Early development and learning in Europe: strengths and challenges

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Montreal, 5 June, 2012
Europe: strengths and challenges

The OECD Starting Strong evaluations

From 1998-2004, twenty countries invited OECD teams to review their services

- Australia
- Austria
- Belgium Flanders
- Belgium France
- Canada
- Czech Republic
- Denmark
- Finland
- France
- Germany
- Hungary
- Ireland
- Italy
- Korea
- Mexico
- Netherlands
- Norway
- Portugal
- Sweden
- United Kingdom
- United States

Montreal, 5-6 June, 2012
European Strengths
National access levels do not tell the full story. Differences in provincial access but above all, high quality in services is also necessary. How many hours daily and weekly do the services provide? Are they of good quality? Are they affordable? What is the educational level of the teachers? Are teachers certified in early childhood education? What are the child:staff ratios…
Where access **and** quality are concerned, the Nordic countries tick almost all the boxes...

- Probably, the best early childhood services in the world exist in these countries.
- The number of children born in poverty has been impressively reduced – through services and allowances – to well below 10%. Child health figures are also excellent: low rates of IM; fewer children with disabilities; high scores for child well-being; societies take seriously the CRC...
- Access rates of children and their entitlement to licensed, affordable childcare services are much higher than in most other countries.
- At the same time, **real** choice is offered to parents to be with their children: Sweden – paid parental leave to 15 months; possibility for parents to work shorter hours while children are young, e.g. parents in Norway have a right to part-time work to care for children, until children are 10 years old.
- Pre-school curricula in these countries are noted for their holistic approach to children and to their attention to democracy (John Dewey)
An extract from the Swedish curriculum

- Democracy forms the foundation of the pre-school. For this reason all pre-school activity should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values... An important task of the pre-school is to establish and help children acquire the values on which our society is based. The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between the genders as well as solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are all values that the school shall actively promote in its work with children.

- The pre-school should take into account and develop children’s ability to take responsibility and manage their social life in society so that solidarity and tolerance are established at an early stage. The pre-school should encourage and strengthen the child’s compassion and empathy for others. All activities should be characterised by care for the individual and aim at developing a sense of empathy and consideration for others, as well as openness and respect for the differences in the way people think and live.
Another positive aspect is new leadership by the European Commission

1. **The Barcelona targets**: To ensure by 2010 that at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age should access provision.

2. **An ECEC policy unit has been created within EACEA**, which issued a Communication (2011): *Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow*, Brussels, Author.

3. **A new OMC group for early childhood has been created**

4. **The Eurydice Network**: country overviews, data, information, analyses and publications on all aspects of European education systems and policies

5. **EUROSTAT data collections**, e.g. on child poverty

6. **Research publications from the Commission**


   EACEA (2009) *ECEC in Europe: tackling social and cultural inequalities*, Brussels, Author

   EACEA/NESSE Network (2009) *ECEC: Key lessons from research for policy makers*, Brussels, Author

   DG EAC *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care*, Brussels, Author


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But many challenges...
1. Tradition
The 19th – early 20th century heritage, which has led to split ECEC systems

- The charity-hygiene movement during the industrial revolution. The churches and the wealthier middle classes were concerned that:
  - Many poorer women had begun to work in the factories, leaving their children in grandparent care or in the streets – growing delinquency, child accidents, mistreatment of children (Charles Dickens)
  - Unhealthy living conditions, lack of professional birth assistance … led to extremely high rates of infant mortality…
  - These concerns led to the founding of child shelters, asylums, orphanages… Childcare services were founded, focussing on hygiene and the education (moralisation) of working class mothers.

- At the same time, middle-class parents saw the advantages of an early start in education and established morning-time, early education centres (Froebel, Montessori…)
- With the expansion of state power, social welfare or health ministries took over childcare services, while education ministries incorporated early education… The influence of colonial mono-culturalism…
Main models of (accredited and subsidised) ECEC provision according to the age of children, 2006/07

Model A: Unitary settings
12-18 months to 6-7 years

Model B: Split settings
Under 3 years
Over 3 years

Mix A + B

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The negative effects of split systems

- Split systems duplicate administrations, create ‘turf’ boundaries and make it difficult to have comprehensive services for disadvantaged children.

- Split systems tend not to have a holistic view of the child.

- Split systems tend not to have entitlements for children, at least not before entry into formal early education. In turn, this reinforces access inequalities.

- Split systems weaken considerably early childhood pedagogical research and training.

- Split systems weaken considerably the bargaining power of early childhood personnel, leading in turn to inferior working conditions and qualifications for, in particular, childcare workers and child-minders.

The Nordic countries have unified their ECEC systems. Now, ALL services are or will be managed by education.
2. Child Poverty
What are the main predictors (statistically) of the child’s education outcomes? The answer from PISA and other data-based research is clear:

- **For successful outcomes, an acceptable socio-economic status and parental guidance (what parents do) provide a good educational start (home, kindergarten, primary school...).**

- **In contrast, educational risk is created by widespread child poverty and the concentration of poverty in certain neighbourhood services and schools undermines children and education systems.**

Ed Zigler, one of the founders of Head Start, wrote some years ago (2003) and article entitled: *Forty years of believing in magic is enough!* In it, he asks: “Is there a magic potion that will push poor children into the ranks of the middle class?” He answers without ambiguity:

- **Only if the potion contains health care, childcare, good housing, sufficient income for every family, child rearing environments free of drugs and violence, support for parents in all their roles, and equal education for all students in school. Without these necessities, only magic will make that happen.**
Poverty rates for children and the total population, 2008

Although EC services can lessen the negative effects of poverty, they cannot substantially address issues of structural poverty.
Public spending on family benefits in cash, services and tax measures, in per cent of GDP, 2007

In this figure, public spending concerns only public support that is exclusively for families (e.g. child payments and allowances, parental leave benefits and childcare support). Spending recorded in other social policy areas as health and housing support also assists families but not exclusively, and is not included here.
Access generally depends on socio-economic background

Use of childcare (0-3 years) by different groups in Flanders

- All children, 55.7%
- One-parent families, 48.0%
- Low income (Belgian), 21.7%
- Ethnic minority, 12.7%
The accession of the CEE countries has changed the European access and quality profile

- Many of the new accession countries are characterised by:
  - Large rural populations, often living in severe poverty
  - Ineffective local governments
  - Very low 0-3 enrolments
  - Low 3-6 enrolments in rural regions
  - Relatively low investments in ECEC

- There remain important access challenges in all the new countries for all children 0-3 years and in some countries for children 3-6 years (Romania 82%; Slovakia 79%; Bulgaria 78%, Lithuania 77%, Poland 67.5%)

- Important quality challenges: poor buildings & learning environments, many non-qualified staff, little inspection, investment poorly spent...

- Questions of equity, especially for Roma children
The situation of Roma families and children in Serbia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SERBIA</th>
<th>Majority</th>
<th>Roma</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Functionally illiterate (15 +)</td>
<td>Less than 4%</td>
<td>c. 80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not in formal employment</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>70-80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households in severe poverty – less than 8,883 dinars per month</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>55.5% (WB 60.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children in extreme poverty</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>57.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant mortality rate</td>
<td>7 infants per 1000</td>
<td>25 infants per 1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life expectancy</td>
<td>74 years</td>
<td>c. 45 years (women 48 yrs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education enrolments</td>
<td>c. 15%</td>
<td>m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Nursery (- 3 years)</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
<td>m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Kindergarten (to 5 years)</td>
<td>88% (OSI)</td>
<td>45% (OSI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• PPP year</td>
<td>c.60%</td>
<td>31% of all pupils (2008/9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Special school or class</td>
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In every country, extreme poverty means culturally impoverished home environments.

It is estimated that 40% of Roma children suffer from severe malnutrition. Severe poverty undermines health and prevents adequate achievement in school.
3. Economism
Economism

Economism is a term used to describe economic reductionism, that is the narrowing of all social facts to their economic dimensions.

- In education, this can lead to tying curriculum and content very tightly to immediate economic interests, to what is useful for the economy. In the early childhood field, economism can lead to an unbalanced attention to early literacy and numeracy and the neglect of the other developmental capacities and needs of children.

- Many examples from politicians and governments:
  
  *We live in a world in which our countries will only survive if we have literate and highly educated populations. There will not be room in our economies for anyone else – particularly as we face in the future enormous competition from India and China. So, young children have to be made literate as soon as possible.*

- This type of reasoning is narrow and xenophobic if applied to the early childhood period. It leaves aside the well-being of our own children and also the fact that we must strive to instil in children respect for other people. In all countries, there are many enlightened people who wish to trade, invest abroad and live in harmony with others.
There is also a time for childhood

- Young children need fun, freedom, their friends and a sense of belonging not only to their families but to their peers and classmates.
- They live in the present as they have so many urgent tasks to achieve right now: to make meaning of the family and world in which they live; to achieve a personal identity (their gender identity, their place in the family, in their peer group, as part of a community, as part of nature...). They need to explore their environment, to experiment...
- Adults have the responsibility to prepare them for the future and to leave them a better world.
What world are young children likely to encounter?

- One in which there is significant population growth and depleted natural resources (the issue of sustainability)?
- One in which the natural environment is being exploited abusively or invaded by urban sprawl?
- One in which it becomes difficult to speak of social justice and the need to redistribute wealth through taxation?
- One in which citizens comply and seek individual advantage rather than working together for necessary change?
- One in which sectarianism and dangerous nationalisms abound, leading to contempt for other groups and peoples?
- One in which economic and political colonisation continues, in which war and regime change are taken for granted by Western powers as long as it happens in far-away places in which Western populations are not personally involved.
How should we prepare children for the future?

- Children’s learning is a core goal of early childhood services, but within a context that ensures the child’s well-being, socio-emotional development and motivation to learn.
- The following five pedagogical principles, seem to support the child’s motivation to learn and contribute to their personal development:
  - To encourage parental responsibility for the development and learning of their children.
  - To respect the child’s natural learning strategies, that is: investigation of matters important for the child, meaning-making, movement and play (Sweden).
  - In the early childhood centre, to have a balanced curriculum: Learning to be; learning to do; learning to learn; learning to live together and to respect the CRC (Norway, Sweden...)
  - To listen to children, engage in project work and use documentation as major means of working with young children and monitoring centre performance and children’s progress (Reggio Emilia).
  - To focus on the agency of the child, in particular, encouraging child participation in decision-making, in the life of the centre (the group dimension) ... with the aim of creating a sense of responsibility for self, for others and for our common environment.
Thank you!