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The UK at the crossroads:

towards an early years European partnership

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Early childhood services in the UK (that is services providing care and education for children below compulsory school age) are at a critical point. A momentum for change has built up, but we need more thought and clarity about where we want to go and how to get there. Responsibility for early childhood services has been gathered into education, an important first step on the road to a truly integrated and inclusive system of early childhood services. But what are the next steps?

This paper argues we need now to review a number of critical issues, for example about - the age range of early childhood, staffing, funding, entitlement, types of provision and providers, the balance between prescription and diversity, our image of the child. It also argues that being a member of a European community, with so many partners, provides a resource to assist with addressing these issues and to help us to think about and decide our future direction.

But first, the paper sets the scene, and situates the UK within Europe. After providing some demographic, employment and policy context, it outlines some of the main features of early childhood services in the 15 member states of the European Union (EU) - the whole of Western Europe apart from Iceland, Norway and Switzerland. Table 1 provides national summaries. There is also a more detailed account of two countries with well-established but contrasting early childhood systems, France and Sweden (see Box 3).

What I hope does come across is a sense of the diversity within Europe. What I hope to avoid is any suggestion of one way learning. I want to dispel any notion of a uniformly failing UK compared to a homogeneous and uniformly successful rest of Europe. The UK has important early childhood traditions, many examples of innovative and inspiring practice and valuable experience from which other European countries can benefit. Services in other European countries differ in many respects, and have their fair share of weaknesses and failings. Having said that, a better knowledge and understanding of early childhood services in our European partners enables us to see our own situation more clearly and to think more critically about that situation, here and now and in the future.

For sources and further reading, see the reference section at the end.

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THE EUROPEAN UNION AND EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES

The EU itself is an economic organisation, but also a political entity. As such, it has already influenced early childhood policies in the UK through requiring improved statutory maternity leave and the introduction of statutory parental leave and leave for family reasons. A Council Recommendation on Childcare adopted by all member state governments in 1992 has also provided a framework of principles for the development of policies to enable parents to 'reconcile' employment and the care and upbringing of their children, including services, leave arrangements, changes in the workplace and measures to encourage increased participation by men in the care of children.

Households are getting smaller - and more diverse, including more lone parent families. The proportion of children living in lone parent households increased from 8% in 1983 to 13% in 1998

DEMOGRAPHIC, EMPLOYMENT AND POLICY CONTEXT

The EU has a population of 376 millions. If present trends continue the population will start to fall in 20 years time, although this fall will happen at different times and at different rates in different member states (Italy, Spain and Germany first; later in France, Denmark, UK, Portugal and Ireland) (this and other data below comes from Eurostat (2001) unless otherwise stated). More generally, Europe is aging: 'the mean age of the European population is higher than that of any other region in the world, and gets older year by year. In exact figures, the population of the European Union ages by 2.5 months each year or by 2 years each decade. The mean age of the European population, which presently is around 39 years, is likely to reach 45 years by 2030' (Lutz, 1999: 8).

This aging process is driven by low fertility rates, below replacement level everywhere, but especially low in Southern Europe and Germany (for example, 1.19 in Spain and 1.21 in Italy compared to 1.7 in the UK). At present, international migration is the main source of population growth, adding 700,000 per annum: without such migration, the populations of Germany, Italy and Sweden would be falling. This means a decreasing proportion of children, a rising proportion of older people and a more ethnically diverse Europe. Households are getting smaller - and more diverse, including more lone parent families. The proportion of children living in lone parent households increased from 8% in 1983 to 13% in 1998, with the proportion, at 25%, particularly high in the UK.

The employment rate in the EU (62%) lags behind that in the US (73%) and Japan (70%). Despite falling employment among men and rising employment among women, there remains a considerable gap in employment rates (72%/53%), and the gap is even larger for women with children under five years. Employment rates among women with children under five vary considerably between countries -

they are highest in the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and Portugal and lowest in Southern Mediterranean countries (Greece, Italy, Spain). Countries also vary in levels of part-time working amongst women with children. It is particularly high in the Netherlands and the UK and particularly low in Southern Europe. Fathers' employment is uniformly high, and overwhelmingly full time, but the UK stands out for the long hours worked by fathers (for parental employment, see Deven, Inglis, Moss and Petrie, 1998; Moss and Deven, 2000)

FATHERS' EMPLOYMENT IS UNIFORMLY HIGH... BUT THE UK STANDS OUT FOR THE LONG HOURS WORKED BY FATHERS

Overall in the EU, women earn 77% of what men do. The difference is lowest in Belgium, Denmark, Luxembourg and Sweden, and highest in Ireland, Netherlands and the UK.

The relationship between women's employment and fertility is not clear: member states with higher female employment generally have higher fertility rates, yet overall trends to fewer children and more women working have coincided. It has been suggested that 'compatibility between family and labour market participation is improved, and fertility is higher, in the member states where: the caring activities are better shared between men and women, public caring infrastructures are more developed, part-time jobs are more available, legislation is more family friendly' (Eurostat, 2001: 28).

The UK has the highest level of child poverty in Europe (26% in 1996, compared to an EU average of 20%); Denmark has the lowest level, with just 4%. These figures exclude Finland and Sweden, but comparison of OECD countries shows that Sweden and Finland have the lowest levels of child poverty among EU member states and confirm that the UK has the highest (UNICEF, 2000) - despite Finland, Sweden and the UK having similar per capita GDP: 'it is now clear that among Western industrial countries the United Kingdom is an outlier in terms of child poverty' (Bradshaw, 2001: 15). High poverty levels in the UK are associated with high levels of lone parent families, workless households and low wages. Income inequality within member states is relatively high in Southern Europe, Ireland and the UK, and lowest in Denmark, Sweden and Austria.

THE NORDIC COUNTRIES TYPIFY A SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC WELFARE REGIME... EMPHASIS ON INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS, UNIVERSAL BENEFITS AND SERVICES, AND A STRONG DEVELOPMENT OF SERVICES TO REDUCE FAMILY-BASED CARE

This brief overview shows considerable variations in demographic, economic and social conditions likely to affect demand for early childhood services. The UK is high on fertility, part-time working, men's working hours, lone parent families, income inequality and poverty. But there are also contextual conditions that influence supply of services. Ideas about children and childhood vary considerably (see Box 2). There are different types of welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1990, 1999). The Nordic countries, for example, typify a social democratic welfare regime, with an emphasis on individual rights, universal benefits and services, and a strong development of services to reduce family-based care. While the UK typifies a liberal welfare regime, with an emphasis on targeted and means-tested benefits and services, and increasing individual responsibility for managing personal and family risk: in this respect the UK is closer to other English-language countries than to most of the rest of Europe.

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WHAT IS OUR IMAGE OF THE CHILD?

Societies, groups and individuals have different images of the child. The final report of the recent OECD thematic review of Early Childhood Education and Care policies and provisions in 12 countries notes that they 'are embedded in cultural and social beliefs about young children' (OECD, 2001: 38). These beliefs - social constructions of childhood - are the subject of increasing interest today. They mean that 'childhood does not exist, we create it as a society, as a public subject... (as) a social, political and historical construction' (Rinaldi, 1999). These constructions of the child are productive of policy, provision and practice: early childhood institutions 'and pedagogical practices for children are constituted by dominant discourses in our society and embody thoughts, conceptions and ethics which prevail at a given moment in a given society' (Dahlberg, 1997).

Early Childhood Services

WHAT IS EARLY CHILDHOOD?

If 'early childhood services' are defined as being for children below compulsory school age, when is compulsory schooling? In most member states of the EU (indeed, in most of the rest of Europe too), compulsory school age is 6. There are some exceptions. Compulsory schooling starts at 7 in the Nordic EU member states, although 6 year olds can (and mainly do) attend some form of nursery education, mainly at school. At the other extreme, compulsory schooling starts at 4 in Luxembourg and 5 in the Netherlands and the UK. These last two countries, plus Ireland, admit children from 4 upwards into primary school on a voluntary basis.

Although the definition of 'early childhood services' potentially covers children from birth, the age at which children actually enter services is influenced by several factors, including leave provision for parents. Most countries offer around three months highly paid post-natal maternity leave: the UK is unusual in combining a long post-natal leave period (up to seven months) with a low level of payment. After maternity leave, parental leave is available in all countries, but varies widely in length, payment and flexibility. The UK was the last country to introduce parental leave, and has the weakest measure in Europe: unpaid, inflexible and minimal in length with just three months per parent only available to be taken in four week periods per year (other countries enable the full period to be taken in one block).

THE UK WAS THE LAST COUNTRY TO INTRODUCE PARENTAL LEAVE, AND HAS THE WEAKEST MEASURE IN EUROPE: UNPAID, INFLEXIBLE AND MINIMAL IN LENGTH

Overall, it is possible to discern a range of policies with respect to children under three years of age. Some countries (such as Finland and France) pursue an objective of supporting parental[1] choice as between caring for children at home and going to work: they offer extended leave periods and provide extensive services. Other countries (such as Germany) encourage parental care during the first three years through long periods of parental leave and few services (at least in the former West Germany). Sweden encourages employment after a relatively short period of well paid leave, with strong public support for working parents, including entitlements to part-time working, paid leave to care for sick children, and a place in a publicly-funded service for children between 12 months and 12 years of age.

THE STRUCTURE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES

The structure of early childhood services in member states broadly follows two models. The first, and more common, is division of services between education and welfare systems. The other, less common but growing, is unification of responsibility within one system, education or welfare. There are differences within this broad distinction. For example, within divided systems the split may coincide with age group, so services within the welfare system provide for children under 3 (as in Italy) or 4 years (as in the Netherlands), while services in the education system provide for children over 3 or 4 years; or there may be overlapping responsibilities, so that children of the same age may be in either welfare or education system provision (as is the case for 2 year olds in Belgium or France). There may also be various measures to increase coordination between the systems. For example, in the French Community of Belgium a Minister for Childhood has responsibility for education and care services, although they are still administered separately; while in Portugal, the Ministry of Education has administrative responsibility for nursery education for children over 3 years, and responsibility for the pedagogical quality of all services including those welfare system services which come under the administrative responsibility of the Ministry of Labour and Solidarity.

Similarly, where administrative responsibility for services is integrated within one system, there are important differences. In England and Scotland, as well as Spain, services have been integrated within education. In the Nordic countries it has been welfare. Recently however Sweden has moved responsibility from welfare to education (see Box 3). The extent of integration, over and beyond administrative responsibility, varies considerably. Early childhood services in the Nordic countries are completely integrated, for example with respect to legislation, funding, staffing, curriculum and types of services. But countries which have integrated administrative responsibility more recently still retain a strong legacy of their divided pasts, both in structure and thinking.

LEVELS OF PROVISION

The general trend in mainland Europe (including Central and Eastern Europe) has been to provide three years of publicly-funded nursery education or kindergarten provision for three to six year olds. This has either been achieved (for example in France, Spain, Belgium) or is being actively pursued (for example, in Italy, Portugal). Provision is voluntary and usually available for a full school day. In some cases (such as Belgium, France and the Nordic countries) extended hours provision is widely available geared to the needs of working parents. This may take the form of associated 'out of school services' or all-day services that combine care and education.

Publicly-funded provision[2] is much lower in general for children under three years. Highest levels (for around 25% of children and over) are found in the Nordic countries, Belgium and France (with the admission of two year olds to nursery education boosting provision in the last two cases). Lowest levels (for less than

10% of children) have been in Southern Europe, Germany (or at least the former West Germany), Ireland and the UK.

In recent years some countries have introduced entitlements to provision, for example a kindergarten place for children from three to six years old in Germany and to a nursery school place in Belgium for children from two and a half. In the UK all local authorities are now required to provide a part-time early education place for four year olds. Given widespread existing services in most countries for children over three years, entitlement to services for children over *and* under three years of age is perhaps more significant. Such entitlements now exist in all three Nordic member states: in Denmark, local authorities must provide a place within three months of demand; in Finland every child has an unconditional right to a place from 12 months or from the end of parental leave, until starting school; while in Sweden, children between 12 months and 12 years are entitled to a place, within three months, in an early childhood service or a 'free-time centre'

PROVIDERS AND PROVISION

With their long established integrated systems, the Nordic countries have favoured 'age integrated' centres, taking children from a few months old (now more often one year old) through to six years. Elsewhere, split systems often led to 'age segregated' services, with one set of services (nurseries) for children under three years, and another set (such as nursery schools or classes or kindergartens) for children over three. There may be some 'age-integrated centres', but these are usually in a minority, and there are always services which concentrate only on children over three.

Another variation concerns the role and structure of family day care. Family day carers are important providers of early childhood services except in the Southern Mediterranean countries. However in some cases (the Nordic countries, France and Belgium), many or most family day carers are in 'organised schemes', where they are recruited, paid and supported by a local authority or private agency. Elsewhere, family day carers mainly operate as self-employed workers, with a greater or lesser degree of support. More generally, except in the Nordic countries, the main providers of non-parental care, at least for children under three years, remain relatives.

GENERALLY, EXCEPT IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES, THE MAIN PROVIDERS OF NON-PARENTAL CARE, AT LEAST FOR CHILDREN UNDER THREE YEARS, REMAIN RELATIVES.

When it comes to providers, the UK and Ireland are unusual in having a large for-profit nursery sector. This may be due to several influences: belated public policy support for working parents and well-established liberal welfare regimes in Ireland and the UK; and extensive publicly-funded nursery education or kindergarten for children over three years in other countries. This does not mean that provision elsewhere in Europe is only provided by the public sector. Nursery education mainly is, as part of the school system. Kindergarten provision (which is for children over three, but not within the education system) and services for children under three years are often provided by private, but non-profit, organisations.

The public/private mix does, however, vary. For example, in Germany it is expected that services will be provided by private organisations, and public authorities only step in where such organisations will not or cannot provide. In Denmark, around a third of early childhood services are provided by private organisations. In Italy, the great majority of publicly-funded nurseries for children under three years are provided by local authorities; but nearly a third of nursery schools are provided by private (mostly religious) organisations.

THE WORKFORCE

Nothing illustrates more clearly the legacy of split systems than the early childhood workforce. Split systems have a split workforce: a higher trained and higher paid group, often teachers, mostly working in nursery education or kindergartens; and a large group of relatively poorly trained and paid workers, mostly working in nurseries and other 'welfare' system services such as family day care.

In integrated systems (both in and out of Europe), with one exception a 'core' early childhood worker has emerged and now forms half or more of the centre-based workforce. This worker is relatively well trained (with at least a three year training in higher education) and well paid (at or just below the level of school teachers), and works across the whole early childhood age range. She may be an early years teacher (as in Spain or, looking further afield, New Zealand), or a pedagogue (as in Denmark, where pedagogues are trained to work with children up to 18 years and in a wide range of settings, not only early childhood services). These 'core' workers usually work with less qualified workers, some of whom may be gaining experience prior to training as an early years teacher or pedagogue.

The one exception is the UK. Administrative integration of services has not, as yet, led to a reform of the split staffing system. Rather then a comprehensive restructuring, Government has opted for limited reforms of the 'childcare workforce' sector.

In all European countries, the workforce is overwhelmingly female. The highest proportion of men workers is in Denmark, and is still only 8%: elsewhere it is generally well under 5%. Within the EU, some local attempts have been made to bolster men's participation in training and staffing. The UK is the only country within the EU to set a target for men workers - 6% in the 'childcare' sector. Outside the UK, the Norwegian Government has set a 20% target (cf. Owen. Cameron and Moss, 1998; Cameron, Moss and Owen, 1999).

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TABLE 1

MEMBER STATE [GDP PER HEAD; CHILD POVERTY RATE]	LEAVE	COMPULSORY SCHOOL AGE	SPLIT OR INTEGRATED SERVICE SYSTEM
AUSTRIA [23600; N.I]	24 MONTHS (18; 24*)	6	LIMITED INTEGRATION (WELFARE)
BELGIUM [23,400: 4.4~%]	10 MONTHS (10) ADDITIONAL 'CAREER BREAK' AVAILABLE	6	SPLIT
DENMARK [25,000: 5.1%]	14 MONTHS (14)	7	FULLY INTEGRATED (WELFARE)
FINLAND [21,400: 4.3%]	36 MONTHS (36)	7	FULLY INTEGRATED (WELFARE)
FRANCE [20,900: 7.9%]	36 MONTHS (36*)	6	SPLIT
GERMANY [22,700: 10.7%]	36 MONTHS (24*)	6	LIMITED INTEGRATION (WELFARE)
GREECE [14,200: 12.3%]	9 MONTHS (3)	6	SPLIT
IRELAND [24,100: 16.8%]	10 MONTHS (3)	6 (EARLY START: 4)	SPLIT
ITALY [21,200: 20.5%]	13 MONTHS (13)	6	SPLIT
LUXEMBOURG [38,800: 4.5%]	14 MONTHS (8)	4 (IN NURSERY EDUCATION)	SPLIT
NETHERLANDS [23,800: 7.7%]	15 (3)	5 (EARLY START: 4)	SPLIT
PORTUGAL [15,900: N.I.]	10 MONTHS (5)	6	SPLIT
SPAIN [17,300: 12.3%]	36 (4)	6	MODERATE INTEGRATION (EDUCATION)
SWEDEN [21,600: 2.6%]	18 MONTHS (15)	7	FULLY INTEGRATED (EDUCATION)
UNITED KINGDOM [21,600: 19.8%]	9 MONTHS (4): FURTHER 2 MONTHS PER PARENT AT 4 WEEKS PER YEAR	5 (EARLY START: 4)	MODERATE INTEGRATION (EDUCATION)

TABLE 2 PARENTS' CONTRIBUTION TO COSTS OF PUBLICLY-FUNDED SERVICES

AUSTRIA (B)	PARENTS CONTRIBUTE, NO INFORMATION ON %
BELGIUM (A)	NURSERY EDUCATION: FREE. **OTHER:** 17-28%
DENMARK (A)	MAXIMUM THAT CAN BE CONTRIBUTED = 33% OF COSTS
FINLAND (A)	15%
FRANCE (B)	NURSERY EDUCATION: FREE. **OTHER:** 28%
GERMANY(B)	16-20%
GREECE (B)	NURSERY EDUCATION: FREE. **OTHER:** PARENTS CONTRIBUTE, NO INFORMATION ON %
IRELAND (B)	EARLY ADMISSION TO PRIMARY EDUCATION: FREE. **OTHER:** FEW PUBLICLY-FUNDED SERVICES. NO INFORMATION ON %
ITALY (A)	NURSERY EDUCATION: FREE FOR STATE AND LOCAL AUTHORITY SCHOOLS. **OTHER:** 36%
LUXEMBOURG (B)	NURSERY EDUCATION: FREE. **OTHER:** PARENTS CONTRIBUTE, NO INFORMATION ON %
NETHERLANDS (A)	EARLY ADMISSION TO PRIMARY EDUCATION: FREE. **OTHER:** 44%
PORTUGAL (A)	NURSERY EDUCATION: FREE. **OTHER:** PARENTS CONTRIBUTE, NO INFORMATION ON %
SPAIN (B)	NURSERY EDUCATION: FREE.**OTHER:** VARIES, LESS THAN 20% IN PUBLIC SECTOR NURSERIES
SWEDEN (A)	17% (BUT FREE 525 HOURS/YEAR FOR 4 AND 5 YEAR OLDS)
UNITED KINGDOM (A)	NURSERY EDUCATION AND EARLY ADMISSION TO PRIMARY EDUCATION: FREE

LEVEL OF PUBLICLY-FUNDED SERVICES	TAX RELIEF OR OTHER SUBSIDY TO PARENTS
0-3 YEARS: LOW 3-6 YEARS: HIGH	NONE
0-3 YEARS: HIGH 3-6 YEARS: HIGH(LE)	0-3 YEARS
0-3 YEARS: HIGH(LE) 3-6 YEARS: HIGH(LE)	NONE
0-3 YEARS: MEDIUM(LE) 3-6 YEARS: MEDIUM(LE)	NONE
0-3 YEARS: MEDIUM/HIGH 3-6 YEARS: HIGH (LE)	0-6 YEARS
0-3 YEARS: LOW 3-6 YEARS: HIGH(LE)	0-6 YEARS*
0-3 YEARS: LOW 3-6 YEARS: HIGH	0-6 YEARS
0-3 YEARS: LOW 3-6 YEARS: MEDIUM (MAINLY EARLY START)	NONE
0-3 YEARS: LOW 3-6 YEARS: HIGH(LE)	NONE
0-3 YEARS: N.1. 3-6 YEARS: HIGH	0-6 YEARS
0-3 YEARS: LOW/MEDIUM 3-6 YEARS: MEDIUM (MAINLY EARLY START AND PRIMARY SCHOOL)	0-6 YEARS
0-3 YEARS: LOW/MEDIUM 3-6 YEARS: HIGH (LE 4 AND 5 YEAR OLDS)	NONE
0-3 YEARS: LOW 3-6 YEARS: HIGH	0-3 YEARS*
0-3 YEARS: HIGH (LE 1 AND 2 YEAR OLDS 3-6 YEARS: HIGH (LE)	NONE
0-3 YEARS: LOW 3-6 YEARS: MEDIUM (MAINLY EARLY START AND PRIMARY SCHOOL)	0-6 YEARS*

NOTES:
GDP: GDP per head for 1999 expressed in Purchasing Power Standard. Source: Eurostat (2001: 113)
Child Poverty rate: refer to early/mid 1990s. Source: UNICEF (2000: Table 10)
Leave: maximum period of post-natal maternity and parental leave per family. The figure in brackets indicates period of leave for which some payment is made (often at a low flat rate for parental leave). * indicates payment for parental leave made to certain families only
Compulsory school age: 'early start' indicates age at which children may be admitted to primary school before compulsory school age, excluding nursery or kindergarten classes.
Publicly-funded provision: shows amount of provision directly publicly funded, expressed as full-time equivalent places, and includes places for children under 6 years in primary school. Does not include tax relief or other subsidies made direct to parents. Figures are mainly mid-1990s and some may have increased since then. For 0-3 years (i.e. below 36 months), LOW=coverage for less than 10% of children; MEDIUM=10-24%; HIGH=25% or more. For 3-6 year olds (i.e.from 36-71 months), LOW=under 50%; MEDIUM=50-74%; HIGH=75% or more. LE=legal entitlement
Tax relief: * indicates paid to lower income groups only

NOTES:
Parents contribution to costs: refers to parents' contribution to total costs of publicly-funded services. Parents normally contribute in relation to income; where single % given, this indicates an average (a) information from OECD (2001) referring to late 1990s; (b) from EC Childcare Network (1996) referring to middle 1990s

Public funding in the UK, unlike most of Continental Europe, mainly takes the form of demand subsidy through tax credits directly paid to low income parents using private services. Only a relatively few nurseries and other centres in the public or non-profit private sectors receive any direct funding.

FUNDING SERVICES

The recent OECD review of services found there was no comparable data for public expenditure on early childhood services, as well as related policies such as payments for maternity and parental leaves. The only comparable data covers expenditure on 'pre-primary education', that is educationally-oriented provision for children over three years old - which is only part of the picture. Thus Sweden spends 0.6% of GDP on 'pre-primary education', but 2.3% on all forms of early childhood services.

Broadly speaking, nursery education - that is school-based provision in the education system - is fully publicly funded. Parents may only have to contribute to supplementary services such as meals or 'out of school childcare'.

Parents contribute to the costs of other forms of provision (i.e. non-school provision). In most countries, many or most of these services receive subsidies direct from public sources (i.e. supply subsidy). Parents whose children attend these publicly-funded services make a means-tested contribution, usually around 15-30% of total cost. Quite a number of European countries offer some form of subsidy direct to parents (i.e. demand subsidy), including those using non-subsidised services, usually through the tax system - but this is usually in addition to subsidising services.

Public funding in the UK, unlike most of Continental Europe, mainly takes the form of demand subsidy through tax credits directly paid to low income parents using private services. Only a relatively few nurseries and other centres in the public or non-profit private sectors receive any direct funding. A further exception is the programme for neighbourhood nurseries in disadvantaged areas, where part of the funding will be for subsidising running costs - but only for the first three years of each nursery and falling from 50% of costs in year 1 to just 10% in year 3.

Individual employers generally play a minor role, either in providing services directly or funding them. The Netherlands is an exception. Here, a major programme was introduced in 1990 to expand services, especially childcare for working parents, based on sharing financial responsibility between government, employers and employees. Participation by individual employers has been encouraged both through the funding mechanism of this programme and through a powerful and extensive system of collective bargaining. In 1997, employers contributed 21% of the costs of childcare provision, compared to 35% from government and 44% from parents.

In France, employer responsibility has been recognised, but on the basis that *all* employers contribute, through compulsory social security payments, to family allowance funds (*Caisses d'Allocations Familiale*). One purpose of these funds is to support the development and running of services available to all families. Belgium and Italy also levy compulsory contributions on employers, which are intended to help fund early childhood services, although the amounts involved in these two countries make only a small contribution to total costs.

Some countries (notably Denmark and Sweden) have taken the view that early childhood services are a societal responsibility, and that services should be community based.

REGULATING THE SYSTEM

There are various ways in which government can seek to regulate early childhood services. Two that are widespread are setting standards and creating a curricular framework. What varies is the content, the degree of prescription and the level at which standards and curricula are defined or implemented. On standards this can be illustrated by staff ratios. There are no national standards in Denmark and Sweden: defining ratios is left for local authorities. Elsewhere ratios may be determined nationally, or by regional level governments. Ratios vary considerably. For example, in Italy there may be one adult to six children under three years compared to one adult to three children under two years in the UK. Variations may partly reflect compromises between the ideal and what is feasible. But they may also reflect different theories and practices in pedagogical work (cf. Munton et al., forthcoming; Penn, 1997).

MOST EUROPEAN COUNTRIES HAVE NOW DEVELOPED NATIONAL CURRICULA, AND THERE IS A TREND TO COVERING A WIDE AGE RANGE AND DIVERSE FORMS OF SETTINGS

Most European countries have now developed national curricula, and there is a trend to covering a wide age range and diverse forms of settings. In some cases, curricula are confined to children over three years (e.g. Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal, UK), while in other cases they span the whole age range in early childhood services (e.g. Finland, Sweden). A distinction has been drawn between 'central, competency oriented curricula' and 'framework, consultative curricula'. The former are rather prescriptive, with centralised control and quite specific goals, targets or competences that children should achieve: it has been suggested that these are characteristic of European countries with a preschool rather than a Froebel kindergarten tradition (eg. Belgium, France, England).

The framework curriculum 'provides the main values, orientations and goals for pedagogical programs, but does not enter into the details of how these goals should be achieved' (Bennett, 2001: 229). Interpretation and implementation are left to the local level, individual local authorities and centres: this type of curriculum 'restores the responsibility to early childhood professionals and parents of formulating their own pedagogical programs' (ibid.: 233).

3

FRANCE AND SWEDEN: TWO EXTREMES

Both France and Sweden have well established, extensive and relatively well-funded early childhood services. Yet they have adopted very different approaches. This comparison explores some of these differences, which generate important questions for other countries to consider.

France has a 'classic' split early childhood system. Parents may take up to three years parental leave, with a low flat-rate payment for parents with two or more children and a right to take leave full time or part time. For those who do work, there is a range of publicly-funded services for children under three years within the welfare system, most run by local authorities. A national system of nursery schools (*ècoles maternelles*) within the education system provides for children from two and a half to six years. Virtually all children over three years are in nursery schools, and about a quarter of under threes are either in welfare system services or *ècoles maternelles*.

The systems operate in quite different ways. For example, while the welfare system services (such as nurseries and organised family day care) are publicly-funded, parents make income-related payments which contribute about a quarter of total costs; tax relief can be claimed on these and other childcare costs. Nursery schooling is free. Or to take another example, welfare system nurseries are staffed by a mix of workers: the head is usually a paediatric nurse, and other staff include *auxiliares* with a one year post-16 training and *educatrices* with a two year post-18 training. Nursery school teachers, by contrast, have a five year university training. They work to a centralised, competency-based and detailed national curriculum.

The young French child is understood in a very particular way. She is seen as a future adult citizen, who must be integrated into the larger community via the acquisition of French culture and republican values.

Swedish services evolved in a very different way, and had been integrated for many years within the welfare system. There is a 15 month period of paid parental leave, most at 80% of earnings; most children therefore are cared for at home until at least their first birthday. After that, a law introduced in 1993 entitles parents who are working or studying or who have a child with special needs to a place in an early childhood service and free-time centre, until their child is 12 years. At six years, most children now go to part-time classes in school, before starting compulsory schooling at seven.

About three-quarters of children between 12 months and six years go to publicly-funded services. About four fifths go to 'age-integrated centres' taking the full age range, the remainder going to organised family day care. Provision by totally private providers and relatives is very low. Services are open all year and on an all day basis, and parents make an income-related contribution averaging 17% of total costs.

Staffing of early childhood services is based on a pedagogue, or preschool teacher, with a 3 year, post-18 training. They make up about 60% of the workforce in centres, and the proportion has been growing. Since 1998 they have worked with a curriculum of the framework, consultative type - a short document, proposing broad goals 'to be striven towards' and which leaves much scope for local interpretation by practitioners and parents. Although most provision is of one type, local authority age-integrated nurseries, 'provision of early childhood services has become programmatically far more diversified than in the past. Curricular strategies are becoming more diverse as are the options afforded parents' (OECD, 1999: 32).

Both France and Sweden could be said to be very well established systems. But whereas France has adopted a policy of incremental change, Sweden has recently entered into a period of major reform. In 1998, administrative responsibility for early childhood services at national level was transferred from welfare to education, following a lead already taken by many local authorities. This has led to a number of changes.

The introduction of a national curriculum for early childhood services has already been mentioned. The right to an early childhood place has been extended to all children, not just those with employed or studying parents or who are in need. Four and five year olds will get three hours of free attendance a day, and the government is proposing a maximum fee for parents to pay (up to now, local authorities have set fees). Most radical of all, from Autumn 2001 a new integrated system of teacher training is being introduced, encompassing not only all types of school teaching but also preschool teachers and free-time pedagogues working in school-age childcare. Under the new system, all students will do a degree course of at least 3½ years, including a common section of 18 months prior to specialising.

What is particularly interesting about Sweden is that its reforms of the last 10 years combine new entitlements, restructuring, and rethinking of childhood, knowledge, learning, teaching and so on. Integration of early childhood services into education has not meant an automatic take-over by schools and their traditional culture. Instead there is a debate about whether a new and equal relationship can be created based on new and shared understandings, including the view of the child as

> *'an active and creative actor, as a subject and citizen with potentials, rights and responsibility. A child worth listening to and having a dialogue with, and who has the courage to think and act by himself... [The child as] a constructor, in the construction of his own knowledge and his fellow beings' common culture... This child is seen as having 'power over his own learning processes' and having the right to interpret the world'*
> (DAHLBERG, 1997: 22)

French and the Swedish children occupy strong but very different early childhood systems. But these children are also understood very differently - each country has a distinctive image of the child, played out not only in different institutions, but also in different policies and practices.

The UK at the crossroads

Early childhood services illustrate the UK's ambivalent attitude, uncertain how to position itself between the rest of Europe and the rest of the English-language world. As a broad generalisation we can define the emergence of a common agenda for European early childhood policy: a legal right to maternity and parental leave; public support for working parents; and public support for a period of early education available to all children before they start school. Yet although, since 1997, the UK has signed up to this agenda, it has done so in some respects in a rather minimal way. Statutory leaves are among the weakest in Europe, reflecting deep reluctance to offend employers by regulating a free market economy in the interests of parents and children. Early education is moving belatedly towards two years, part-time provision, when most European countries seek three years full time: while five-year-olds in the UK do get education at primary school, that begs questions about when compulsory schooling should start and the scope of early childhood.

If we look at the UK from the perspective of the English-language world (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United States), we see important points of similarity: weak statutory leave entitlements; a strong emphasis on a private market in services with a substantial role played by the for-profit sector; funding systems that emphasise demand subsidy over supply subsidy; and a limited early education sector, often closely tied in to the compulsory school system. Both the US and the UK have invested sizably in early childhood programmes intended to reduce child poverty, reflecting high levels of child poverty in both countries and a belief that such programmes can reduce the adverse social consequences of embracing neo-liberal capitalism.

One way in which the UK could benefit from its location in both Europe and the English-language world is to focus on the theme of developing an integrated early childhood system

One way in which the UK could benefit from its location in both Europe and the English-language world is to focus on the theme of developing an integrated early childhood system. This focus brings together countries from the EU (the Nordics and Spain) with New Zealand and the state of Southern Australia. Much might be gained from developing strong links with these countries, with the shared objective of finding innovative ways of reconceptualising and restructuring early childhood services within an integrated framework.

USING A EUROPEAN LENS TO FIND CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Why bother with cross-national work in general and European comparisons in particular? It is of course interesting - but that alone may not be sufficient justification. It is difficult to simply export other people's solutions, not least because contexts differ. The UK tends to look to the English-language world, not only because we literally understand each other better, but also because our economic and welfare regimes have much in common. But even then, solutions do not always travel well, and constant circulation of ideas and solutions among countries with the same type of regimes does not stimulate radical change. What membership of Europe offers is the chance to consider other types of regimes, and also to view our own situation through the lens of other countries. Viewed this way, the familiar becomes strange, assumptions are made explicit and contestable, and new questions emerge. In short, meeting difference provokes critical thinking and creates new knowledge.

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF HAVING AN EARLY CHILDHOOD SECTOR THAT, IN EFFECT, SPANS ONLY FOUR YEARS?

Most European countries have an early childhood sector from birth to six years: the UK's is, in effect, 25% shorter. Some people have questioned this in terms of children's experience (e.g. inappropriate settings for children aged 3 to 4). More fundamentally, it weakens the early childhood sector, and militates against 'the strong and equal partnership with the education system' that OECD identifies as a key element of successful early childhood policy. It is ironic that at a time of modernising government, the UK labours under a school starting age determined in the 19th century for reasons that are unknown to most people today and irrelevant to current conditions.

IS THE PRESENT STAFFING SYSTEM SUSTAINABLE OR DESIRABLE?

There are many reasons for questioning whether a workforce based on poorly educated, trained and paid women is sustainable: supply is falling as levels of education amongst young women improve, while demand is increasing, not only in childcare, but also in social care and other non-care service work. But in any case, should we continue staffing our services in a way that has remained unchanged for decades? Is work with young children of intrinsically low value? Other countries which have integrated their early childhood services have reformed their workforce around a 'core' early childhood worker, substantially better trained and paid than 'childcare workers' in the UK. We need to ask, what is the work in an integrated early childhood service? Who should the worker be?

WHERE DOES INTEGRATION LEAD?

The Labour Government took a bold step in integrating all early childhood services within education. However this is just a starting point: we are a long way from where the Nordic countries have got to after decades of integration (see Box 3 for the example of Sweden). We still have a system that is split in many respects - conceptually and structurally, reflected in our continuing use of the language of 'early education' and 'childcare'. Many areas still need tackling, which means rethinking, restructuring and new ways of talking about early childhood services.

THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT TOOK A BOLD STEP IN INTEGRATING ALL EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES WITHIN EDUCATION... HOWEVER THIS IS JUST A STARTING POINT

One area is staffing, as just discussed. Another is funding, with the post-1997 funding situation more confused and fragmented than ever. Should we simplify funding, basing it on a secure system of payment to services, and a free element of daily attendance to ensure coherence with the school system? We have a legacy of many different types of services, which are inflexible and socially divisive. Should we move towards a more cohesive and inclusive system, based on a new generation of 'age integrated' children's centres open to all children and families in their catchment area? We have unquestioningly taken up 'for-profit' provision, and turned away from public provision - yet some of the best services in the UK and elsewhere in Europe are provided by local authorities. Should we re-assess the best private/public mix and the pros and cons of commodifying early childhood services?

WE HAVE UNQUESTIONINGLY TAKEN UP 'FOR-PROFIT' PROVISION, AND TURNED AWAY FROM PUBLIC PROVISION... SHOULD WE RE-ASSESS THE BEST PRIVATE/PUBLIC MIX?

WHAT IS OUR LINE ON CHILDREN UNDER 3 YEARS?

Our European partners have various public policies for children under three years - from supporting parental employment once children are over 12 months of age to encouraging parental (maternal) care until children reach three years. At present, it is difficult to discern public policy in the UK. Support for working parents is now acknowledged, but remains minimal: weak leave entitlements, no entitlement to work reduced hours (as most other European countries offer, at least during the period of parental leave), and no entitlement to a publicly-funded place in an early childhood service. Government is trying to ride two horses: supporting families and minimising regulation. In this respect, as in many others, Sweden offers a challenging comparison: strong entitlements to paid leaves, reduced hours and affordable, well-run services (see Box 3).

IS CONTROL AND PRESCRIPTION A NECESSARY EVIL?

The UK, in European terms, has a very regulated early childhood system, in terms of both standards and curriculum. Arguably (but it would be interesting to have the argument), this is the price to be paid for decades of neglect and its legacy of fragmented services of varying quality staffed by a poorly trained workforce. Unwilling to follow through the logic of a marketised system of services, government has felt impelled to play regulator on a major scale. But is this a temporary expedient, leading to a less regulated and more diverse future? Or is it a permanent solution for coping with an intrinsically weak market? At present we have great diversity in types of provision, but rather standardised practice. Should our ambition be more uniform provision, but more diverse practice?

WHAT IS OUR IMAGE OF THE CHILD?

Government documents are full of questions, but most are technical or managerial: how should we do this or that? More fundamental and critical questions about issues of value are needed, but receive little attention. What is our image of the child? Who do we understand the young child to be? What sort of early childhood worker do we want? What are the purposes of early childhood services and pedagogical work? What do we want for our children, here and now and in the future? How might we understand knowledge and its production in a post-industrial society and in conditions of late or post modernity?

At last, we have a government that has given policy priority to early childhood services, injecting commitment, resources and some good ideas. But after the frenetic activity of the last four years, we need to take breath and think. We need to reflect on where we want to go and how to get there, envisioning an integrated early childhood service providing care and education, but much more besides, for all our children and parents. Being partners with so many other European countries offers us a unique opportunity to exchange and learn and a wonderful resource to enrich our reflections

WE HAVE A GOVERNMENT THAT HAS GIVEN POLICY PRIORITY TO EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES, INJECTING COMMITMENT, RESOURCES AND SOME GOOD IDEAS... WE NEED TO TAKE BREATH AND THINK

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1. It should be noted that while the term 'parental' denotes equal responsibility and/or rights between mothers and fathers with respect to caring for children, throughout the EU mothers still do most of the caring: in practice, therefore, read 'maternal' for 'parental'. **2.** The term 'publicly-funded provision' refers in this report to services which are directly subsidised from public sources: level of publicly-funded provision therefore means places in services subsidised in this way. In some countries, some parents' costs may be directly subsidised (e.g. through tax reliefs), as well as or instead of services being directly subsidised. While I have discussed these different forms of funding later on, I have not been able to find reliable estimates of the numbers of children in different countries whose parents' costs are directly subsidised.

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