

Advancing Towards a Better Quality Early Childhood Education

There is increasingly more awareness of the benefits of preschool education for children. It is urgent to further improve the quality of early childhood education and the regulation of the rules applied to these institutions, by creating new standards concerning the owner, staff, infrastructure and educational project. In this respect, the bill creating a system which accredits the operation of preschools advances in the right direction, and the role of the Education Quality Agency is also crucial.

Evidence indicates that assisting to a quality kindergarten center has positive effects on the children's both cognitive and social emotional development, especially for those coming from families with greater social vulnerability. As a partner of the parents in the mission of educating their children, it is important that the State safeguards the children's wellbeing by guaranteeing minimum operation conditions and quality standards of these institutions.

Significant changes are needed for guaranteeing a better service to the children, particularly if we consider that preschool or early childhood education has massified in the past years and the institutional framework has not changed. An initiative along this line is still pending at the Congress and it regards the bill creating a system that accredits the operation of preschools. Another aspect which should be fostered, and where there is still much work

ahead, is the establishment of quality requirements and measurements.

Coverage of Early Childhood Education Centers

In past years, the preschool education coverage has strongly increased, along with women's greater incorporation to the labor market, and because parents are increasingly more aware of the beneficial effects of early childhood education on children. Coverage of children between 0 and 6 years old went from 27.3% in 2000 to 44% in 2011, and currently amounts to nearly 715,000 children.¹ These numbers are encouraging, but differences by socioeconomic level are still evidenced. In 2011, preschool coverage was 42.3% for the first quintile and 48.4% for the fifth; there is still a gap, but much narrower than in previous years (in 2000 these figures were 20.2% and 46.3%, respectively).

However, coverage is very dissimilar by age, since the older the child, greater their attendance to preschool education. As observed in Table 1, smaller children (less than two years old) have a very low coverage and it has grown slowly in the last years (4% up to 1 year and 16% from 1 to 2 years in 2011). Many parents argue that they prefer to take care of their children at home at that age. Instead, in the older groups, the coverage has increased much more, reaching 75% in the 4 to 5 year olds (pre-kindergarten) and 94% in the 5 to 6 year olds (kindergarten).

Table 1

EVOLUTION OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION COVERAGE
BY AGE

Year	Up to 1 year	1 to 2 years	2 to 3 years	3 to 4 years	4 to 5 years	5 to 6 years
1992	1%	2%	6%	17%	30%	56%
2000	1%	4%	12%	26%	42%	72%
2009	4%	11%	20%	42%	68%	90%
2011	4%	16%	32%	51%	75%	94%

Source: Based on the document base of MIDEPLAN and CASEN Survey

There are several institutions that deliver early childhood education with public funding. In Table 22 we observe that the National Board of Nursery Schools (JUNJI, in Spanish), with its own facilities and others administered by third parties, is the main supplier of childcare centers and middle level preschools (up to three years old), while in prekindergarten and kindergarten the municipal and private subsidized schools concentrate the largest coverage. *Fundación Integra* also assists children, mainly the smallest ones. Furthermore, it calls our attention that there is a large number of children who attend special schools (25% of the enrolment in middle levels; and 20% and 11% in prekindergarten and kindergarten respectively); these schools are intended for children below six years with specific language disorders.

Table 2

ENROLMENT DISTRIBUTION BY LEVEL AND EDUCATIONAL
DEPENDENCY, 2012

Institution	Childcare	Middle Levels	Prekindergarten (NT1)	Kindergarten (NT2)	Total
JUNJI	58,622	103,252	13,123	2,202	177,199
Integra Foundation	15,744	43,243	8,772	1,107	68,866
Municipal Schools	0	0	50,505	71,867	122,372
Private Subsidized Schools	165	1,751	80,621	110,031	192,568
Private Paid Schools	401	7,121	12,956	15,432	35,910
Special Education Schools*	353	53,052	40,624	24,634	118,663
Total	75,285	208,419	206,601	225,273	715,578

Source: MINEUC, JUNJI & FUNDACIÓN INTEGRÁ. Data from private childcare centers and preschools are not included.

*They are municipal, private subsidized or private paid educational institutions.

In relation to private paid preschools, there is no consolidated official source available which reports the enrolment, since they have no obligation to deliver this information until now. There are many preschools and childcare centers that collaborate with the companies in order to support working mothers with children smaller than two years (Article 203 of the Labor Code).

Preschools' Accreditation Project

Until now, childcare centers and preschools are not required to comply with minimum requirements in order to operate; instead, there are diverse organisms which give different types of certifications, with different demands and purposes. On the one hand, municipalities set a number of demands referred to infrastructure and sanitation, which differ according to the type of required permit (business license, authorization, etc.). On the other hand, the JUNJI sets certain common requirements with the municipalities, but additionally, other ones concerning the employees, didactic material and furniture, so as to offer a record to the childcare

centers servicing children of working mothers and all the centers who voluntarily wish to be registered. Finally, the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) delivers an accreditation to the institutions who offer preschool service and who voluntarily wish to have this seal. In this case, the requests – in addition to the above- deal with the requirements that sustainers have to fulfill, referred to standards on minimum capital and curricular bases.

Furthermore, no organism independent from the educational centers, such as the MINEDUC or the Superintendence of Education, has the power to supervise and penalize the institutions offering preschool education with no State- accreditation, since they lack the authority to safeguard the children's safety.

Currently, the legislation gives the JUNJI the authority to supervise preschools. However, until now, this organism has no powers to penalize the education centers when children's safety is at risk. This organism concentrates the power to provide preschool education, register educational centers and supervise this kind of institutions in the country. These powers are stipulated in the rules that have prevailed for over forty years and which probably responded adequately to the needs of that time. Nevertheless, today everyone agrees on how inconvenient it is that the same institution which provides preschool education is in charge of making the record and supervising all preschools in the country, because there are evident conflicts of interest while being both judge and jury.

For this reason, the bill under discussion assigns the JUNJI the service provider role, while the accreditation and supervision functions shall be undertaken by the MINEDUC and the Superintendence of Education, respectively. This bill stipulates that all child educational centers – embracing since birth until their access to primary education- shall have an accreditation in order to operate, which will be given by the Ministry of Education. The Superintendence of Education shall be in charge of supervising the compliance of the rule and shall have the power to penalize them in case of non-compliance. On the other hand, the JUNJI shall focalize on its role of preschool education provider.

Improving Quality: a Pending Task

Regarding early childhood education, the strong coverage increase in the last years disregarded the quality assurance matters. The quality measurement of preschool education in Chile lacks established procedures and common measurement instruments. Although the JUNJI and *Fundación Integra* have developed their own assessment instruments in their institutions, it is necessary to rely on external information in order to be able to compare the quality of preschool education among all the institutions providing this service. In this perspective, the Education Quality

Agency has the assignment of creating different measurements standards and indicators, a task that is already showing some progress.

This is a still pending challenge, and not a minor one, since it is the most vulnerable children who access the centers with public funding, which lack common indicators or standards that reflect a minimum guaranteed quality. Additionally, the great coverage increase in early childhood education was not consistent with the training of preschool teachers and technicians. The last INICIA test² and previous ones as well, have shown important deficiencies in the training of preschool teachers.³ Among the evaluated preschool education graduates, 60% showed insufficient knowledge of their subject matters, and 62% in the pedagogical knowledge test. Moreover, 51% did not achieve an adequate level in written communication skills.

Thus, it is urgent to further improve the quality of early childhood education, and the Education Quality Agency will play a key role in defining quality criteria and standards for the different education levels provided (child care, middle and transitional). Likewise, it is necessary to further improve the training of teaching professionals, and to accomplish this, the corresponding higher education institutions should play an important role.

In brief...

- Preschool or early childhood education has massified in the past years and the institutional framework has not changed; thus, it needs to be improved.
- The preschool accreditation bill advances in the right direction towards greater regulation of the rules governing these service institutions, by means of establishing certain minimum standards to operate.
- Quality assurance is still a pending challenge, a task in which the Education Quality Agency will play a relevant role, as well as a better training of professionals and technicians who work with preschool children.

¹ According to CASEN Surveys, MINEDUC, JUNJI-INTEGRA.

² A voluntary national exam that assesses the competence of Chilean teaching graduates (T.N.)

³ Except that this test is voluntary and therefore the results cannot be made extensive to all graduates.