

The Characteristics of Early Childhood Education in Spain

Ruzhen Zhang^{1,2,*}

¹ Department of Developmental and Educational Psychology, Autonomous University of Madrid, Madrid, Spain

² Department of Preschool Education, Jiangmen Preschool Education College, Jiangmen, China

* Corresponding author: Ruzhen Zhang

Abstract: Spain is a key member of the European Union, which stands out with its high enrollment rates and comprehensive early childhood education system among EU countries. Early childhood education (Educación Infantil, 0-6 years old) in Spain is a non-compulsory stage in the country's education system. Over 95% of Spanish children start school at the age of 3, and the enrollment rate of children aged 3 to 5 is close to 100%. The study explores the unique features of early childhood education in Spain, emphasizing its internationalized educational framework, comprehensive educational objectives and content, relatively well-developed welfare system, as well as the emphasis on children's foreign language proficiency and digital literacy, provide valuable insights for the development of early childhood education in other countries.

Keywords: Spain; Early Childhood Education; Characteristics.

1. Introduction

UNESCO highlights that Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is not just for children to prepare to go to primary school; it aims to holistically develop children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical needs, laying a broad and solid foundation for their lifelong learning and well-being. Providing ECCE is not just considered a method to promote equitable and inclusive economic growth, and drive sustainable development, but also is supported by a series of research. Firstly, neuroscience indicates that the early childhood environment significantly influences brain structure. Furthermore, from a human rights perspective, expanding high-quality early childhood education is a fundamental approach to fulfilling the right to education, laying a vital foundation for basic education and lifelong learning. Spain is a social democratic constitutional country, advocating freedom, justice, equality, and political pluralism as the core values in its legal system, and its early childhood education is divided into two stages: the first is nursery education (guardería) for children aged 0-3 years, and the second is kindergarten education (escuela infantil) for children aged 3-6 years. Although education in both stages is non-mandatory and voluntary, public early childhood education in the second stage is free of charge, which provides families with more options and support.

2. Overview of Early Childhood Education in Spain

The 2022 report from the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training of Spain (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, or MEFP) reveals that [1], 2.1 There has been a significant increase in the enrollment rate for the first stage of early childhood education from the academic year 2009-2010 to the academic year 2019-2020. The enrollment rate for children under 1 year old increased by 5.4%, for 1-year-old children it increased by 17.4%, and for 2-year-old children it increased by 18.8%. In the academic year 2019-2020, the enrollment rates for these age groups

reached 13.3%, 43.9% and 63.1% respectively. From 1990 to 2019 in Spain, the enrollment rate of children in the first stage of early childhood education (ages 0 to 3) increased by 120%, rising from 28,631 to nearly 470,000. 2.2 In the second stage of early childhood education, the enrollment rate exceeds 96.0%. Specifically, the enrollment rate for 3-year-old children is 96.1%, and the age-specific enrollment rates in the second stage (96.1% for 3 years old and 98.0% for 5 years old) are higher than those in the first stage (13.3% for under 1 year old and 63.1% for 2 years old). According to a report from the Spanish Statistics Institute (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, or INE) in 2017, the enrollment rate for children aged 3 to 5 in Spain was close to 100%. 2.3 Enrollment rates are equal across genders. In the academic year 2019-2020, as in 2009-2010 and 2014-2015, there were no significant differences in enrollment rates between boys and girls. 2.4 In the academic year 2019-2020, the average duration of early childhood education in Spain was 4.1 years. When examined at the regional level, the Vasca had an average duration of 4.6 years, Madrid is 4.5 years, and Galicia is 4.4 years. This indicates an overall increase of 0.4 years in the duration of early childhood education in Spain. 2.5 In terms of international comparisons, during the academic year 2019-2020, Spain continued to be one of the EU countries with the highest enrollment rates for 3-year-old and 4-year-old children. France, Belgium, Denmark, and Spain had the highest enrollment rates for 3-year-olds, whereas Greece, Croatia, the Slovak Republic, and Romania had the lowest rates.

3. The Characteristics of Early Childhood Education

3.1. Nurturing Multi-talented Future Leaders

3.1.1. Management Model of the Education System

Spain's education system adopts a decentralized management model, where the curriculum for the first stage of early childhood education is determined by the autonomous communities (CCAA), and the curriculum for the second stage is pre-established by the Ministry of Education with specified minimum teaching standards.

3.1.2. Objectives of Early Childhood Education

According to Royal Decree (Real Decreto) No. 95/2022, issued on February 1, 2022, early childhood education aims to facilitate the comprehensive and harmonious development of young children in physical, emotional, sexual, social, cognitive, and artistic aspects. It promotes individual autonomy, fosters the gradual establishment of a positive and balanced self-image, imparts civic values for coexistence, and cultivates their language, mathematics, science, and social skills [2].

3.1.3. Educational Content Areas in Early Childhood Education.

The educational content in early childhood education includes harmonious growth, discovery and exploration of the environment, communication and representation of reality. Moreover, there is an emphasis on developing language communication skills, multilingual proficiency mathematical abilities, and competencies in science, technology, engineering. The curriculum highlights digital literacy, personal, social, and learning skills, civic competencies, creative abilities, cultural awareness, and expressive skills.

3.2. A Well-established Welfare Education System

3.2.1. Equal Opportunity Assurance.

The education system ensures equal opportunities, with a special focus on children with special education needs, guaranteeing their enrollment rates, continuity, and the transition rates. These efforts align with the specific target 4.5 of SDG4 in the “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”: By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations [3].

3.2.2. Financial Support for Education.

The per capita expenditure for students in early childhood education amounts to 5,264 euros, constituting 19.9% of the per capita GDP. The Spanish government supports the financial needs of students by providing grants for children and various types of financial support to ensure their access to basic education. In the academic year 2019-2020, out of the total 1,622,098 children in the early childhood education group 356,154 received financial aid, accounting for 21.96%.

3.2.3. Education Equity Policy.

The Spanish government has implemented a series of programs to achieve fairness and equality in education, such as: the Educational Guidance, Development and Enrichment Program (PROA+); the program of providing individual and family guidance services and support units (UAO) for vulnerable students; the support program for the purchase of textbooks and educational materials; the Inclusive Education Program; and the Emotional Well-Being in Education Program for the promotion of equity in education.

3.2.4. Welfare Support in Different Types of Schools

a. Welfare support in public schools. In Spain, early childhood education in the first stage of public schools is not free, but it is free in the second stage. However, the Spanish government provides financial support and tax break to ensure that families can pay for learning materials and additional services.

b. Welfare support in public-private joint schools. Children in these schools receive the same economic support and families can also be eligible for preferential tax breaks as

public schools.

c. Welfare support in private schools. Private schools have autonomy to establish their own internal regulations. Families can apply for financial assistance to cover their children’s registration fees and other study-related expenses when their children enroll in private schools.

3.3. Emphasizing the Development of Children’s Foreign Language Abilities

3.3.1. High Penetration Rate of Foreign Language

The first foreign language course has been included in the second stage curriculum system of early childhood education, and in the second stage of early childhood education, the proportion of children who have been exposed to a foreign language is very high. In the academic year 2019-2020, 83.3% of children chose English as their first foreign language to learn, 0.5% opted for French, and 0.3% chose other foreign languages. Consequently, a total of 84.1% of children received foreign language education in the second stage of early childhood education.

3.3.2. High Proportion of Foreign Language Instruction.

Based on Spanish regional divisions, in the academic year 2019-2020, 12 autonomous communities and 2 autonomous cities had a foreign language instruction proportion exceeding 90%.

3.3.3. Establishment of Bilingual Programs

The Spanish-English integrated bilingual education program, and the Spanish-Portuguese language and culture course are offered in the second stage of early childhood education in public schools.

3.4. Emphasizing the Development of Children’s Digital Literacy

3.4.1. Stressing the Importance of Digital Literacy

a. Enhancing learning abilities. Cultivating digital literacy helps improve children’s learning abilities, enabling them to better comprehend and apply digital information. b. Adapting to the modern society. Digital literacy is considered a necessary skill for adapting to modern society, which helps children better integrate into the digital environment.

3.4.2. Early Childhood Digital Education Curriculum

a. Clearly positioning digital literacy. The new early childhood education curriculum in Spain clearly identifies digital ability as one of the eight essential key abilities, and specifies in detail the specific skills, foundational knowledge and assessment criteria required to develop it. b. Introduction of digital literacy initiatives. In childhood, digital literacy programs were introduced, including the use of digital media for access to information, communication and creation, and an emphasis on the healthy and responsible use of digital tools. c. Comprehensive application of digital tools. Classroom activities, practical experience, and digital tools in textbooks have been widely applied, aiming to help improve children’s learning motivation, understanding ability, and learning progress.

4. Conclusion

Spain has made significant progress in providing high-quality, free, and high-enrollment early childhood education, further promoting educational equity and the comprehensive development of children. This provides valuable experience for the countries concerned to improve their education

policies, establish a more equitable educational system, and achieve the goal of universal and inclusive early childhood education, to ensure that more children receive quality education at the early educational stage.

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