

CHAPTER 1

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES: THEMES AND ISSUES

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Overview

This book seeks to explore some of the many ways in which early childhood education and care (ECEC)¹ is understood in Europe and beyond. The main objective of the book is to bring critical attention to some key issues from both a national and international perspective relating to the themes of early education and care, intervention in the lives of children and families and the concept of children's spaces. In this chapter, we describe the rationale and organization of the book. The book draws upon international perspectives to 'shine a light' on established practice in the UK and consider how to improve the ways in which services are developed and delivered to best serve all children in a very challenging and uncertain social and economic climate. The chapters reflect these changing and challenging policy agendas and aim to support the professional development of practitioners who work in this field. The book is intentionally research focused and draws on work from renowned academics, researchers and practitioners as co-researchers.

Introduction

We hope this book will offer fresh perspectives at a time of change and uncertainty across Europe and beyond, which is impacting on ECEC services. The economic crisis in particular is having a negative impact on children's health and well-being (Bennett, 2012); European governments question whether spending on ECEC can be justified in stringent economic times. In England, although ECEC services are in theory protected and supported by legislation, the drive to localism is putting services under unprecedented pressure. After a decade or more of investment, we are seeing increased 'marketization' and privatization of services (Lloyd, 2012; see also Woodrow, 2011) and the transfer of funding and decision making to local authorities. The number of children's centres offering full day care nearly halved between 2009 and 2011 (Brind et al., 2011). In 2011, a report into early intervention programmes for young children argued for funding through private investment in what have traditionally been publicly funded services (Allen, 2011). At the time of writing, further changes are proposed to the (de)-regulation of early years provision and to the training and qualifications of staff (DfE, 2013), which we believe could have a negative impact on the quality of early years provision. These developments are cause for concern to those involved in ECEC as economic and political factors can influence both practitioners and parents, so that what is appropriate for young children becomes less clear and less central in public debates. In this context, the book draws attention to a common ECEC agenda: that is the crucial role that early childhood services play in the well-being and learning of children and their families, and in forming democratic societies.

Why international perspectives?

Across the world, governments and non-governmental organizations have recognized the importance of ECEC services in supporting the development of children, and in the economic well-being of societies. The OECD carried out a high impact review of ECEC in 20 'rich' countries and found that integrated early childhood policies underpin significant social and economic policies among OECD countries (OECD, 2006). In particular, early childhood programmes can have a significant role to play in reducing and lessening the impact of child poverty, and investing in children's future at an early age has a higher rate of return than at later ages (OECD, 2006). However, such services alone cannot break the poverty cycle, and what is needed is a 'multi-dimensional approach' involving 'supportive economic and social policies' (Bennett, 2012: 11).

There are many similarities among ECEC services worldwide, but also significant differences. Table 1.1 summarizes key features of the context, including the degree of child poverty and mortality, the ranking in well-being indices, the age compulsory schooling starts, and spending on ECEC services, as well as the degree of access to ECEC that children enjoy. While data collection is far from

Table 1.1 The context for ECEC: a comparison of countries featured in this volume

	Child mortality				Ranking in UNICEF			% attend EC services				Unitary or split: ECEC system (split = provision is for children aged 0–3 and 3–6 years; unitary means government responsibility, access, funding, regulation and workforce integrated across all ECEC services) ^{vi}
	% children living in households with income lower than 50% of national median ⁱ	rate of dying between birth and age 5, per 1,000 live births ⁱⁱ	rate of dying between birth and age 5, per 1,000 live births ⁱⁱ	rate of dying between birth and age 5, per 1,000 live births ⁱⁱ	being index (1 = high, 18 = low)	Age compulsory education starts ⁱⁱⁱ	% GDP spent on EC ^{iv}	0–2-year-olds in formal ECEC (group care or family day care) ^v	3+ years in public and private educational institutions ^{vi}	Part unitary		
EU member states	12.1	5	18.2	4–5	.6	33	90					
England	8.8	4	13	6	1	44.2	100			Split		
Scotland	15.9	4	10	6	.6	11.9	94.8			Split		
France	6.1	3	8.7	6	.8	61	95.7			Unitary		
Italy	7.3	3	5	7	1	70	92			Unitary		
Norway	6.5	4	7.2	6	1.2	63.2	92.3			Unitary		
Sweden	10.3	6	14.5	5	.7	10	82.2			Split		
Denmark	7.4	4	12.5	6	.5	20.5	72.5			Split		
Hungary	25.5	14	N/A	7	.8	N/A	77.5 (a)			Split		
Czech Republic	N/A	7	N/A	7	N/A	N/A	52.3 (a)			N/A		
Romania	N/A	12	N/A	7	N/A	N/A	24.1 (a)			Unitary		
Serbia	N/A	18	N/A	6	N/A	N/A	10.3			N/A		
Macedonia	N/A	17	N/A	4	N/A	N/A	69.4			N/A		
Turkey	N/A	19	N/A	6	N/A	N/A	78.06 (a)			N/A		
Mexico	23.1	8	18	4–6	.4	N/A	59.9			Split at many levels		
Peru												
Latin American countries												
North America												
USA												

N/A = not available

Notes:

ⁱUNICEF (2007)

ⁱⁱUNICEF (2012)

ⁱⁱⁱOECD (2012)

^{iv}Bennett (2006)

^vBennett (2006); Oberhuemer et al. (2010); see also UNICEF/Innocenti Social Monitors

^{vi}OECD (2012)

^{vii}Bennett and Moss (2010); EACEA (2009); UNICEF (2012)

comprehensive, it is clear that certain characteristics go together: low levels of child poverty, high rankings of child well-being, high levels of coverage of ECEC for children under 3 and unitary systems are all features of the three Nordic countries discussed in this book. These differences are complemented by others, prompted by questions such as ‘what is our image of the child?’ (Moss, 2010) and what is the ECEC system for? Does ECEC primarily prepare children for school? Or is children’s citizenship an uppermost concern and educating them for democracy the main focus? Is accessing ECEC seen as a social right for all children or a product of parental ‘choice’? Another approach is to see ECEC as a force for community cohesion, so the role of ECEC is as a site for catalysing family and community members in shaping local services. Are the services broadly ‘educationist’ or ‘protectionist’ in orientation? Do they hope to ‘rescue’ some children from the disadvantages of home life or seek to educate all – or both?

The book features two key themes. In Part 1, five chapters explore different aspects of the relationship between care and education and between ECEC and schools and consider the relevance and impact of possible ‘schoolification’ of ECEC settings in the search for improved ‘school readiness’. Chapters 4 and 6 challenge ideas of intervention within ECEC, who it is for and how it is carried out, and consider different examples of early interventions, from community-based solutions to specific programmes. The chapters in Part 2 focus on ‘Children’s spaces’. This reorients ECEC away from services as meeting the needs of societies and economies and instead considers children’s lives within services. Considering children’s spaces, both geographic and metaphorical, embracing the physical, cultural and familial, enables us to analyse some relationships between what happens within ECEC settings and what happens outside. ECEC is no longer just about what care and education provide; it is also about what children’s families and communities bring to the experience of ECEC settings.

Part 1: Care, education and notions of intervention

An enduring issue in ECEC is that of split and integrated systems of care and education. Split systems are most common worldwide, and at their extreme feature ‘care’ for children from birth to age 3 and ‘education’ for children aged 3+, with lower qualified staff in care services and higher educated teachers in education services. Integrated systems, on the other hand, recognize that children’s lives are lived as a whole and that care and education are inseparable (Bennett, 2012). The workforce is then educated to match this holistic orientation. Bennett and Moss (2010) argue that integrated systems are also better – more inclusive and more equal.

Pamela Oberhuemer sets the scene for the book in Chapter 2, pointing out the increased awareness in recent years of the advantages of well-resourced systems in ECEC. Her chapter looks at similarities and differences across the 27 member states of the European Union (EU) in relation to three key issues: the dominant vision that countries choose to follow when making decisions about the ECEC system as a whole, the staffing of early childhood services, and cooperation and networking across Europe, where early childhood systems remain ‘distinctly diverse’.

In Chapter 3, Yoshie Kaga discusses the relationship between early childhood and primary education and its current importance for early years practices. The chapter reviews three models: the school-readiness model and the ready-school model – for strengthening the linkage between the two sectors; a ‘strong and equal partnership’ model is then considered as a possible way forward for the future of the two sectors.

Chapter 4 offers a refreshing perspective on early childhood curricula. Lead authors Tullia Musatti, Donatella Giovannini and Susanna Mayer document their work in an Italian *nido* with early childhood practitioners and researchers to answer questions about the nature and culture of ECEC. Linking to the theme of Chapter 3, they discuss the role of educational experiences directly geared to the acquisition of specific skills and knowledge, in contrast with the broader educational goal of supporting and developing children’s full potential. They show how it is possible to construct a powerful and detailed curriculum for children in their earliest years.

Two chapters in Part 1, Chapters 5 and 6, focus on the notion of intervention in ECEC services. They raise questions about what intervention might mean. Is it the accessibility of universal services that support all children and their communities? Or is it a specific programme shaping particular outcomes such as those aimed at parents whose children attend centres and which may reduce the risk of undesirable outcomes? This idea can be understood in two ways: first, using services to support the lives of young children and families on a universalist or community basis; and second, more usual in Anglo-American countries, as a specific method to address perceived problems or deficits in a child’s upbringing.

Anne-Marie Doucet-Dahlgren in Chapter 5 provides an overview of some of the characteristics of the French approach to ECEC and family support, including specific forms of provision and early intervention. She describes the Service de Protection Maternelle et Infantile (PMI) and considers the ways in which specific groups of parents respond to a ‘folk university’ parenting initiative. She makes suggestions on how to take some elements of the French experience as a model in an international perspective.

The Roma Early Childhood Inclusion (RECI) Project is the focus of Chapter 6, in which John Bennett describes an initiative to gather data and information in four Central and South-Eastern European (CSEE) countries – the Czech Republic, Macedonia, Romania and Serbia – about the inclusion of young Roma children and their access to public services. The chapter documents the size of the Roma population and the persecution they have had to suffer over the centuries, outlines the main findings from national reports and charts some tentative conclusions.

Part 2: Children’s spaces

Recent research has begun to explore new perspectives on children’s experience of ECEC. From many possibilities we include: children’s understanding of ‘place’ and ‘community’ and the relationship with children’s well-being, and the concept of children’s spaces within the context of the outdoors. The chapters in Part 2 are

deliberately diverse in scope: they open up fresh perspectives on actually being in children's services and draw on data gathered in international research projects.

The theme of space and place is the focus of Chapter 7, where Margaret Kernan and Kathia Loyzaga make a case for including spatial and place perspectives when exploring notions of belonging, participation and citizenship in relation to services for young children in urban societies, in particular marginalized and migrant children. Their chapter references two projects of Melel Xojobal, a non-governmental organization working to improve the quality of life of indigenous migrant children and their families in the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico.

Place-based learning is an approach to ECEC that makes use of local economic activities and the unique history, culture, tradition and other community reference points to engage more effectively with children and young people within the context of their lives. In Chapter 8, Bronwen Cohen and Wenche Rønning look at its origins as a pedagogical approach and how it is developing in Norway and Scotland. They explore what we can learn from services which help children to understand and engage with 'place' and 'community' and the use of nature, and how we might use this as a tool for active learning.

ECEC work is a feminized profession and very few men work in ECEC centres. Continuing the theme of using the outdoors, in Chapter 9 Claire Cameron considers the relationship between being outdoors and being a male worker, using data from a study of the views of practitioners and experts in three countries: England, Denmark and Hungary. She cites research that argues that ECEC centres need to promote working outdoors in order to recruit more men. When discussing being outdoors, Cameron argues that there are two main orientations to practice: a care orientation and a pedagogic orientation. She concludes that gendered practice is more likely to be visible in a care orientation to practice.

We conclude with a consideration of well-being and thriving, key themes in Chapter 10. This draws on a study by an international team of researchers of seven young girls from seven countries who were filmed for a day in their lives. Roger Hancock, Ann Cameron and Ayshe Talay-Ongan use four illustrative examples from Peru, Turkey, the UK and the USA, respectively, to examine the ways in which children's agency and well-being are promoted jointly by caregivers and the children themselves, and, in particular, the significance of the 'culture of play'. Linking to the theme of Chapters 3 and 4, they make a plea that early educationalists, and especially those working in schools, do all they can to promote children's personal agency and thus their well-being.

Final thoughts

In this chapter, we have raised questions about the role of ECEC. We have argued that choices made in the development and formation of these services reflect particular country concerns such as the well-being of children, child poverty, the socialization of children into a particular country's culture and values, and issues

around 'school readiness' and early intervention. We believe that by taking an international perspective we can bring critical attention to familiar policy, provision and practice.



Summary

- In this chapter, we argue for looking outside the UK to consider the changes and developments in Europe and beyond which are impacting on ECEC services and on the well-being of children and families, and to consider what we might learn from this.
- We have said that globally governments and non-governmental organizations are increasingly recognizing the importance of ECEC services in supporting the development of children, and in the economic well-being of societies.
- We propose that an awareness and understanding of changing and challenging policy agendas, such as those documented in this book, can support the professional development of practitioners who work in ECEC services by enabling them to see the familiar with a fresh and critical eye.



Questions for discussion

1. What might be the value of looking to Europe and beyond in informing policy and practice in the UK?
2. What in your view should be the role of ECEC services, for example to educate, care, protect, rescue?
3. What do you think should be the role of intervention in the lives of young children and families? (*Higher-level question*)

Further reading

Levels 5 and 6

Siraj-Blatchford, I. and Woodhead, M. (eds) (2009) *Effective Early Childhood Programmes*. Milton Keynes: The Open University/The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Woodhead, M. and Moss, P. (eds) (2007) *Early Childhood and Primary Education: Transitions in the Lives of Young Children*. Milton Keynes: The Open University/The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation.

These two books are from the Early Childhood in Focus Series (M. Woodhead and J. Oates, Series Editors). The books in this series provide clear and accessible views of recent research, information and analysis on key policy issues relating to early childhood in a global context,

and are underpinned by a children's rights perspective. The publications have been developed with key experts and researchers in the field.

Levels 6 and 7

Bennett, J. (2012) *A Shared European Approach to Quality in Early Childhood Services*. Brussels: Eurochild.

This background paper highlights the need to improve quality ECEC services across European countries and underlines three policy strands deemed to be essential in order to achieve this goal, including children's rights and a multi-dimensional approach to attacking poverty.

Moss, P. (ed.) (2012) *Early Childhood and Compulsory Education: Reconceptualising the Relationship*. London: Routledge.

This book raises an important question about the relationship between pre-school and compulsory education. The book contests the 'readying for school' relationship and explores some alternative relationships, including a strong and equal partnership and the vision of a meeting place.

Website

www.childrenineurope.org

This website, featuring the *Children in Europe* publication, offers up-to-date information on European policies, research and good practice for those working with children from birth to 10.

Note

1. Early childhood education and care is a term generally used in Europe and beyond and reflects the historical and separate development of early childhood services under a two-tier organization emphasizing childcare for children up to age 3 and 'pre-primary education' for 3–6-year-olds (OECD, 2006). In England, 'childcare' covers the 'care' oriented services such as childminders, full day care and sessional care, while 'early years' covers the maintained sector – nursery schools and nursery and reception classes in primary schools (Brind et al., 2011). In all the books within the *Critical Issues in the Early Years Series*, we take the view that it should be impossible to educate without caring, or care without developing and promoting children's learning. We also use the term *she* when referring to individuals of both genders, which seems appropriate in a heavily gendered workforce.

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