



Early Childhood Education and Care Systems in the OECD Countries: the Issue of Tradition and Governance^a

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(Published online July 8, 2008)

Topic

Child care (0-5 years)

Introduction

The series of policy analyses carried out by the OECD Education Directorate from 1998-2006 show that the organisation of early childhood systems is extremely varied across the rich countries. Yet, distinctive patterns of governance emerge from this diversity.^{1,2} The following text will briefly describe two traditional approaches to system governance, namely, through integrated (one ministry or agency in charge) or split management. The adoption of one or other approach says much about how early childhood is understood in a country, and the relative value given by governments to policy-making, funding and regulation in this field.

An abridged history

For historical reasons, national policies for the “care” and “education” of young children have developed separately in most countries. To summarise a complex situation that took various forms across different countries: from at least the 18th century, many European cities had established child care institutions for abandoned or endangered young children. These institutions – often religious or charitable in nature – took care of children from poor or dysfunctional families. In the 19th century, a further development took place: the nation states began to establish 'infant schools' for young children prior to their entry into school, e.g. Sweden from 1836, France in 1881.^c The purposes of the two institutions were different: child care was viewed as an exercise in social protection while infant schools were educational in purpose, founded to provide an early education opportunity

^aThe OECD countries are essentially the richer countries in the world. They are 30 in number – situated mainly in Europe but also in North American (Canada, Mexico and the United States) and Asian/Pacific region (Australia, Japan, Korea and New Zealand).

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^c The term 'infant school' is a misnomer. Care services, in fact, catered for infants or babies (from the Latin: *infans*, a child without speech) as well as for older children, while the 'infant school' typically enrolled young children 4-6 years.

for the children of the more affluent classes and/or to introduce the official national language and culture to children speaking a second language or *patois*. With the emergence of the modern state and the extension of its responsibility for young children, care services were assigned to health or social ministries, and the 'infant' or junior schools to ministries of public instruction or education. This splitting of responsibility has remained the *de facto* governance situation in many of the OECD countries.

Unlike most other countries, the Nordic countries further developed their early childhood systems in the immediate post-Second World War period. From the 1950s, a growing number of women began to access the labour market in these countries, with in consequence, a growing demand for child care services. As both infant schools and the original social care services were administered at local level, local administrations – for the sake of efficiency - combined these services, generally under the responsibility of social affairs. A new integrated sector emerged, administered at national level by the ministry of social affairs. A parallel development also took place in the same period in the Soviet zone of influence, with countries integrating children's services, often under the ministry of education. More recently, other countries have followed suit. Influenced by a growing concern to give form to the notion of lifelong learning, Iceland (1976), New Zealand (1989), Spain (1990), Slovenia (1993), Sweden (1996), England and Scotland (1998), Norway (2005) and Netherlands (2007) have brought early services into the ambit of education, with more or less success depending on the country.

Consequences of split system governance

In split systems, responsibility for services is divided among several ministries. This fragmentation of responsibility seems to be based more on traditional divisions of government than on the actual needs of families and young children. In the US, for example, the US General Accounting Office noted that in 1999, 69 federal programs provided or supported education and care for children under 5. Nine different federal agencies and departments administered these programs, though most were operated by the US Department of Health and Human Services and the US Department of Education.^{d,3} In general, across the OECD countries, differences of auspices and conceptualisation are translated into a two-tier organisation of services: 'child care' for the younger children followed by 'pre-primary education' for three, four or five-year-olds. The result is often a fragmentation of services and a lack of coherence for children and families. Care and early education institutions differ greatly in their funding requirements, operational procedures, regulatory frameworks, staff-training and qualifications.¹

^dIn the US, a strong move toward the integration of services can be seen during the last decade. In May 2004, Georgia created an integrated governmental Department of Early Care and Learning to take in charge more effectively the State's varied early childhood services. Similarly, in April 2005, the state of Massachusetts merged the Department of Education's Office of School Readiness with the Massachusetts' Office of Child Care Services into a consolidated office for early education and care. In 2006, Washington State brought together, under a newly created Department of Early Learning, several ECEC services, including Head Start, child care, state-funded preschool, and a small early reading program. In addition, several integrated governance structures (e.g. governors' cabinets for children, public/private governance boards, inter-agency councils) have emerged to make ECEC policy and oversee its implementation.⁴

Child care services, in particular, suffer from this division of auspices. They tend to be less developed in terms of coverage, and in some countries, the child care field is a patchwork of private providers and individual family day carers. Affordability to parents is often an issue, and as a result, low-income groups are often excluded from access to centre-based services, unless government financed targeted services are available. Frequently, staff – almost exclusively female – have low educational qualifications and wages, and may not be given employment contracts or insurance. In the area of private provision, a current trend is for smaller services to be bought up by larger commercial companies, some of which lobby for greater deregulation of the field.

A further fragmentation of child care services can be seen under governments that see early care as a private responsibility for parents, and not as a public responsibility. This has often been the approach in the liberal market economies (of the countries reviewed by the OECD: Australia, Canada, Ireland, Korea, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States). These countries generally acknowledge governmental responsibility for pre-school education from the ages of 3-5 (depending on the country), in particular for children from disadvantaged or ‘at-risk’ backgrounds. In contrast, care arrangements for children under 3 are considered to be a parental responsibility, and (depending on income, and/or the need to stimulate the labour market participation of women) parents may or may not be assisted to purchase child care in the market place.^c

In order to enhance the integration of early childhood services for children from birth to six years, the OECD *Starting Strong* reviews made the following suggestions to governments concerned to provide a more coherent system of early childhood services to working parents:

- To establish a co-ordinated policy framework for young children at centralised and decentralised levels
- To nominate a lead ministry for young children that would be responsible for overall policy, while working in co-operation with other departments and sectors
- To adopt a collaborative and participatory approach to reform
- To forge strong links across services, professionals, and parents in each community

Integrated services

Countries that integrate their services under one ministry or agency generally achieve more co-ordinated and goal-oriented services of a higher quality. In the Nordic countries, for example, municipal authorities ensure delivery of integrated services either directly or through contracted providers, who must follow public regulations and quality requirements. Highly subsidised services are widely available to parents. Pedagogues, educated to tertiary level, staff the early childhood centres, and enjoy employment

^cIt should be noted that different degrees of public involvement with families and young children exist in the liberal economies. For example, in the UK, although private provision and market competition in the child care sector have been maintained, government strongly subsidises access to child care for young children from working families, and plans to regulate the quality of this care as rigorously as public sector provision.

contracts and remuneration roughly equivalent to primary school teachers. Services in the Nordic countries have so far avoided the weaknesses of the public early education systems of the liberal economies, which, because of their close connection with primary education, often practice very inappropriate child-staff ratios and are unavailable on a full-day, all-year basis. Thus, the Nordic countries that have transferred responsibility for early childhood services to education ministries — as was the case with Norway (2005) and Sweden (1996) — continue to practise low child:staff ratios that favour individual attention from pedagogues and the agency of the child.

Conclusion

The type of governance structure in place strongly influences the coverage and quality of early childhood services within a country. Split systems often mean a weakly regulated child care sector and a “junior school” approach to early education. In the child care sector, the quality of the learning environment is often poor because of weak state guidance and low staff qualifications and work conditions. In parallel, in split systems, the early education sector may be directed toward academic goals and be characterised by high child:staff ratios and a neglect of the child's natural learning strategies. Even in countries in which strong efforts are being made to improve quality in both the child care and early education systems, for example, in Belgium Flanders, the legacy of the past is difficult to overcome. The integrated systems of the Nordic countries seem to offer a more balanced approach to care and education. These countries provide affordable and comprehensive networks for all families needing services, and their approach to child development and learning is respectful of the young child's age, strengths and needs.

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To cite this document:

Bennett J. Early childhood education and care systems in the OECD countries: the issue of tradition and governance. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, Boivin M, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2008:1-5. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/BennettANGxp.pdf>. Accessed [insert date].

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This article is funded by the Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development and the Canadian Council on Learning's Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Centre.

