation and policy adaptation is clear in all three Asian study countries, it is most evident in Singapore, where borrowing of innovative policy ideas from other countries is commonplace. Singapore also boasts a policy context that promotes rapid service expansion and frequent use of pilot projects. In Finland, bedrock trust in the government and in teachers (which are mutually reinforcing because of the strong government oversight of rigorous teacher preparation), coupled

with a strong community ethos, lead to limited formal accountability for ECEC programs and a rich array of community-based efforts. Australia's profound commitment to social justice and equality has led it to develop policies, frameworks, and programs that demonstrate respect for and commitment to Indigenous populations.

In short, this study found that while the countries and their approaches to serving young children are very different, in all cases these variations are heavily contoured by the interplay of durable socio-cultural and more changeable economic-political factors. Thus, in thinking about the United States, we need to consider the elements of our unique socio-cultural heritage (e.g., localism, independence,

Approaches to Comprehensive Early Childhood Services

Nordic Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Heavy public funding for early care and education services › Heavy public provision of early care and education services › National curriculum framework with freedom of implementation and focus on children's agency › Limited, if any, national formal child monitoring or formal program monitoring › Heavy public funding for health care and child protection
Asian Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Moderate to heavy public funding for early care and education services › Mixed public-private provision of early care and education services › National curriculum framework with structured pedagogy › Limited national formal child monitoring › Moderate to heavy formal program monitoring › Heavy public funding for health care and moderate to heavy funding for child protection
Anglo Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Limited to heavy public funding for early care and education services › Mixed public-private provision of early care and education services › National curriculum framework with moderately guided pedagogy › Moderate to heavy national formal child monitoring › Heavy formal program monitoring › Heavy public funding for health care and moderate to heavy funding for child protection

entrepreneurialism) and how they merge with contemporary issues to shape how we think about and enact services for young children.

Comprehensive services

Countries with high-performing ECEC systems employ two major principles when designing and implementing their efforts. First, they all take a *developmental* orientation, providing services throughout childhood and generally not privileging one age group over another. Second, high-performing countries plan and implement services holistically, always including (at minimum) health, welfare, and education.

Given these principles, the Early Advantage study categorized comprehensive early development services as those that include health, welfare, and/or education for young children; ECEC is the subset of comprehensive early development services that specifically engage children in home, center, or school settings for multiple hours per week and often have prescribed pedagogical and service guidelines.



Several common conditions characterize the delivery of comprehensive early development and ECEC services across the study countries. All acknowledge that parents and families are essential to healthy development and provide a rich array of services to parents (or other primary caregivers) of young children. These take various forms, but conceptually parents and children are regarded as a unit, so services are designed with both in mind. Second, all countries are committed to providing high-quality ECEC services. That is, policy is predicated not merely on the provision of services but on the imperative of delivering services of the highest quality, irrespective of the ages served, the nature of the services, or the policy vehicles used to provide them. Conceptually, at least, quality reigns.

Health and welfare services

All study countries offer prenatal care that includes regular checkups with a midwife or doctor. Routine screenings take place (e.g., blood pressure, weight, urine, fetal disorders), accompanied by parenting support and referrals for additional services if necessary. Participation in these services is very high, in part because they are usually free or low cost. Parenting education for at least some portion of the population is common throughout the study countries, with notable examples being Australia, England, and Finland. These efforts typically begin prior to birth and extend throughout the child's early years.

Some form of parental leave exists in all the study countries. The Nordic and Anglo countries tend to provide more generous family leave, which often extends to fathers—now the Asian countries are following suit. Parental leave benefits generally include paid time off from work and job protection during the leave. Finland and South Korea provide home care allowance for families who choose to care for their children at home for certain periods of time. Birth registrations, childhood immunizations, and developmental screenings are provided to children in all study countries.

All study countries are distinguished by their services to special populations, including orphaned, abused, or neglected children. In all cases, such services are offered for the children and for their families. Advanced systems of foster care are

widespread, with Finland offering robust orphans' pensions. All countries also provide services to children with disabilities, with most committed to mainstreaming children with disabilities into regular classrooms. Through its health care system and social insurance, Finland offers special services including transportation, access to a personal assistant, and assistive devices for children with disabilities.

Education and care services

ECEC services are widely available, although the countries use different terminology. All study countries have some form of informal family child care. Some have formalized it, with England and Australia subjecting family child care to regular governmental oversight; in Australia, such services may only be provided by qualified caregivers who are recruited, trained, and regulated under the National Quality Framework. In Finland, drop-in care is also quite popular, providing families with opportunities to leave their children with ECEC caregivers at a community center for short and often unscheduled periods.

Countries with high-performing early childhood education and care systems provide health, welfare, and education services throughout childhood.

Center-based services abound in the study countries. Child care is widely provided and is often funded through a combination of public and private funds. Preschool services are nearly universally provided in the study countries; they tend to run for few hours, be more educational in orientation, and serve older children (those age 3 and older). In some countries, child care and preschool may be combined. In Hong Kong, for example, there are programs that offer (in US terminology) child care, preschool, and kindergarten that operate for 3 to 10 hours per day.

Many of the study countries provide full government funding for children ages 3 to 6, although some do rely on a combination of public and private funding. Increasing attention is being given to supporting children's transition into the early years of formal

school, with all countries using some form of transition activity. Australia, England, and Finland offer publicly funded, educationally oriented services for children in the year prior to their entry into formal school, which is often referred to as the pre-primary year; attendance is mandatory in England and Finland.

Whatever the constellation of services and funding patterns, all study countries provide a broader array of comprehensive services to children and families from the prenatal period through entry into formal school than the United States. In the United States, services for young children remain limited by comparison; moreover, they are often poorly organized and inadequately governed, topics addressed in the next sections of this article.

Governance

Many countries are experimenting with ways to create more effective and efficient services. Especially among countries with highly decentralized governmental structures and systems, efforts to streamline governance are growing as services for children expand. Governance issues exist in three distinct arenas: aligning governance among ministries/departments (*horizontal alignment*); aligning governance among the federal/national, state/provincial, and community levels (*vertical alignment*); and aligning governance between the public and private sectors (*sectorial alignment*).

Horizontal alignment

In the study countries, structural and functional alignments have been undertaken to improve service delivery among ministries or departments. With regard to structural alignment, England and Finland have each elected to consolidate the vast majority of their services for young children within a single existing ministry: the Department for Education in England and the Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland. The intention is to centralize service delivery, promote service equity and continuity among disparate programs and communities, and foster the coordination of information.

Singapore offers another promising approach to structural alignment. The government has created a new national-level governmental entity that is devoted to advancing services for young children. Called the Early Childhood Development Agency, it oversees the entire ECEC sector, facilitates teacher training, develops the master plan for ECEC, assesses and oversees infrastructure and the workforce, administers subsidies and grants, and conducts public information and outreach efforts to parents and the community. In general, this new ECEC-focused agency uplifts visibility and support for young children while working toward enhanced efficiency, improved continuity, and more equitable distribution of services.

A third strategy that promotes structural alignment is the development of permanent coordinating entities that work across existing organizational boundaries. Australia, England, and Finland have such boundary-spanning mechanisms. Typically, these entities exert considerable influence across diverse programs and delivery streams. Other countries establish short-term coordinating entities to address specific governance issues. Hong Kong, for example, established the Free Kindergarten Committee, which draws committee members from multiple realms of government to advise the government on its policy for educating young children. South Korea has an ECEC Integration Committee at the national level that works to link early childhood policies across two distinct ministries. Whatever form these coordinating entities take in the study countries, they work to realign structures to better plan, expedite, and implement services for young children.

Public-private hybrid services can induce innovation, acting as a positive force for change.

Sometimes countries acknowledge the need for alignment across ministries but prefer *functional* solutions. There is no attempt to create permanent structures or consolidate existing ones; rather, the approach works within durable structures to address essential functions associated with ECEC delivery (e.g., data collection, accountability, professional



development). This might mean the establishment of common standards for programs or personnel that adhere across program types, irrespective of the administering department or agency. Other examples include the development of common pedagogical frameworks or linked data systems.

One popular functional integration effort is the development of national curriculum frameworks that apply to ECEC programs, no matter which agency or ministry oversees them. Discussed in greater detail in the accompanying article (see “International Curriculum Frameworks: Increasing Equity and Driving Systemic Change,” on page 10), such frameworks are prominent not only in countries with consolidated governance structures—namely England, Finland, and Singapore—but also in countries that retain split systems of governance, such as Australia and South Korea.

Vertical alignment

Throughout the world, countries grapple with how best to distribute authority for ECEC services among levels of government. In general, how countries distribute such responsibility follows patterns established for other services in the country. For example, Hong Kong and Singapore centralize most services (including ECEC), with no responsibility devolved to localities or governmental subunits. This makes sense due to their small size (and also because of Hong Kong's distinct status as a special administrative region of China). England, too, is relatively centralized, with the national government (specifically the Ministry for Education) serving as the predominant ECEC authority. Although the 152 local authorities in England have some flexibility in administering services, they must act in accordance with nationally established policies.

Distributed responsibilities between federal/national and state/local entities characterize Australia, Finland, and South Korea. Australia gives its states and territories a great deal of authority in the design and delivery of ECEC services. Finland also gives considerable authority to its municipalities and boasts the least restrictive monitoring system of all the countries. South Korea, though it has a relatively more centralized governing system, also blends national and local authorities. Responsibility for long-term planning and the creation of key policy tools is lodged at the national level, while Local Offices of Education set salaries, determine the nature and amount of professional development, and run community engagement efforts for young children.

The major point is that no two governments distribute ECEC authority among levels of government in the same way. They do, however, make these distributions in accordance with other operative policies and practices.

Sectorial alignment

ECEC services tend to exist at the intersection of the public and private sectors. In some cases, this may mean that the government imposes regulations and monitoring on private ECEC services, which are funded through fees paid by families. In other cases, the government may provide much of the funding for

ECEC services, irrespective of whether they exist in the private or public sector. Complicating matters, the balance between public and private sector engagement varies among countries and over time within any given country.

Fluctuations in public and private sector involvement in ECEC are common. The ways the public and private sectors systematically engage—sometimes called *hybridization*—are of consequence to children, families, and governments. Two findings related to public-private hybridization emerge from this study. First, hybridization is growing, often accelerated by changing econo-political variables. For example, England has traditionally prided itself on robust public provision of ECEC. Yet, in reality, the private sector actually provides more spaces for children under the age of 4 than does the public sector. All these private sector programs must adhere to the national curriculum framework and participate in the national public inspection system; most also receive significant public funding.



The growth of hybridization due to economic-political issues is evident in Finland. Though Finland has long been committed to extensive (though not complete) public sector provision of ECEC, economic constraints are challenging the country's capacity to meet increasing demand. Driven by the need to reduce overall public expenditures, Finland has reduced the number of publicly subsidized ECEC hours for children whose parents are not working or enrolled in school (for additional hours, these parents have to pay). Moreover, new policies have increased the proliferation of private sector services. Both strategies—increased reliance on parental fees and involvement of the private sector—reflect growing public-private hybridization due in part to a constrained economy. Conversely, in the context of a burgeoning economy, Hong Kong's once fully privatized child care market has received increased government investments.

The second finding regarding hybridization is that it can induce innovation, acting as a positive force for change. In some countries the dual engagement of both sectors has supported the development of the ECEC infrastructure. For example, in Singapore, much of the professional development is handled by private, nonprofit, postsecondary institutions, but in recent years government funding for professional development has increased significantly. Additionally, Singapore's many innovative pilot efforts are supported by philanthropic organizations working collaboratively with the public sector. Finally, in many of the study countries, research is typically funded and sometimes operated by a combination of public and private efforts.

There simply is no substitute for comprehensive, high-quality early childhood care and education services.

Hybridization is not without challenges. Controversies arise from both the profit motive of the private sector and the regulations of the public sector. As hybridization increases, it will need to be strategically managed so that conflicts over roles and responsibilities can be minimized while contributions are maximized. Such

hybridization can take many forms, beginning with federal and state governments setting up coordinating entities to encourage dialogue across the sectors.

In conclusion

In high-performing systems, services offered to children begin early and last long. There simply is no substitute for comprehensive, high-quality services. Each of the Early Advantage study countries takes unique approaches to ensuring extensive, quality services based on the interplay of their socio-cultural and economic-political contexts. For advocates seeking to enhance ECEC services, understanding their country's underlying value premises and the elasticity of its policy parameters will help them to craft appealing policies. Understanding and working with the hybridization of the field through the engagement of both the public and private sectors is also important. Discerning how to best position government entities is one half of the equation; the other half is understanding how to leverage them, based on contextual considerations and the prevailing array of services that must be delivered.

Given these conditions, what roles can we as early childhood teachers and leaders in the United States play to create higher quality and more equitably distributed services? We must begin by recognizing that many conditions affecting children's learning and their learning environments are framed by both the context and the policies that emerge from it. Consequently, our voices must be heard at policy tables where decisions directly affecting the well-being of children and families are made. Teachers routinely advocate for the individual children in their care; these advocacy skills could be broadened into more collective advocacy for larger groups of children. Teachers can inform families about the conditions that affect their ability to create higher quality programs so that families' voices can be marshaled also. Finally, teachers must recognize that advancing the ECEC profession is as much their responsibility as is advancing the well-being of children. Serving the profession is serving children.

Without a doubt, the early childhood education and care experiences of children around the world will vary depending on their contexts, the available

services, and their countries' governance choices. At the end of the day, it is the job of caring, informed adults not to render children's services identical, but to render them just.

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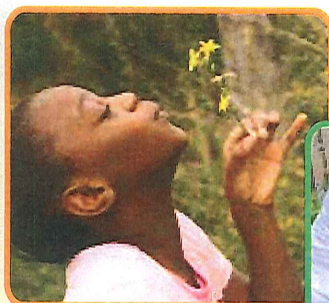
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