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Early Childhood Education and Care Systems: Issue of Tradition and Governance

[a]John Bennett, MEd, PhD

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Introduction

The series of policy analyses carried out by the OECD Education Directorate from 1998-2006 show that the organization 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 of early childhood institutions

For historical reasons, national policies for the “care” and “education” of young children have developed separately in most countries. To summarize a complex situation that took various forms across different countries, several European cities had established child care institutions for abandoned or endangered young children as early as the 15th century. In the 19th century, a further development took place: the nation states began to establish 'infant schools' for young

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children prior to their entry into school, e.g. Sweden from 1836, France in 1881. The purposes of the two institutions were quite different: child care institutions focused on child survival and social protection while infant schools were educational in purpose. Early education nurseries or preschools were founded to provide an early education opportunity 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 a 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 labor 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, generally 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 U.S., for example, the U.S. General Accounting Office noted that in 1999, 69 federal programs provided or supported education and care for children. Nine different federal agencies and departments administered these programs, though most were operated by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education.[3] In general, across the OECD countries, the

separation of management has been translated into a two-tier organization 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.

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 may be 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 years (only at five years in some countries), in particular for children from disadvantaged or ‘at-risk’ backgrounds. By 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 labor market participation of women) parents may or may not be assisted to purchase child care in the market place.

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 subsidized services are widely available to parents. Pedagogues, educated to tertiary level, staff the early childhood centers, and enjoy employment 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. By contrast, 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 open all year round on a full-day basis and practice low child:staff ratios that favor both individual attention from pedagogues and the agency of the child.

Recent Research Results

A recent study, Caring and Learning Together[4] examined five countries - Brazil, Jamaica, New Zealand, Slovenia, and Sweden - that have integrated their childcare and early education administrations. The study suggests that the consequences of integration within education have been generally very positive. Access and enrolments increased significantly for all children but especially for the age group 1-3 years. The status, recruitment levels, training and employment conditions of staff improved significantly. In other respects such as curriculum development or pedagogical work, results were also very positive. For example, in New Zealand, the link with education inspired the creation of the Te Whariki curriculum and a specific learning evaluation instrument called Learning Stories.[5] The New Zealand Report written for the study states: “If there had not been prior integration of services under Education, it is unlikely that New Zealand would have had a curriculum as innovative and as widely inclusive of early childhood education services as Te Whāriki...” Even more striking has been the transformation of the New Zealand early childhood workforce: higher qualifications for staff and improvements in pay supported by the creation in 1994 of a combined union for early childhood and primary school teachers. Since integration within education, “there has been continued growth in the number of students in, and graduates from, early childhood teacher education colleges.”[6]

Conclusions

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 investment and low staff qualifications and work conditions. In parallel, in split systems, the early education sector may be directed toward academic goals and be characterized 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.

Implications

ECCE services can be integrated successfully within a number of policy domains, as long as young children are an important focus of the ministry in charge. In situations of severe poverty, good reasons are present to continue a health/well being approach to children 0-3 years and their families, hoping that the huge opportunity for cognitive stimulation and language development in this period will not be neglected. However, if the benefits sought from integration include: (1) universal entitlement, (2) affordable access, (3) a unified and well educated workforce, (4) enhancing learning for all ages, and (5) smoother transitions for young children, then integration of care services within the education sector would seem more likely to deliver such benefits

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Note:

[a] Dr. John Bennett was project leader of the OECD early childhood reviews of early childhood policy. He is also co-author of the two Starting Strong volumes (OECD, 2001, 2006). At present, he is a Visiting Fellow at the Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, London, England.