

Comments on 'Childcare and the European Union: a bumpy but upward path', for workshop 'Social Policy and Labour Market Integration in Canada and the EU'

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Issues of diversity

In considering the actual and potential role of the EU with respect to early childhood education and care (ECEC) and school-age leisure time services, it is important to recognise the extent of diversity between member states, much more so than between provinces and territories in Canada. These differences are conceptual and structural with respect to the services themselves, but also extend to the context within which policies are formed, to include material conditions, welfare regimes and social and cultural understandings of parenthood, gender and childhood. Below, I outline only some of the most obvious examples.

The English-speaking EU countries (the UK and Ireland), but also the Netherlands, split ECEC, conceptually and structurally, between 'childcare' and 'early education'. Furthermore, 'childcare' is characterised by a strongly marketised orientation; it is treated in effect as a private commodity that parents purchase in a 'childcare market' and where the state's role is to support parents' ability to use the market through forms of demand subsidy. While 'early education' is a public good, but offered as a limited (1-2 year) programme of mainly primary school-based provision. The approach is similar to other English-speaking countries (apart from New Zealand), including the English-speaking parts of Canada.

Yet there are differences. The UK (or rather England and Scotland) has moved responsibility for 'childcare' into the education system (as part of a hugely ambitious reform of all children's services – the 'Every Child Matters' agenda); and has an active government policy to develop integrated ECEC services (Children's Centres), especially in low income areas. Ireland and the Netherlands are far behind in these respects.

Then a wide range of countries (such as Belgium, France, Italy and a number of CEE countries) have ECEC services divided between welfare-based 'childcare' services for under 3s and substantial (3 years) education-based programmes for all 3-6 year olds, mainly in distinctive 'nursery' schools. Although changes are happening, services are much less marketised than in the above countries.

A third group of countries, mainly the Nordics but also Slovenia, have fully integrated all ECEC services conceptually and structurally. There is one service system that is understood as providing a holistic 'pedagogical' service or education in its broadest sense, covering education, care and upbringing¹. There is single departmental responsibility (shifting now from

¹ Lenz Taguchi and Munkhammar, in their excellent UNESCO review of recent reforms in Swedish ECEC services, refer to "parents now expect[ing] a *holistic pedagogy* that includes health care, nurturing and education for their pre-schoolers"

social welfare to education), a single workforce, usually a single age-integrated type of provision, and a single policy on access, funding and regulation. Spain and the UK both show signs of moving to this integrated approach (both, for example, have integrated all ECEC into education), but both of these countries have so far found it impossible to move far from their existing split systems and compartmentalised thinking.

The point to be made is not only that the EU, as a political institution, confronts major diversity – but that some member states have gone beyond the ‘discourse of childcare’, towards a ‘discourse of pedagogy’, i.e. of a universal early childhood service for all families addressing a range of needs, including but not only those related to labour markets and gender equality². My earlier use of the term ‘leisure-time services’ – a term used by the Nordic states for services for older children, rather than ‘school-age childcare’ – also illustrates a different way of thinking about (and structuring) services, one that is, in part, explained by a different way of understanding/constructing childhood.

Jane Jenson’s note argues that the EU recognises the “multipurpose nature of childcare” in its discourse, but “does not often include attention to early childhood education and care”. This is correct and of fundamental importance. The consequence is that, in its policy development, the *EU* is committed to an outmoded and dysfunctional ‘childcare discourse’ that, if followed through, will encourage an approach to services that is narrow, fragmented and exclusionary at a time when this approach is increasingly contested at national and local levels. For the lesson that *European countries* are learning – slowly and unevenly – is that labour market needs are necessary but not sufficient goals for the development of services: policy and disciplinary boundaries are blurring, which calls for new policies based on cross-sectoral and cross-disciplinary thinking.

Issues of competence

The EU has remained firmly wedded to the ‘childcare discourse’ (illustrated most recently in the language of the Barcelona targets) in part because of its limited legal competence for children and families. For years, any questioning of the EU’s narrow focus on services providing care for children while parents worked, was met by the response that the EU had no legal responsibility for children (or indeed families). More recently, this situation has begun to change, opening up some interesting if uncertain future prospects.

The Charter of the Fundamental Rights of the European Union, adopted as a ‘political declaration’ in 2000 and incorporated into the stalled EU

² OECD has also recognised the limits of the ‘childcare discourse’. In its major thematic review of services for young children (1998-2006), it has adopted the term ‘early childhood education and care’. This review has taken a very different approach and perspective to another OECD review – *Babies and Bosses* – referred to in Jenson’s paper; Rianne Mahon has written a very interesting paper on the different perspectives adopted by these two different OECD reviews.

Constitution, includes an article on the rights of the child (Article 24) which covers, *inter alia*: children's right to such protection and care as is necessary for their well-being; children's right to express their views freely; and recognition that "the child's best interests must be a primary consideration [in all actions relating to children]". Most recently, last month in fact, the EC issued a Communication 'Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child' which proposes "to establish a comprehensive EU strategy to effectively promote and safeguard the rights of the child in the European Union's internal and external policies".

This new visibility of children as citizens in EU (or at least EC) thinking is still marginal. However, it opens up the possibility of new and different EU discussions and, possibly and in the long term, new policies which might include discussion of ECEC and leisure-time services that include – but as only one purpose – childcare. Moreover, organisations concerned with children are increasingly organised to advocate and lobby at European level, and therefore to stimulate a European politics of childhood.

At the same time, this recognition of children needs to be set against the EU's increasingly narrow economic approach to policy, which seems to have lost much of the social dimension that marked out the Delors years (1985-95). 'Childcare' illustrates the point. In 1992, as Jane Jenson notes, the European Council of Ministers adopted a Recommendation on Childcare. Though not a legally binding instrument (like a directive), it was a statement of political commitment, principles and objectives adopted by all member state governments. Not only did it state the EU's commitment to gender equality and the need to 'reconcile employment and family responsibilities', but it also defined how these goals might be implemented in four areas: childcare services; 'special leave'; 'environment, structure and organisation of work'; and 'sharing of responsibilities' between men and women. It recommended principles for the development of services for young children including: affordability; access; the need to combine 'safe and secure care with a pedagogical approach'; 'close and responsive relations' between services, parents and local communities; increased choice for parents; and diversity and flexibility of services, together with greater coherence between services.

Ten years on, the Barcelona targets ignore this important statement. The focus is exclusively on increasing coverage of 'childcare facilities', with no attempt to define common principles and non-quantitative objectives. The aspiration in the Council Recommendation to ensure certain common European standards is gone; instead, member states are left to pursue the Barcelona targets "in line with (national) patterns of provision".

What tools are available

Jane Jenson's note provides a good overview of tools available to the EU, though I would add two more. First, some services and related initiatives (e.g. related to training) have been co-financed via various EU **funding** streams. Second, the EU has a large-scale **research** programme, including the social sciences, which has (and could in the future) support

studies into ECEC and leisure time services³. These, together with the tools mentioned by Jane Jenson, offer great potential for the development of services across Europe. I would add three observations:

1. The Council Recommendation, and the work of the EC Childcare Network, illustrated the potential for developing – democratically and through negotiation – a European policy approach that went beyond the crude quantitative approach of Barcelona. For example, the network, with its multi-national group membership, developed 40 ‘quality targets’, achievable across all member states over a 10 year period and which built on the principles adopted in the Recommendation. ‘Quality Targets in Services for Young Children’ remains an important example of how a diverse political entity might move towards implementing certain agreed common objectives, whilst respecting and maintaining diversity. I believe that Europe needs to return to this essentially political task again, to pick up the challenge of developing a ‘European approach’ to these services.
2. The EC Childcare Network was a highly successful tool for raising European awareness, deepening understanding and exploring possibilities for common policy. I am, of course, completely biased, having been the Coordinator, and I recognise that simply establishing a cross-national network guarantees nothing. But in ditching most of its networks, including the Childcare Network, the EC lost an important means for underpinning the development of policy. The concept is a good one, especially if lessons are learnt from prior experiences.
3. Directives (EU legislation) can affect ECEC and leisure-time services – but not only those directives that directly target these services. A good example is the proposed Services Directive (sometimes called the Bolkestein Directive after the EC Commissioner), intended to promote EU-wide market competition in services. This originally covered health and social services, including ‘childcare’, and if fully implemented would have opened these services to full cross-border competition, including the ‘country of origin’ principle (i.e. private providers could have set up nurseries in other countries, applying the regulatory standards from their own country, so risking a process of levelling down to the lowest common denominator). Fortunately, as a result of strong opposition, health and social services have been removed from the directive and the Commission has begun to identify the concept of a separate set of ‘social services of general interest’ requiring different treatment to other services⁴. However, this example shows how easily services for children can be caught up in other areas of EU policy.

³ An example is the Framework 5 project ‘Care Work in Europe: Current Understandings and Future Directions’ led by Claire Cameron and myself, with the participation of six EU countries (2001-5). Reports from this study are available at www.ioe.ac.uk/tcru/carework.htm

⁴ See EC Communication ‘Implementing the Community Lisbon programme: Social services of general interest in the European Union’ (April 2006)

Gender equality – a final thought

Jane Jenson is right to draw attention to the centrality of 'promoting gender equality' in EU policy, The EU, to its credit, has not only recognised that this involves services and leave policies – but also men. Article 4 of the 1992 Council Recommendation on Childcare, for example, recommends "increased participation by men [in the care and upbringing of children], in order to achieve a more equal sharing of parental responsibilities between men and women".

However, it is worth drawing attention to two areas where policy, unless qualified, will be counter-productive, working against the achievement of equality. First, the Directive on Parental Leave (adopted in 1996) specifies that leave should be individual and non-transferable (as a recognition that men and women share responsibility for children) – but adds that leave should be granted on a non-transferable basis only "in principle". This reflects the fact that leave policy in a number of member states is transferable (i.e. it is a family, rather than an individual, right) and strong national objections to changing this situation. Continuing transferability, however, contributes to parental leave in most countries being taken overwhelmingly by women; policy hinders, rather than helps, gender equality, especially when the leave period runs over a 3 year period⁵. In my view, the future lies in equal and substantial periods of individual non-transferable leave for men and women, with a limited period of family leave to permit some flexibility; and a leave period of about one year followed by a universal entitlement to ECEC services (this is the principle now seen in Iceland, Norway and Sweden).

Second, despite leave policies that are in many countries weak from a gender perspective, there is evidence that men within the home are taking substantially more responsibility for the care and upbringing of their children. However, outside the home, ECEC services remain, in every country, overwhelmingly staffed by women workers; this remains true from Sweden to Italy, Ireland to Hungary. Without strong and concerted action – at all levels, including the EU – to increase participation by men in these services, the effect of increased provision will be to counteract the shift to less gendered childcare in the home – and to increase the gendering of childcare overall. Gender equality in the labour market, therefore, may be brought at the price of gender inequality in childcare. For this reason, the EC Childcare Network proposed, as one of its 40 quality targets, 20 percent male workers to be achieved within a 10 year period, a good example of an achievable objective that can and should be adopted and actively pursued with policy measures at a European level.

⁵ For the current situation on leave policy and take up across 22 European and other countries, see Moss, P. and O'Brien, M. (eds) (2006) *International Review of Leave Policies and Related Research 2006* (DTI Employment Relations research Series No 57), London: department of Trade and Industry. Available at <http://www.dti.gov.uk/employment/research-evaluation/errs/page13419.html>