

ECEC Policies in European Countries

**John Bennett,
M.Ed., Ph.D.**

Education & Training Division,
OECD, Paris, France

Introduction

For the sake of clarity, I would like to divide this communication into five parts:

- 1) First, to limit our field of discussion and channel your interest toward the recent OECD 1998-2001 analysis of cross-national policy in the early education and care (ECEC) field, in 12 OECD countries (including 10 European);
- 2) Second, to inform you why a comparative analysis of European policies may have some importance for policy-makers in Spain and further afield;
- 3) Third, to tell you how the major policy issues in the ECEC were identified for the review;
- 4) Fourth, to outline, very briefly, some of the insights that the review revealed in dealing with these issues from a comparative perspective;
- 5) Finally, to introduce you to *Starting Strong*, the comparative analysis of ECEC policy, published by the OECD, which provides all the information included in this communication, and outlines eight key elements for successful policy in the early childhood field.

I. ECEC policy in European countries: defining our field of discussion.

You will agree with me that the topic - *ECEC policy in European countries* - is extremely wide. In order to limit the topic in a useful way, I would propose to channel our interest toward the policy issues and results that have been identified in a three-year research project on ECEC policy in 12 OECD countries, 10 of which were European. In 1998, when I joined the Education and Training division at the OECD to assist with this project, policy attention to early childhood education and care policy (ECEC) in OECD countries was already intense. Not only was the

provision of care and education for young children seen as a necessary response by governments toward ensuring the equal access of women to the labour market, but in addition, early development was increasingly seen as the foundation of lifelong learning. In addition, when sustained by effective fiscal, social and employment measures in support of parents and communities, governments saw ECEC as providing a fair start in life for all children and as contributing to social integration.

In March 1998, the *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy* was launched under the auspices of the Education Committee of the OECD. Twelve countries volunteered to participate in the review: Australia, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States.

II. Why a cross-national review of policies across countries can be useful

A cross-national review of policies can be useful to policy makers in all our countries for a number of reasons. If we know the best of what is being thought and practised in the other European countries in the early childhood field, it allows an acknowledged critical standard to be applied to practice in our own countries. There is little reason, for example, for countries in the OECD group to consider that unsupervised care for infants and toddlers should be the norm, when several countries show that high quality care can be guaranteed at little extra cost.

Comparisons of the early childhood systems can also reveal different understandings and constructions of childhood in our countries, about the role of women in our societies, about the democratic participation of parents in institutions, and even about the balance to be maintained between strong economic performance and social policies.

The Nordic societies, for example, have clear views about childhood, gender equality and the responsibility of the state to support the education of citizens from the cradle to the grave. Their early childhood services are focussed on child development. Access to quality services is guaranteed by law, and participation of parents is encouraged, not least in the area of infant care, where parental leave is remunerated to a level that allows real parental choice.

Countries that take a formal education approach to ECEC, e.g. the Latin language countries, may have good services in place for children from three or four-years of age, but after-school care and services for the younger children are still relatively under-developed. With the exception of some countries and regions

in this group, there is still a presumption at the political level that women will opt out of the labour market for a number of years to care for the children.

Yet other countries, e.g. the Netherlands and the UK, take an employment-oriented, social policy approach that emphasises “family-friendly” policies that can help parents balance work and family responsibilities. Part-time work patterns, especially for women, are a feature, with quality early education and care for the younger children still relatively under-developed or not easily available in all social milieus.

Already, with these few example, one can understand why comparative studies of early childhood organisation will become increasingly important for European countries, as our economies and labour markets converge and become one. Early childhood interest groups will do well to study the example of societies that have successful economies and yet maintain universal access for all their children to high-quality early childhood services. Governments, and ideally Brussels, need reliable information about the collateral impacts of economic, labour market, social and employment policies on young children and parents, and convincing arguments as to why publicly supported, high quality early childhood services are necessary.

III. The identification of seven major ECEC policy issues across the European countries

The first phase of identifying the major policy issues consisted of an in-depth literature review, and the commissioning of several papers by leading early childhood experts. The results of this exercise were communicated to the participating countries. Prior then to the actual review process, the countries had been consulted and reached agreement with the OECD concerning the framework, scope and process of the review. Seven major policy issues for investigation had been co-constructed together, viz.

1. Expanding provision of ECEC services toward universal access
2. Raising the quality of provision
3. Promoting coherence and co-ordination of policy and services
4. Exploring strategies to ensure adequate investment in the system
5. Improving staff training and work conditions
6. Developing appropriate pedagogical frameworks for young children

7. Engaging parents, families and communities

Between 1998 and 2000, OECD review teams were constituted and conducted visits to the 12 participating countries. With the aid of ministries and the major actors in ECEC in each country, each review team aimed to take a broad, holistic approach that would consider how governments, ECEC services, staff, families and communities could support children's early development and education. In each country, it studied policy, programmes and provision for children from birth to compulsory school age, including the transition period from ECEC to primary schooling. Consideration was given to the roles of families, communities and other environmental influences on children's early learning and development. In particular, concerns about *quality*, *access* and *equity* were investigated with an emphasis on policy development in the following areas: governance, regulations, staffing, programme content and implementation, family engagement and support, funding and financing. The goal of the review was to provide cross-national information to improve policy-making and planning in early childhood education and care in all OECD countries. Information on the visits and several reports from the review can be viewed on the project web site: <http://www.oecd.org/els/education/ecec>.

IV. What did the Review reveal about the major policy issues?

1. Expanding provision toward universal access: First, improving access is a policy priority in all countries. Increasingly, countries are expanding provision toward *universal* access – provision that is available to all children *whose parents wish for them to participate*. In several countries access to ECEC is a legal right – from the age of 1 in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, from age 2.5 in Belgium, from age 3 in Italy, and from age 4 in the Netherlands and the UK. The trend is toward coverage of all three- to six-year-olds in order to give children at least two years of *free* publicly-funded provision before they begin compulsory school. For children under three, the situation is different. Countries have made efforts to expand provision, but current levels of supply do not meet demand, and there is large regional variation in access and quality. All countries, except Australia and the US, job-protected paid parental leave arrangements provide an alternative to organised infant provision. Countries are also striving for *equitable* access, that is quality, affordable ECEC that meets the diverse needs of children and families (e.g., ethnic minority, special needs) in different communities (rural, urban, etc.).

2. Raising the quality of provision: Raising the quality of provision is also a high policy priority in OECD countries. Definitions of quality differ considerably among stakeholder groups and across countries. Yet, most countries focus on similar structural aspects of quality for pre-schools (e.g., staff-child ratios, group size, facility conditions, staff training). While national regulations are important, there is

a trend toward participatory approaches that engage staff, parents, and children in co-constructing the program aims and objectives at local level. In terms of quality assurance, there has been an emphasis on self-evaluation approaches that promote ongoing reflection and improvement of practice. Four major quality concerns emerged during the review: (1) fragmented policy and provision in some countries; (2) low status and training of staff outside the education system; (3) lower standards of provision for children under three; and (4) poor quality of services for children from low-income families.

3. Promoting coherence and co-ordination of policy and services: Third, coherence and co-ordination. In most countries, policies for 'care' and 'education' have developed separately, under different administrative auspices, with different systems of governance, funding streams, and training for staff. In others, care and education have been integrated conceptually and in practice. For example, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and the UK have unified administrative responsibility into one national department. Across countries, a more holistic approach is gaining ground. Many countries have adopted mechanisms such as inter-agency councils to increase co-ordination for children across departments and sectors. At the local level, the trend toward decentralisation has led to the diversification of provision, and in some cases, inequities in supply and quality. On the other hand, this increased flexibility has encouraged many communities to integrate health, family support, and educational services to meet the needs of children and families comprehensively (e.g., Sure Start, EEC). In some countries, staff with different professional backgrounds are working together in teams. A similar trend is toward closer co-operation between ECEC and the educational sector to facilitate children's transition to school.

4. Ensuring adequate investment in the system: Adequate funding is essential to ensuring that all children have equitable access to quality ECEC. While co-ordinated financial data are limited, it seems that public investment has increased greatly in some countries, particularly those starting from a low base (e.g., the Netherlands, Portugal, the UK). In almost all the 12 countries, governments now pay the largest share of costs, with parent fees covering about 30%. In Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, UK, pre-school is free. Direct provision through public services and schools makes up the bulk of government assistance in most countries. Even when the share of private providers is large, as in Australia, the Netherlands, and the UK, a high percentage of services receive direct or indirect public funding. Yet, cost remains a barrier to equitable access, particularly in countries where a significant burden falls on parents. This suggests that regardless of the financing strategy adopted, substantial *public* investment is necessary for the development of an *equitable* co-ordinated *system* of quality private and public provision, supported by an infrastructure for training, planning, and quality assurance.

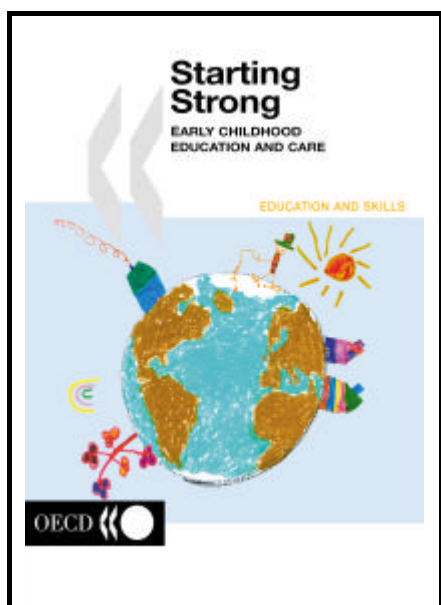
5. Improving staff training and work conditions: There is a trend toward at least a three-year tertiary degree for ECEC staff with the main responsibility for pre-school children. Belgium, Czech Republic, Italy, and Portugal require a high degree of specialisation to work in early childhood, while the Nordic countries take a broader approach and train staff to work with children from birth to at least seven in a range of social and educational settings. Australia, the Netherlands, UK and the US train early years and primary teachers together. Despite these different approaches, there are common training gaps in the following areas: work with parents, work with infants and toddlers, multi-cultural and special education, and research and evaluation. In terms of working conditions, low pay, status, poor working conditions, limited access to in-service training and limited career mobility are a concern, particularly for staff working outside the education system. As ECEC provision expands, recruitment and retention of quality staff, especially men, has become another major challenge.

6. Developing appropriate pedagogical frameworks for young children: Most countries have developed national pedagogical frameworks which state both general objectives and specific aims for children. These frameworks may cover pre-school provision (Belgium, Czech Republic, Finland, Italy, Portugal, UK) or all provision for children under six (Norway, Sweden). There is a trend toward frameworks which cover a broad age span (e.g., birth to 18) and diverse forms of settings (e.g., centres, FDC, etc.). These frameworks tend to focus broadly on children's holistic development and well-being, rather than on narrow literacy and numeracy objectives and stress the importance of learning through play. We have learned that flexible curricula developed in co-operation with staff, parents, and children allow practitioners to experiment with different methodological and pedagogical approaches and adapt goals to local needs and circumstances. Yet, the development of a framework is not enough. Ensuring the proper use of frameworks in early childhood settings requires supporting staff through in-service training and pedagogical guidance and favourable structural conditions (ratios, group size).

7. Engaging parents, families and communities: The review has highlighted four reasons for engaging parents, families, and communities in ECEC: (1) to build on parents' knowledge about their children; (2) to promote positive attitudes and behaviour toward children's learning; (3) to provide parents with information and referrals to other services; and (4) to support parent and community empowerment. Patterns of engagement vary greatly within and across countries from marginal engagement to full participatory engagement. Examples of full participatory engagement are found in Denmark where parents often constitute a majority on kindergarten councils or, in the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the UK in parent-run playgroups. In the US, Head Start Committees of parents and community representatives ensure that there are strong ties with the local community. We have learned that the main challenges to parental engagement are cultural, attitudinal, linguistic differences between parents and staff, and

logistical barriers, such as time and transportation. These barriers seem to particularly affect parents from lower socio-economic and educational backgrounds. For this reason, it is important for staff to continuously strive to engage parents in ways appropriate to their needs, strengths, interests, and availability.

V. Starting Strong, the comparative analysis of ECEC policy, published by the OECD



In June 2001, **Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care**, a comparative analysis of ECEC policies, was published by the OECD. It is a complete report on twelve countries that contains not only a major text on policy issues common to all twelve participating countries, but many data tables and individual country profiles in the annexes. Copies of the publication, (213 pages, OECD 2001) are available from

Publications, OECD Paris Centre,
2, rue André-Pascal,
75775 Paris, Cedex 16, France

or through the OECD online bookshop

<<http://electrade.gfi.fr/cgi-bin/OECDBookShop.storefront>>.

An Executive Summary of the publication can be accessed freely from the OECD website: <http://www.oecd.org/els/education/ecec/>. In fact, it is possible to consult on line, the entire text in PDF form.

In addition, the WAECE (World Association of Early Childhood Educators) has kindly translated the Executive Summary and Chapter 4 (Policy Lessons from the Thematic Review) into Spanish. The Spanish texts can be consulted on the WAECE website: <http://waece.com/>