

Abstract

The education and care of young children are of paramount importance, as the early years of a child's life form a crucial foundation for their development and future (Jeong et al., 2021; Tomasello, 2020). During the early years, children go through significant developmental stages, which have far-reaching effects on their future, including their ability to integrate into the educational system. Early childhood is a critical phase in human socialization, as a substantial portion of cognitive and social development occurs during the first three years of life (Alwaely et al., 2020; Jeong et al., 2021; Maleki et al., 2019; Tomasello, 2020; Zarotis, 2020). Furthermore, by the end of the first three years, the brain reaches 90% of its maximum volume, underscoring the significant impact of early life experiences on a child's development (Tomasello, 2020).

Participation in high-quality educational settings, even during infancy, contributes significantly to a child's development in various aspects, including social, emotional, cognitive, educational, economic, health, and moral (Shavit et al., 2018; Heckman, 2011; Jeong et al., 2021). Interaction with peers and caregivers in educational settings fosters social skills, encourages collaboration, and personal communication. For instance, research has shown that a lack of interaction negatively affects the social and emotional well-being of children, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, disruptions to the structured environment provided by early childhood programs can hinder interaction. These findings emphasize the importance of nurturing environments that early childhood programs provide, aiding children in emotional development and resilience (Egan et al., 2021; Ernst et al., 2019).

Early learning experiences in infancy promote cognitive development, including problem-solving, critical thinking, and creativity, all of which are essential skills for the 21st century. Research has shown that there is a connection between early childhood education and later cognitive development, leading to higher mathematical abilities in later years (Peng & Kievit, 2020; Tang et al., 2020).

Moreover, high-quality early childhood education programs can reduce achievement gaps among children from different social backgrounds (Kulic et al., 2019). Furthermore, international assessments such as PISA (2015) have shown that children who participate in early educational programs perform better academically compared to their peers who do not participate in such programs during early childhood. The impact of participation in early childhood education on mathematical literacy varies with different socioeconomic backgrounds, with the achievement gap decreasing as socioeconomic status improves (OECD, 2017).

Economically speaking, investment in early childhood education yields long-term economic benefits, both for individuals and society as a whole. Studies have demonstrated that early education is associated with the highest return on investment compared to other age groups (García et al., 2023; Heckman et al., 2010; 2022; 2023; Walker et al., 2023; Hahn et al., 2023). It increases the likelihood of acquiring higher education and raises the potential for higher earnings in adulthood, ultimately narrowing socioeconomic disparities (Bai et al., 2020; Reynolds et al., 2019).

Early participation of children in high-quality educational programs, even during infancy, also has positive effects on their health. Research has indicated that early involvement in such programs helps identify and address health issues and early development delays. Additionally, it contributes to better overall health (Lipkin et al., 2020). Furthermore, the need for professional assistance for young children due to developmental delays or behavioral disorders is identified in some cases within the preschool environment, typically by the preschool staff (Rabinowitz, 2015).

While in the past, the focus on infancy primarily centered on hygiene, safety, and nutrition, there has been a global shift in perspective, influenced by global, local, social, cultural, and political processes, towards early childhood education and care (ECE) (Marope & Kaga, 2015). This change in focus began in the 1990s, influenced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and emphasized the role of early childhood education and care.

Early exposure of young children to diverse social environments promotes tolerance and cultural awareness. Early education in childhood serves as a critical period for the formation of attitudes and values for life. For example, research conducted in South Africa highlights that the first years are crucial for the initial formation of children's attitudes towards different groups of people. This research contributes to identifying ways to make early learning environments more inclusive, fostering more democratic and socially positive changes (Mahadew, 2023). Another study conducted in Turkey indicates that early learning can contribute to the development of moral and ethical thinking in young children (Yalçın, 2021).

The structures of early childhood education systems in different countries reflect perceptions influenced by global, local, social, cultural, and political processes. The way early childhood is perceived within a community and the distribution of responsibilities between families and society affect the education and care of young children. Additionally, the education and care of early childhood are influenced by societal views on gender roles, labor market conditions, and employment policies (Jensen, 2017). For example, research in Turkey found that family life and choices in education were coordinated with the career choices of couples, and traditional gender roles influenced these decisions. When gender roles were perceived as traditional (e.g., the woman's primary role is childcare), career choices tended to reflect this, leading to the selection of more female-dominated professions (Koçak et al., 2022).

The professional literature suggests that there are two main structural models for the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) system - the split system and the unified system. The split system is prevalent in many countries, such as Ireland, France, Japan, and Australia. In this model, responsibility for ECCE is divided among several government ministries. This model typically represents a view where childcare services are designed to assist working mothers, and therefore ECCE is perceived as a service for parents.

In contrast, the unified system model emphasizes the comprehensive responsibility of ECCE under the Ministry of Education, as seen in countries like Austria, Finland,

Canada, Denmark, and the UK. This model highlights the pedagogical and educational perspective of ECCE, viewing early childhood education as the starting point, with the child at the center. The educational and care frameworks are designed to promote the child's development rather than merely providing parental support (Moss, 2017).

The implementation of a unified system is often considered more efficient as it creates uniformity through the implementation of management, regulations, and supervision standards, as well as a coherent educational sequence (Adi-Yafe, 2022).

As mentioned earlier, ECCE holds great importance in Israel, given the demographic significance of the age group 0-3, which constitutes a significant portion of the population. This demographic factor underscores the importance of investing resources in early childhood education and care.

This policy research focuses on the ECCE system in Israel, examining the significant changes it has undergone in recent years. Israel has experienced a shift from a split system to a unified system, along with legislative changes. The high birthrate in Israel, particularly among children aged 0-3, is noteworthy compared to other OECD countries. Therefore, there is a need to investigate the policy and legislative changes in the early childhood education and care system in Israel (OECD, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023).

In Israel, children aged 0-17 make up approximately 38% of the total population, whereas in other OECD countries, such as Germany, children represent only 12% of the population (Destatis, 2023). Furthermore, within the group of children aged 0-3, they constitute about a fifth of this population. The high proportion of children in the population highlights the importance of education and care, necessitating significant investments.

This policy research analyzes the policy and care processes for early childhood development in Israel over the past two decades, incorporating various external and internal factors and considering the ecological model by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998). The analysis takes into account the political instability in recent years, including multiple elections and political changes.

The issues explored in this research are divided into two circles, external and internal, related to the early childhood education and care environment for children aged 0-3. The external circle, called the chronos-system, deals with policy changes and their implementation, while the internal circle, the micro-system, refers to the relationships between different micro-systems in an individual's life (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

The micro-system focuses on the role of time in shaping an individual's development. This dimension acknowledges the influence of historical events, personal experiences, and significant life transitions on developmental processes. This system also recognizes that social and cultural changes over time can affect an individual's development (Martinello, 2020).

The reform in Israel's ECCE system, particularly the transition from a split to a unified system, has significant implications for children's experiences and developmental outcomes across generations. In the external context, we first examined the ECCE reform in Israel, followed by an analysis of the policy and legislation in the field and its implementation within the educational and care staff.

In the following sections, we present four integrated research studies within this work, all guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). According to this ecological theory, internal life cycles influence external cycles, and vice versa. Changes in Israel's ECCE system, from a split to a unified structure, are associated with external systems in children's lives, as well as with cultural, value, and economic contexts. The reform within the ECCE system is situated in these external cycles, driven by long-term societal and cultural processes, and brought into effect by professional and governmental decision-makers. The reform process may be top-down, but it also influences the micro-systems within the ECCE system.

The articles included in this work cover various aspects related to the ECCE system, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between external and internal factors and their impact on children's development. The analysis draws from a wide range of sources, including government documents, committee protocols, policy

papers, position papers, and media articles. Process tracing was used as a methodological tool to identify and track policy developments (Collier, 2011).

The analytical framework for this work is based on a five-stage model for process tracing. These stages include explaining the current situation, delving into the contextual factors in the country, collecting supporting evidence for the current explanation, retesting the collected evidence, and drawing conclusions based on the accumulated insights from the previous stages (Beach & Pedersen, 2019).

In the first article, changes in demographic, economic, cultural, political, and social factors that have accelerated policy changes were analyzed. Demographic factors refer to the growth in the number of children aged 0-3 and the high fertility rate in Israel. Economic factors relate to the shortage of qualified early childhood education and care workers and their low wages. Cultural factors involve the shift from perceiving early childhood as a framework for promoting women's entry into the labor market to an approach emphasizing the need for pedagogical and educational support in infancy. Political and social factors refer to the persistent political crisis and the activities of social organizations driving organizational change. As of the publication date of the research, early childhood education and care facilities in Israel are not under the responsibility of a single government ministry.

The second study analyzed the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policy in the context of the political crisis in Israel from 2019 to 2021. The research examined the impact of the political crisis on the ECCE system, which includes infants and toddlers aged 0-3. The findings were divided into three aspects: arrangement, expansion, and transfer. The research highlighted the changes in the activities of politicians during a political crisis, focusing on preserving their electoral power while addressing the immediate needs of their constituents.

The third study examined the implementation of children's rights to education and care in Israel in light of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child from 2003.

This research explored the right to education for infants and toddlers (ages 0-3) and assessed four dimensions: accessibility, availability, quality, and suitability.

While the right to education has been enshrined in Israeli law since the founding of the state in 1949 and has undergone changes and expansions over the years, the findings of this study revealed discrepancies between legislation and the actual implementation of the policy regarding the right to education for infants and toddlers. For example, the transfer of responsibility for daycares to the Ministry of Education, the enactment of the Daycare Oversight Law, and related regulations indicated significant policy changes. However, even with these changes, some daycare facilities still operate without proper oversight, or their responsibility lies with different government ministries.

The research emphasized the importance of developing a nationwide, accessible, and available daycare system operated by trained educators. It also highlighted the need for affordability and equal access to early childhood education and care services for all populations. Additionally, there was a crucial need for the development of a comprehensive and affordable daycare system to support young families, invest in infrastructure, train staff, and provide financial assistance to families unable to afford these services.

To examine the application of the inner circle (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), we analyzed the relationships between training, professional identity, and self-efficacy of early childhood care and education center managers. The fourth article, titled "The mediating role of professional identity between self-efficacy and training of early childhood care and education center manager," was submitted to the *Early Childhood Research Quarterly (Q1)* journal.

Prior to the enactment of regulations governing the supervision of daycare centers for infants and toddlers in 2021, there was no requirement for a minimum number of training hours for the educational and care staff in these centers. As part of the education reform, daycare center managers are now mandated to complete 220 hours of training as a core condition for their work. In contrast, kindergarten teachers are required to have a bachelor's degree and undergo comprehensive training over four years in a teacher

training college, including approximately 3,000 study hours and ongoing professional development throughout their careers. The significant differences in training requirements for the education and care staff in the early childhood sector indicate that policymakers perceive the role of daycare center managers primarily as caregivers and not as educators (Shiloh, 2020). Some may see this as a semantic change, but it goes beyond that. Ongoing training and development for education and care staff have a substantial impact on the quality of education and care, particularly in the early childhood years, as well as on their self-capacity, resilience, and ability to cope with job-related stress and burnout.

The Daycare Center Supervision Act (Infant Daycare Supervision Act - 2018) was the first to regulate the training of daycare center managers and set minimum training requirements. However, there is a gap between the law and its practical implementation, as revealed by a report from the State Comptroller (2022).

The research presented in this article explores the relationships between professional identity and self-efficacy, with participation in professional training as a mediating variable. The research model is quantitatively analyzed using regression analysis in SPSS. The model is examined in a broad sample of 137 early childhood care and education center managers. The findings suggest that the professional identity of the managers predicts self-efficacy, and participation in training predicts higher levels of both professional identity and self-efficacy. Additionally, participation in training was found to mediate the relationship between professional identity and self-efficacy.

Furthermore, the research findings indicate that managers who received higher levels of training had higher levels of professional identity compared to their peers. Similarly, managers with higher levels of professional identity exhibited higher levels of self-efficacy. However, the relationships between training participation and self-efficacy were not statistically significant.

These research findings support the notion that strengthening the professional identity and self-efficacy of early childhood care and education center managers enhances the overall quality of early childhood education and care. The research emphasizes the need

to promote policies that regulate appropriate training and development requirements, similar to the requirements in later stages of education.

Combining the findings from all four publications underscores the importance of comprehensive policy changes to promote quality education and care for infants and toddlers. Despite the legislation, the research reveals a gap between the law and its implementation, highlighting the impact of political upheaval on the education and care sector. The ongoing political turmoil in Israel has led to delays in implementing educational reforms.

Analyzing the transition from vision to reality through research allows for an examination of the processes of change and their contributions to creating the desired reality. As part of the educational reform, a significant emphasis has been placed on the crucial aspect of the training requirements for education and care staff. Analyzing the psychological and educational aspects of daycare center managers represents the forefront of implementing reforms in the education sector.