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Policy Coherence for Early Childhood Care and Education in the UAE: Toward Achieving SDG 4.2 through Strategic Integration and Governance Reform

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**Policy Coherence for Early Childhood Care and Education in the UAE: Toward
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Abstract

This working paper examines the policy development and transformation of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with specific focus on the alignment with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.2. It highlights the country's ambitious efforts to reform ECCE governance through a combination of centralized federal strategies and decentralized local innovations, particularly in the Emirate of Sharjah. Drawing on a mixed-methods research approach that includes quantitative survey data from nursery leaders, semi-structured interviews with policy experts, and an in-depth case study of the Sharjah Private Education Authority (SPEA), the paper explores both structural barriers and emergent opportunities within the ECCE ecosystem. Findings reveal that while the UAE has demonstrated strong political commitment to ECCE, the implementation remains fragmented, especially in areas such as regulatory oversight, inter-agency collaboration, data integration, and equitable funding. A statistically significant correlation was found between multi-sectoral collaboration and perceived policy effectiveness ($\rho = 0.423$, $p < 0.01$). These results suggest that cross-ministerial governance and coherent quality assurance systems are critical for system-level transformation. The paper concludes with five strategic recommendations

including: the creation of a federal ECCE coordination mechanism; the development of a national regulatory and quality assurance framework; investment in workforce development; improved data interoperability; and strengthened public-private partnerships. As global interest grows in early childhood policy transformation, the UAE's hybrid model of balancing national ambition with local innovation, offers insights for high-income, multicultural education systems around the world.

Keywords: Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), UAE education reform, SDG 4.2, multisector collaboration, governance integration, policy transformation, quality assurance, Sharjah, ECCE workforce, education strategy

1.0 Introduction

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is increasingly recognized as one of the most cost-effective investments a nation can make in its long-term economic and social development. Extensive evidence demonstrates that high-quality early childhood programs yield substantial returns in the form of improved educational outcomes, workforce readiness, and economic productivity (Heckman, 2011; OECD, 2020). In this context, the global education policy agenda has placed ECCE at the center of development frameworks, most notably in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.2, which commits countries to ensuring “that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education” by 2030 (United Nations, 2015; UNESCO, 2022).

For high-income countries like the United Arab Emirates (UAE), ECCE is not simply an educational or social policy concern, it is a national economic strategy. Early investment in children's development is now widely understood as a mechanism to support human capital formation, enhance gender equity through improved maternal workforce participation, and

prepare future generations for a globally competitive knowledge economy (Schleicher, 2019; World Bank, 2021). As part of its Vision 2031 and broader national development goals, the UAE has positioned education starting from the early years, as a foundation for building a diversified and sustainable post-oil economy (Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, 2017).

In response to these priorities, the UAE has implemented several forward-looking policy reforms. These include the creation of the Federal Agency for Early Education (FAEE) in 2022, intended to consolidate and oversee early childhood governance at the national level; the integration of ECCE targets within national development strategies; and ongoing efforts to align ECCE services with global standards of quality and inclusion (FAEE, 2022; UAE Government, 2021). However, despite these policy advances, the structure of ECCE governance in the UAE remains fragmented and institutionally complex. Key responsibilities are shared between federal ministries, local authorities (such as ADEK, KHDA and SPEA), and private providers who operate the majority of early learning services across the Emirates.

This fragmentation has led to several implementation challenges. Regulatory standards vary across jurisdictions; quality assurance mechanisms are uneven; and there is limited interoperability of data systems, making it difficult to track children's progress, monitor service delivery, or evaluate outcomes (OECD, 2020; UNICEF, 2019). Furthermore, although ECCE policy touches on multiple sectors, including education, health, and social welfare, there is no consistently enforced framework for cross-sectoral collaboration. This has resulted in policy overlaps, gaps, and missed opportunities for efficiency and impact (UNESCO, 2022).

One of the central challenges in the UAE's current ECCE landscape is the absence of policy coherence which refers to the alignment and integration of policies, systems, and actors across all relevant levels and sectors (Kingdon, 2011; Fullan, 2007). Policy coherence is

essential not only for educational equity but also for resource optimization, cost-effectiveness, and measurable impact on national economic goals. Without a coordinated policy framework, even well-intentioned reforms risk being diluted by redundancy, administrative inefficiencies, and disjointed service delivery (Schmidt & Alasuutari, 2023).

This paper investigates how policy coherence can be strategically achieved in the UAE's ECCE sector through structural integration, streamlined governance, and multi-stakeholder collaboration. By analyzing national policy documents, reviewing international frameworks, (particularly those endorsed by UNESCO, OECD, and UNICEF), and synthesizing research findings from the field, including survey data and interview insights gathered from ECCE leaders and policy actors based in the UAE, this working paper offers an evidence-based critique of current conditions and proposes actionable policy solutions that outline a path for the UAE to move from fragmented innovation to system-level transformation. In doing so, it contributes to the global dialogue on how to build ECCE systems that are equitable, resilient, and future-ready.

In particular, it explores the economic rationale for ECCE system reform in the UAE, arguing that the country's future prosperity depends not only on investment in higher education and advanced technologies, but also on ensuring equitable access to high-quality early learning opportunities that build the foundation for lifelong productivity and innovation (World Bank, 2021; Heckman & Karapakula, 2019).

1.1 Problem Statement and Justification

The fragmented governance and inconsistent policy integration across the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) ecosystem in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) present a significant barrier to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4.2. Despite recent national

reforms, efforts to enhance early childhood services remain challenged by siloed institutional structures, limited cross-sector collaboration, and gaps in monitoring and evaluation systems (UNESCO, 2022a; UAE Government, 2022). The emergence of multiple federal and emirate-level bodies has introduced complexity without ensuring cohesive policy outcomes. This has raised concerns over the efficacy and sustainability of the current ECCE policy framework.

While ECCE is increasingly recognized as vital for holistic child development and national economic resilience, there is limited empirical analysis of how strategic management principles and business administration tools can inform and improve ECCE policy coherence in the UAE (Kaddoura, 2024). The persistent disconnect between educational, health, and social policy stakeholders hinders integrated service delivery and long-term impact.

Moreover, the literature lacks region-specific frameworks for aligning ECCE goals with broader governance reforms, especially in fast-growing economies like the UAE (Sharjah Recommendations, 2023; UNICEF, 2023).

Understanding the extent to which current policy efforts align with the UAE's Vision 2031 and SDG 4.2 is essential. Existing research underscores the need for multisectoral coordination and integrated financing strategies to avoid duplication, fragmentation, and inefficiencies (UNESCO, 2022b). The UAE's policy ambitions are well-articulated, yet their implementation continues to face obstacles due to limited cross-agency collaboration, inconsistent data collection, and underdeveloped quality assurance mechanisms (Federal Authority for Early Education, 2023).

Furthermore, early investments in ECCE have shown to yield long-term economic benefits by improving workforce readiness, social inclusion, and public health outcomes (Heckman, 2011; Barnett & Nores, 2015). Therefore, failure to embed ECCE within a cohesive strategic management framework risks undermining national goals. By addressing these structural

gaps, this study offers timely and evidence-based insights to support UAE policymakers, stakeholders, and development partners in designing more effective, coordinated ECCE systems.

1.2 Goal of the Study

This study aims to assess the role of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policy development in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in relation to achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.2. Specifically, it investigates the influence of multisectoral governance, strategic planning, and stakeholder collaboration on ECCE outcomes within a rapidly evolving educational ecosystem.

The primary objective is to evaluate the extent to which whole-of-government and multi-level coordination mechanisms contribute to the coherence and effectiveness of ECCE systems in Abu Dhabi and across the broader UAE context (UNESCO, 2022; Kaddoura, 2024). In addition, the study examines how principles drawn from strategic management and systems thinking can be applied to address policy fragmentation, governance silos, and implementation gaps that currently hinder the delivery of ECCE services.

By undertaking this analysis, the study seeks to inform public sector leaders, development agencies, and educational policymakers about sustainable frameworks for ECCE system integration. It positions ECCE not only as an educational necessity but also as an economic and social investment capable of enhancing long-term national competitiveness and well-being (Heckman, 2011; UNICEF, 2023).

Ultimately, this working paper aspires to generate actionable insights that support evidence-based policymaking, optimize inter-agency collaboration, and guide the transformation of ECCE systems toward equity, quality, and sustainability. The findings are intended to guide

future national and regional strategies, providing both theoretical and practical contributions to ECCE policy development.

The case of the UAE is both unique and instructive. As a high-income, rapidly modernizing state with strong policy ambitions, the UAE also faces the complexities of a diverse population and a service delivery model that relies heavily on private provision. These characteristics position the UAE as a relevant case study for other Gulf and global contexts seeking to balance centralized planning with local flexibility and private sector engagement.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How do multi-sectoral and intergovernmental collaborations influence ECCE policy effectiveness in the UAE, particularly in relation to achieving SDG 4.2?
2. What are the barriers and enablers to developing an integrated ECCE policy framework in the UAE that aligns with international benchmarks?
3. What evidence-based policy strategies can be proposed to improve ECCE governance, funding, and service delivery through cross-sectoral alignment?

The following sections of this paper will:

1. Review international and national literature on ECCE policy and system transformation.
2. Outline the research methodology used to assess the UAE's ECCE policy landscape.
3. Present key findings from stakeholder data and case analysis; and
4. Offer policy recommendations to enhance integration, quality, accountability, and economic return on investment.

By focusing on policy coherence as both a governance imperative and a strategic investment, this working paper contributes to the growing discourse on how nations can design ECCE systems that are strategically integrated, fiscally sustainable, and globally competitive.

2.0 Literature Review

The literature review in this study, draws upon both published and grey literature selected for their relevance to early childhood care and education (ECCE) policy development, governance, and multisectoral coordination in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Priority is given to authoritative sources from international organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and the World Bank, which offer established frameworks for aligning ECCE policy with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.2. The review also incorporates national reports, policy papers, and empirical studies to provide a contextualized understanding of the UAE’s evolving ECCE landscape.

2.1 Global Policy Frameworks for ECCE

The international policy landscape has undergone a major shift in recent decades, recognizing Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) not only as a rights-based imperative but also as a driver of long-term economic development. The adoption of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.2 by the United Nations marked a formal recognition of the importance of quality early childhood education in ensuring school readiness and lifelong learning outcomes. Specifically, SDG 4.2 aims to “ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education” by 2030 (United Nations, 2015).

Leading multilateral institutions, including UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), have echoed this call, emphasizing that investment in ECCE leads to improved cognitive and non-cognitive development, reduced inequality, and stronger economic performance (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2022; World Bank, 2021). According to Heckman and Karapakula (2019), high-quality early education has a return on investment of up to 13% per annum per child, when accounting for increased earnings, improved health, reduced crime, and lower social spending. For high-income countries like the UAE, these outcomes are critical in building a future-ready, productive population.

Policy frameworks in countries such as Finland and Singapore offer illustrative models of ECCE integration. Finland, for example, delivers ECCE through a publicly funded, nationally coordinated model that aligns education and welfare services within a single governance structure. Its curriculum emphasizes play-based learning, inclusivity, and teacher professionalism, underpinned by comprehensive workforce training and a strong quality assurance system (OECD, 2020). Similarly, Singapore, while operating in a very different socioeconomic context, has institutionalized ECCE through centralized governance via the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA), which coordinates programs across education, health, and social development sectors. This model has successfully expanded access while maintaining quality and equity through outcome-based regulation and targeted investment (World Bank, 2021). The United Kingdom, although characterized by a more decentralized structure, has emphasized regulatory coherence through its Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework, which establishes mandatory learning and development goals for all registered early years providers.

The United Kingdom, although decentralized, has emphasized regulatory coherence through its Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework, which sets mandatory learning and development goals for all registered providers. What these examples share is an emphasis on policy coherence, the deliberate alignment of objectives, implementation tools, and accountability structures across actors and sectors (Schleicher, 2019).

Taken together, these international cases underscore a common insight: fragmented governance leads to inefficiency and inequity, while integrated policy environments produce better outcomes and optimize public spending. ECCE systems that lack coherent regulation, workforce standards, and financing strategies are prone to quality gaps, limited scalability, and underperformance in terms of social return (UNICEF, 2019; UNESCO, 2022).

2.2 ECCE in the UAE: National and Local Policy Landscape

The UAE has taken significant steps toward modernizing its ECCE system in the past decade. Initiatives such as UAE Vision 2021, the Centennial Plan 2071, and most recently UAE Vision 2031 have positioned early education reform as a central priority within the broader national agenda (UAE Government, 2021). These long-term plans are closely connected to overarching goals of economic diversification, social inclusion, and the development of human capital.

A major milestone in the reform of early childhood care and education (ECCE) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was the 2022 establishment of the Federal Agency for Early Education (FAEE). This agency was created to oversee the governance, licensing, curriculum development, and quality assurance of early childhood institutions nationwide. FAEE represents a centralized effort to address the previously uncoordinated approach to ECCE regulation, where responsibility was divided among the Ministry of Education, Ministry of

Health and Prevention, Ministry of Community Development, and local education authorities such as SPEA (Sharjah Private Education Authority) and ADEK (Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge) (FAEE, 2022; OECD, 2020).

Despite this progress, ECCE in the UAE remains predominantly privatized, particularly for children aged 0 to 4. Private providers account for approximately 90 percent of ECCE service delivery, with considerable variation in curriculum design, teacher qualifications, regulatory enforcement, and overall quality across the Emirates (UNICEF, 2019). This variability contributes to a fragmented implementation landscape in which federal policies, though well formulated, are often inconsistently applied.

The case of Sharjah offers a notable counterexample. SPEA has introduced localized instruments for quality assurance, licensing, and inspection that reflect international standards. However, these tools are not currently aligned with a unified federal framework. Interviews with local ECCE leaders indicate that while innovation is encouraged at the Emirate level, the absence of centralized data infrastructure and sustainable funding mechanisms limits the potential for scaling effective practices and achieving national policy coherence. In contrast, the FAEE, in its initial phase of development, has prioritized regulatory clarity and standard setting. Nevertheless, it faces ongoing challenges in integrating decentralized systems and coordinating a diverse landscape of private providers under a unified governance model.

This federal-local tension between centralized oversight and decentralized implementation, is a defining characteristic of the UAE's current ECCE policy architecture. Without mechanisms to ensure vertical coherence (between federal and local levels) and horizontal coherence (across ministries and sectors), the system struggles to translate policy ambition into operational impact (Schmidt & Alasuutari, 2023).

2.3 ECCE Policy Fragmentation and Governance Silos

ECCE in the UAE is marked by a complex governance structure that spans federal, emirate, and private sector levels. This complexity contributes to a high degree of policy fragmentation and misalignment across institutions. Survey data reveal that 53.77% of ECCE stakeholders identified a lack of coordination between federal and local authorities as a major barrier to successful implementation, while 36.79% cited inconsistencies in standards, and 30.19% noted insufficient implementation guidelines.

These findings align with Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes the importance of consistency across institutional environments that influence child development. Without harmonized ECCE standards and procedures, policy delivery becomes uneven, jeopardizing equity and quality across regions.

Moreover, Tett’s (2015) concept of “silo effects” is particularly useful in diagnosing systemic inertia in UAE ECCE governance. The vertical isolation of authorities prevents horizontal integration, resulting in duplicated efforts, conflicting mandates, and limited feedback loops for evidence-based improvement.

2.4 Capacity Building and System Innovation by Design

A central theme in the literature is the urgent need for capacity building through design-led leadership and innovation methodologies. The study highlights how Design Thinking offers a transformative framework for improving ECCE systems by focusing on user experience, iterative problem-solving, and creative strategy development (Razzouk & Shute, 2012).

This is not just a theoretical proposition. The use of design thinking in ECCE, as supported by Trilling and Fadel (2009), underscores the potential of participatory, human-centered

approaches in generating effective and sustainable education reform. These strategies empower ECCE leaders to create learning environments that are dynamic, culturally responsive, and forward-thinking.

Furthermore, the study discusses the role of analytical leadership and performance by design in driving systemic transformation. Decision-making driven by real-time data analytics, combined with collaborative leadership strategies, offers a mechanism to navigate the “wicked problems” of ECCE policymaking.

2.5 Critical Theory and the Politics of ECCE Policymaking

The literature also explores how Critical Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) expose the underlying political, ideological, and power-related factors shaping ECCE policymaking in the UAE. Dallmayr (1980) and Leotti et al. (2021) point to the way language, authority structures, and elite interests often determine which ECCE policies are adopted, how they are framed, and whose voices are included or excluded in the decision-making process.

The UAE’s top-down policy culture, though effective for mobilizing national initiatives, can marginalize local knowledge and civil society input, thereby compromising inclusive, responsive policymaking. This study argues for balancing centralized policy control with localized, stakeholder-driven input, especially in culturally and linguistically diverse settings.

2.6 Policy Labs, Cloud Hubs, and Technological Interventions

Emerging technologies such as policy labs and cloud-based knowledge hubs are increasingly featured in the literature as tools to improve multisectoral collaboration. Canadian and European examples highlight how these platforms provide iterative, participatory spaces for

the co-creation and testing of ECCE policy solutions (Wellstead et al., 2023; Romero-Frías et al., 2023).

In the context of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), such platforms could help bridge the persistent disconnect between data producers, policymakers, and frontline educators, ensuring that policy reform is not only top-down but also grounded in operational realities. The study highlights the potential of these technologies to streamline data integration, support cross-sector collaboration, and facilitate transparent policy monitoring, all of which are critical to achieving the targets set under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.2.

2.7 System Transformation: From Fragmentation to Integration

System Transformation Theory offers a roadmap for transitioning fragmented ECCE systems toward integrated, high-impact models. According to Crowley et al. (2020), achieving lasting ECCE reform requires coordinated action across federal, emirate, and private sector levels, guided by aligned values and shared governance mechanisms.

This view is reinforced by Harris (2010), who emphasizes visionary leadership and inclusive stakeholder participation as prerequisites for system-wide policy coherence. Applying this model to the UAE, this study highlights the strategic role of the Federal Authority for Early Education (FAEE) as a potential anchor for unified ECCE governance, though its implementation power is still developing.

2.8 Emergent Themes and Implications

2.8.1 Governance Fragmentation and Institutional Complexity Affecting ECCE Policy Implementation in the UAE

The literature review underscore the significant role of fragmented governance in shaping ECCE policy outcomes in the UAE. The integration of ECCE policy across federal and emirate levels remains limited due to overlapping mandates, inconsistent terminologies, and lack of clear frameworks. Survey results show that over 50% of stakeholders report inconsistencies in policy directives and regulatory expectations, which hinder implementation at local levels. Semi-structured interviews reinforced this, revealing that local authorities often operate independently, with limited guidance or alignment with federal objectives.

The role of FAEE, while recognized as strategic, was also viewed as still evolving.

Participants noted that FAEE has laid a foundation for multisectoral coordination, but meaningful integration of local and federal initiatives remains a work in progress.

Respondents emphasized that while there is visible engagement, policy coherence is lacking, and fragmented governance slows the realization of SDG 4.2 goals.

Jurisdictional fragmentation and communication barriers emerged as central themes.

Stakeholders described the ECCE policy environment as burdened by unclear role delineations, inconsistent language, and lack of standardized protocols. These challenges are compounded by varying institutional capacities across Emirates, which produce unequal implementation outcomes and regional disparities in service quality.

These insights suggest the urgent need for a centralized policy coordination framework.

Establishing a unified national ECCE strategy that includes all emirates is essential to achieving policy harmonization. Policymakers should consider creating standardized

implementation tools and procedures while reinforcing intergovernmental collaboration.

Addressing fragmentation would significantly improve delivery quality and promote equity across ECCE services in the UAE.

2.8.2 Capacity-Building and Design-led Leadership in ECCE System Transformation in the UAE

The literature review signals that gaps in leadership and workforce development significantly constrain ECCE transformation. Educators and administrators lack access to sustained, structured training, resulting in inconsistent implementation of quality standards. Over one-third of survey respondents identified capacity limitations as a top implementation challenge.

Design Thinking (Brown, 2009; 2019) and systems-based leadership emerged as promising avenues for innovation. Stakeholders highlighted the potential of applying design-led strategies to policy and service delivery. These approaches emphasize user-centered problem-solving, agility, and iterative feedback, allowing ECCE professionals to adapt to dynamic policy environments. Participants noted that where design frameworks were applied—such as in Sharjah—there was greater responsiveness to local needs and improved cross-sectoral alignment.

Leadership capacity, design innovation, and cross-functional teamwork are critical for ECCE systems reform. The study shows that capacity building must go beyond basic skills training, focusing instead on cultivating analytical, creative, and strategic leadership competencies. FAEE's capacity development efforts, though promising, need scaling and embedding within institutional mandates across all Emirates.

Investing in workforce development is essential for enabling ECCE transformation. Training programs should integrate design thinking, leadership development, and multisector collaboration. These must be delivered through scalable models and aligned with national

development goals. ECCE reform will require a skilled and empowered workforce capable of navigating complexity and fostering innovation within policy ecosystems.

2.8.3 Evidence-based Governance Interventions Supporting Multi-sectoral ECCE integration in the UAE?

The literature review highlights that governance inefficiencies are a key barrier to ECCE system transformation. Participants identified limited data integration, weak interagency agreements, and insufficient monitoring as persistent issues. Survey results indicated a significant negative correlation between perceived policy effectiveness and the lack of standardization and coordination, affirming the impact of governance gaps on system outcomes.

However, examples from Sharjah demonstrate the potential of integrated governance approaches. Collaborative bodies and taskforces formed between FAEE and local authorities have supported more coherent policy development, enhanced feedback mechanisms, and increased policy responsiveness. These initiatives, though still emerging, are cited by stakeholders as models of effective multisectoral governance.

The absence of shared digital platforms and standardized data collection tools inhibits policy coordination. Stakeholders called for national dashboards and cloud-based systems to improve real-time tracking and cross-sectoral engagement. The findings also emphasize the need for formalized governance structures to institutionalize coordination efforts.

Policymakers must establish formal intergovernmental mechanisms such as national ECCE councils or inter-ministerial taskforces to drive integration. Investments in data infrastructure and cloud hubs will improve transparency, monitoring, and responsiveness. By institutionalizing collaborative governance, the UAE can ensure cohesive ECCE systems that support equitable outcomes for all children.

2.9 Summary

The literature review suggests that ECCE policy in the UAE is challenged by governance fragmentation, underdeveloped coordination mechanisms, and unequal access to quality services. However, it also identifies transformative opportunities through capacity building, critical reflection, cross-sector collaboration, and technological innovation. This review underpins the study's focus on multisectoral governance, strategic leadership, and system transformation as key levers for ECCE reform in alignment with SDG 4.2. By combining critical theory with applied policy tools like design thinking and cloud hubs, the UAE can transition from fragmented governance toward an integrated, inclusive, and adaptive ECCE ecosystem.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Rationale

This study adopted a convergent mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive assessment of ECCE policy coherence in the United Arab Emirates (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The decision to employ a mixed-methods strategy was grounded in the complexity of the research question, which explores both policy structures and lived experiences of implementation. As ECCE governance involves multiple actors across sectors and levels of government, a singular methodological approach would have been insufficient to capture the nuanced, multi-dimensional nature of the system.

The convergent design allowed for parallel data collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative datasets, which were later synthesized to identify convergence, divergence, and explanatory links. This structure was particularly effective in contextualizing survey results

with real-world narratives from institutional leaders and policymakers. It also supported triangulation of evidence—enhancing both the credibility and validity of the findings (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

3.2 Sampling Strategy

Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling to ensure relevance and representativeness. Inclusion criteria required at least two years of experience in ECCE administration, direct involvement in governance, inspection, or oversight, and geographic diversity across Emirates. The quantitative survey reached 90 respondents, including nursery directors (41%), curriculum coordinators (29%), and senior educators (30%), with geographic representation from Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Ras Al Khaimah, and Fujairah. The demographic profile reflected the sector's gender distribution, with 87% female participation.

The qualitative component consisted of 12 in-depth interviews with representatives from FAEE, SPEA, ADEK, the Ministry of Education, and private ECCE operators. Participants included policy advisors, regulatory leaders, and education consultants. Interviews were conducted via Zoom or in-person, using a semi-structured protocol and lasting between 45–75 minutes.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

Three primary instruments were used. The structured survey included 34 closed-ended items organized across five thematic areas: policy clarity, regulatory oversight, workforce development, inter-agency collaboration, and perceived policy effectiveness. Each item was rated using a 5-point Likert scale. A pilot survey was administered to 10 ECCE leaders, and Cronbach's alpha confirmed strong internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.84$).

The semi-structured interview guide explored themes such as institutional structure, quality assurance, multisector collaboration, workforce challenges, and perceptions of policy coherence. The flexible format allowed for probing based on participants' expertise.

A third component, document analysis, included a review of 17 national and emirate-level policy documents. These ranged from UAE Vision 2021 and 2031 to FAEE founding decrees, licensing regulations, and inspection frameworks. Documents were coded using a six-dimensional matrix covering strategic alignment, legal authority, regulatory consistency, workforce standards, financing, and monitoring.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS v28. Descriptive statistics were calculated, and Spearman's rank correlation was employed to assess relationships among key variables due to the ordinal nature of the responses. A statistically significant correlation was found between inter-agency collaboration and perceived policy coherence ($p = 0.423$, $p < 0.01$).

Qualitative data were coded in NVivo using a two-cycle approach. Open coding identified initial themes, while axial coding synthesized these into broader categories aligned with the research questions. Findings from surveys, interviews, and document reviews were integrated to form a holistic understanding of the ECCE policy environment.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the SBS Institutional Review Board in December 2023. Ethical safeguards included informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymization of personal and institutional identifiers, and secure, encrypted data storage. Sample consent forms and protocols are included in Appendix A.

3.6 Ensuring Rigor and Validity

To strengthen the credibility and reliability of findings, the research employed triangulation through multiple data sources, member checking with interview participants, and documentation of analytic procedures in an audit trail. External reviewers participated in peer debriefing to ensure objectivity and enhance interpretative validity.

3.7 Limitations

Despite its robust methodology, the study faces several limitations. The non-probabilistic sampling limits generalizability, particularly to underrepresented or rural ECCE settings. Reliance on self-reported data introduces potential bias, despite measures taken to ensure anonymity and neutral phrasing. While Sharjah served as a rich case study, other Emirates such as Abu Dhabi and Dubai, despite having significant ECCE systems were not analyzed in equal depth.

Additionally, the study was limited by the absence of longitudinal data on child outcomes and by reliance on documents available in English and Arabic, excluding comparative analysis from other Gulf nations. Nonetheless, the UAE provides a valuable reference point for ECCE reforms in high-income, rapidly modernizing Arab states. These limitations are counterbalanced by the study's triangulated methods, stakeholder diversity, and methodological rigor.

4.0 Case Study: Sharjah Collaboration and FAEE Initiatives

4.1 Context and Background

Sharjah has played a pivotal role in the development and delivery of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policies in the UAE. Its longstanding commitment to education since

1979, and the establishment of the Sharjah Private Education Authority (SPEA) in 2018, position it as a leader in ECCE transformation. Guided by the vision of His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, SPEA has prioritized policy integration, institutional innovation, and the advancement of inclusive education to enhance the quality of early learning environments. This case study investigates the collaboration between SPEA and the Federal Agency for Early Education (FAEE) and examines how Sharjah's local governance model offers a strategic blueprint for ECCE system integration nationwide.

4.2 ECCE Policy Development Process

The policy development process in Sharjah followed a structured, phased approach designed to align local strategies with national goals. The project commenced with a situational analysis to evaluate current strategic directions, followed by the drafting of the *Sharjah Early Years Quality Improvement & Operating Guide*. SPEA conducted education market research and internal assessments to identify areas for system improvement. Policies were then developed and reviewed collaboratively with stakeholders including nursery leaders, teachers, and federal bodies.

A policy task force comprising members from FAEE and SPEA was formed to draft and refine implementation strategies. This task force operated alongside an external advisory group composed of private sector representatives and nursery managers who provided practical feedback. Webinars, stakeholder briefings, and structured feedback mechanisms were used to ensure inclusive consultation and sector-wide alignment.

4.3 Collaborative ECCE Policy Development

The Sharjah initiative reflected a national commitment to ECCE transformation aligned with SDG 4.2. Joint policy-making between FAEE and SPEA included the creation of 28

evidence-based policies covering areas such as teacher qualifications, governance, and inclusion. The collaboration emphasized participatory governance and emphasized systems-level alignment between federal priorities and local implementation strategies.

FAEE's role was pivotal in orchestrating national coordination, while SPEA acted as the liaison between nurseries and policymakers, managing policy roll-out, collecting stakeholder feedback, and overseeing implementation training. Activities included the development of a central communication plan, remote quality assurance webinars, and the creation of evaluation tools and key performance indicators to monitor policy outcomes.

4.4 ECCE System Transformation

SPEA's efforts resulted in a comprehensive transformation of Sharjah's ECCE landscape.

The project was structured into five phases, including:

- Situational Analysis and Visioning (Phase 0): Alignment with national goals.
- Assessment and Benchmarking (Phase 1): Development of quality improvement tools.
- Self-Evaluation and Support (Phase 2): Roll-out of internal performance tools.
- Needs-Based Intervention (Phase 3): Custom development plans for each nursery.
- Capacity Building and Institutional Resilience (Phase 4): Establishment of the Nurseries Principals Council, external reviews, and training programs.

These efforts yielded measurable improvements in institutional performance, stakeholder satisfaction, and alignment with global ECCE quality frameworks.

4.5 Findings and Implications

Findings from the case study reveal that innovative collaboration between FAEE and Sharjah resulted in stronger policy integration and improved system outcomes. Stakeholders

recognized that while FAEE laid the groundwork for national ECCE governance, the success of Sharjah's transformation was due to localized leadership, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive policy-making strategies.

The case study highlights the importance of:

- Participatory policy design to ensure relevance and community ownership.
- Strategic capacity building using design-led frameworks.
- Clear governance roles and standardized protocols to ensure consistent implementation.

Ultimately, the Sharjah case presents a replicable model for other emirates, demonstrating how national objectives can be localized through structured collaboration, robust policy cycles, and targeted system investments.

5.0 Conclusion

The findings from this study underscore the multidimensional and intergovernmental complexity of ECCE policy development in the UAE. Evidence from both the Sharjah case study and stakeholder data highlights the fragmented governance structures, policy inconsistencies, and gaps in cross-sectoral coordination that hinder the effectiveness and equity of early childhood systems. The integration of ECCE policy across federal and local levels, while conceptually prioritized by national frameworks, remains practically constrained by misaligned roles, resource disparities, and limited monitoring capacity.

A critical conclusion of this research is the necessity of centralized coordination in ECCE policy design and implementation. Establishing a central coordinating body, as recommended by stakeholders and supported by evidence, is imperative to unify fragmented efforts,

streamline communication, and enable coherent strategy alignment with SDG 4.2. This would support more equitable service delivery across emirates and prevent duplication of effort.

Leadership development also emerged as a key enabler of effective policy reform. Data from the Sharjah initiative suggest that localized leadership, when supported with capacity-building structures, facilitates stakeholder engagement and policy uptake. Investing in leadership training for ECCE administrators, especially in areas of multisectoral coordination and data-informed decision-making, is essential to overcome institutional resistance and drive systemic change.

The research also confirms the significance of reliable, interoperable data systems for ECCE monitoring. The lack of standardized metrics and real-time evaluation mechanisms impedes the UAE's ability to assess the effectiveness of policy interventions or track progress toward strategic outcomes. Establishing a unified national ECCE data management system will ensure transparency, accountability, and evidence-based policymaking, aligning federal and local efforts toward improved outcomes.

Recommendations further emphasize the importance of embedding equity and cultural responsiveness within policy frameworks. Addressing disparities in access—particularly for children under five, rural communities, and low-income families—requires both legislative reforms and targeted public investment. These must be accompanied by stakeholder inclusion in policy cycles to ensure that solutions are contextually grounded and socially sustainable.

By adopting a whole-of-government approach that includes education, health, and social services, the UAE can strengthen the integration of ECCE services and deliver more holistic child development outcomes. This approach should also reflect the system transformation theory applied in the study, which advocates for inter-agency synergy, equity-centered

reform, and future-oriented governance that adapts to evolving social and technological demands.

Overall, the study concludes that the UAE is positioned to transform its ECCE landscape through strategic governance, inclusive policy frameworks, and scalable innovation. While foundational progress has been made, particularly in Sharjah, achieving national coherence will require strengthened leadership, aligned accountability systems, and continuous investment in professional development, institutional collaboration, and research.

5.1 Recommendations - Actionable Policy Steps

1. Establish a Central ECCE Coordinating Body

The establishment of a national Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) coordinating body, mandated by the Federal Authority for Early Education (FAEE), is critical to address the significant governance fragmentation identified across federal and local levels. This centralized entity must be empowered to align policy directives, coordinate multisectoral stakeholders, standardize implementation tools, and monitor policy outcomes. Findings from this study revealed a lack of communication and duplicated efforts between emirate-level and federal actors, which undermines strategic coherence in ECCE provision. This aligns with global guidance from the Tashkent Declaration, which underscores the necessity of an inter-ministerial body to lead coordinated ECCE governance, particularly through standard-setting, accreditation, and monitoring mechanisms.

2. Standardize ECCE Policy Language and Regulatory Tools

To mitigate inconsistencies across jurisdictions, the creation of a unified ECCE policy lexicon and standardized regulatory tools is essential. Participants in this study highlighted

disparities in policy definitions, enforcement mechanisms, and terminology across Emirates, which result in varied interpretations and hinder equitable service quality. This challenge is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which stresses the importance of harmonized systemic environments to support child development. A nationally endorsed set of ECCE standards, inclusive of procedural guidelines and quality assurance benchmarks, is imperative for promoting consistency and accountability in early learning outcomes.

3. Invest in ECCE Leadership and Workforce Development

Leadership is a critical enabler for ECCE policy reform. This research recommends the launch of a National ECCE Leadership Academy focused on equipping administrators with competencies in systems thinking, stakeholder engagement, and policy implementation. The current workforce displays limited preparedness to manage cross-sectoral initiatives, a finding echoed in the literature on systemic transformation and public sector reform. Strategic investments in leadership and workforce capacity building are fundamental to ensure that ECCE professionals can operate effectively within integrated governance models and are able to sustain change.

4. Create an Integrated National ECCE Data Hub

The lack of reliable and interoperable data was a recurrent theme in both surveys and interviews. Respondents stressed that the absence of a centralized data infrastructure impedes monitoring and limits evidence-based policymaking. To address this, the development of an integrated, cloud-based ECCE data hub is recommended. This system should allow for real-time monitoring, shared access across ministries, and informed decision-making. UNESCO (2022) and the SDG 4.2 roadmap advocate for the strengthening of national Education

Management Information Systems (EMIS) as a foundation for equitable and accountable ECCE governance.

5. Scale Local Innovations Through National Replication

Successful local models, such as Sharjah’s ECCE ecosystem, should be leveraged for nationwide policy learning and replication. These initiatives demonstrated effective stakeholder engagement, policy innovation, and results-based strategies. A national replication strategy is advised, supported by policy laboratories and inter-emirate peer review mechanisms, to test and scale promising practices. This aligns with the Sharjah Recommendations (2023), which emphasized the exchange of innovative policy and financing models across Arab states.

6. Embed Equity and Inclusion in ECCE Financing and Access

Inequitable access to ECCE services—especially among children under five and those from lower-income or migrant families—was a key finding of this research. To close these gaps, targeted subsidies and inclusive financing mechanisms must be introduced. Public-private partnerships can be structured to incentivize service expansion to underserved communities. This recommendation is strongly supported by the Tashkent Declaration, which calls for coordinated public investments tied to inclusion, equity, and innovative financing models.

7. Institutionalize Multisectoral Governance Mechanisms

Given the cross-cutting nature of ECCE, the institutionalization of multisectoral governance bodies is essential. Ministries responsible for education, health, and social development should collaborate through formalized structures such as joint planning committees, pooled budgets, and shared accountability frameworks. The Sharjah case and broader international

literature confirm that multi-stakeholder partnerships are key to overcoming policy fragmentation and delivering integrated child development services.

8. Ensure Culturally Responsive and Contextually Adapted Policy Design

The effectiveness of ECCE reform depends on policies that are culturally grounded and context-specific. The findings emphasized that top-down, imported frameworks often fail to resonate with local realities, leading to poor adoption. Therefore, participatory policy design processes involving parents, educators, and local authorities must be institutionalized. This approach is supported by ecosystem models of systemic transformation and by UNESCO's recommendation to root ECCE reform in local socio-cultural contexts.

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