



Contemporary Issues of
Education Quality

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Integrated Policies for Early Childhood Education and Care – Challenges and Possibilities

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) or pre-school education does not yet have a clearly defined provision. At different periods it was classified in other more developed fields – sometimes education, health or social. Depending on the time of the governmental structure of society, the dominant social system, culture, tradition, wealth / poverty and other existing resources, power/status of individuals in relation to society and the state, a system of ECEC or preschool education can vary through time, space and the community in which they are created and formed. Recognizing the importance of the social context in the identification of the role of ECEC or preschool education by individuals in a community, it opens the possibility of considering the social context – how the social practices and relationships create value through public policy. This paper aims at providing some reflections on the policy development and implementation of integrated services of early childhood education and care (ECEC) within a systemic perspective.

Key words: early childhood education and care, position and role, integrated approach.

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Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is becoming a growing priority, and has received increased policy attention in many countries during the past years. Equitable access to quality early childhood education is increasingly viewed by policy makers as a way of strengthening the foundations of lifelong learning for all children and supporting the educational and social needs of families. While countries are increasingly determined to increase the provision of ECEC, these policy developments are often motivated by economic and political goals (Urban 2009: 12). It should not be forgotten that early childhood education is, first and foremost, *for children*.

The OECD has undertaken the broadest and most systematic cross-national study of services for young children, covering 20 of its member states, most, but not all, in Europe. The two reports of this thematic review of early childhood education and care (Starting Strong, published in 2001, and Starting Strong II, published in 2006) include not only invaluable information and insights, but a number of “key policy elements of successful ECEC (early childhood education and care) policy”, including: a systematic and integrated approach to policy; a strong and equal partnership between early childhood services and the education system; equal possibility for enrolment; substantial public investment in services and infrastructure; a participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance; and appropriate training and working conditions for all staff.

The adoption of a common denominator, such as ECEC, which refers to the set of possibilities that cover the services oriented to the care and education of young children, has some important implications:

- It recognises that all types of services providing care and education for children below school age belong to the same field;
- It addresses the multiplicity of dimensions involved in the field;
- It leads to convergent actions with regard to policy, programmes or research.

The integrated approach to ECEC systems stems from a paradigm shift, in which the responsibility for the care and socialisation of young child lies no longer with the family alone, but of society as a whole, shifting from a deficit model to a model based on human rights. It results that a significant portion of the upbringing process has become a public matter, therefore falling within the realm of human rights arena, with enormous implications for the development of ECEC policies and programs. “It is about situating public provision for children within an analysis of

a changing world and the implications of that world for such provision". (Moss, 2005:2) Within this perspective, the term ECEC suggests shifts in the services' approach and objectives — from selective and exclusive to universal and inclusive — and sets out the elements that grant legitimacy to the system: integration, unity, continuity, comprehensiveness and coherence.

In this paper, a review shall be given on integration within education concerning the effect on ECEC being situated in education, alongside compulsory and post-compulsory education. What are the implications of being integrated there rather than in, say, welfare? To what extent does the whole ECEC system assume the values and principles of the educational system?

Functions and roles of ECEC

The question of the role and purpose of ECEC is defined through what society, as a community of human agents, agrees upon and creates. These constructions come to life with regard to dominant understandings of the child on the one hand, and influence and determine the identity of the ECEC through our given denominations on the other. That way ECEC, as a structural form, represents a specific structure arising in response to an authentic social and cultural series of historical events related to the care and education of early age children.

Most fundamental question we ask ourselves when speaking about ECEC is: what is our image of the child? The question is fundamental because discussion of services for young children must start with young children. To ask the question is to recognise that there are many possible images or understandings of childhood. „Our construction of childhood and our images of the child represent ethical and political choices, made within larger frameworks of ideas, values and rationalities“ (Moss, 2005:55). To answer is to make a political and ethical choice, a choice that is very significant for policy, provision and practice and offers a statement of values as a point of reference for the principles that follow.

Given the multifaceted nature of early childhood, it often goes by a number of names and definitions, in different countries, as well as between different stakeholders. For example, UNESCO refers to early education as early childhood care and education (ECCE), the OECD calls it early childhood education and care (ECEC), and the World Bank calls it early child development (ECD), while UNICEF calls it early childhood development (ECD).

In today's modern and postmodern society, there are a great number of debates about the relation between care and education within the ECEC: is care, protection and security of the child, more important or is it the education. Many questions arise: should ECEC have only one function and could it satisfy both? In today's world, many children need care outside of the family, most often because their parents are working and the ECEC should provide that sort of care. The more important question is: how do we construct the significance of the ECEC through the purpose we give it? What do we think, what is it for? How do we situate it through state, social and/or cultural aspect? What is the basic purpose of early childhood education and care?

In order for the education to fulfil its role in the cultural production, achieve social changes, i.e. so it wouldn't only maintain and restore the existing, it should aspire towards development of individuals who shall be emancipated, independent critical thinkers, who shall actively participate in the changes of their immediate and broader environment and be ready to contribute to the common "acts" of their culture through continuous learning.

By exposing different philosophical understandings of the development of early childhood education and care, Dahlberg and Moss (Dahlberg, Moss, 2005) are showing how the institutionalisation of the child brings a dilemma to practitioners involved in care and education of young children and to other institutions directly or indirectly involved with children through political and ethnical instruments. Whilst before there was a widespread understanding that the family is the only natural place and a suitable environment for the upbringing of young children, today, not only do we not see a necessary evil in public education of young children, but it is declared necessary for good emotional, social and intellectual development in early childhood. Pedagogical literature on preschool often either contains or openly presents a thesis by which the institutionalization of preschool children is either the consequence of advances in knowledge about the development and education or a matter of social progress.

The idea and the concept of "social education of young children" turns institutional education into the social one, which implies a change of basic function of ECEC: instead of "replacement and addition" to the family education based on consumer relationship, ECEC should be an opportunity for the exercise of parental function at a social level and a place for joint residence and equal decision-making for children and adults (Marjanović, 1987.) However, is it really? Each country develops institutions for care and education of young children in different ways, depending on the social and cultural context.

Split or integrated system

There is a correlation between concepts of childhood, responsibility for the education and care of young children, the objectives of ECEC institutions, and political and practical aspects related to the supply, management, financing, and distribution of services, starting age of compulsory school, age groups, annual school calendar, length of operation during the day and year, types of services, flexibility and accessibility to different groups, staffing (profile and conditions), and parental involvement. Some basic system characteristics have been selected to discuss major challenges and pitfalls facing government spheres (municipalities, states and ministries) in charge of the ECEC system, as they go about integrating care and education within a wider perspective.

In every country, early childhood care and education (ECEC) services embody two different traditions: care and education. The former was often developed as a welfare measure for working-class children who needed care while their parents were at work; the latter as kindergarten or pre-primary education, providing middle-class or all children with enriched educational activities prior to formal schooling. For example, in France, *crèches* and *écoles maternelles* were both established during the period of industrialisation with the aim to take care of poor children while their parents worked in factories. However, *crèches* evolved into services with a strong medical orientation focusing on children's health and hygiene. They became part of government responsibility only after the Second World War, and have always been fee-paying. By contrast, *écoles maternelles* were integrated in the education system in 1886 as a vehicle for constructing the French nation and disseminating the French language, and increased in number rapidly thereafter (Rayna, 2007). In Sweden, the first nurseries were established in the 1850s for children with evident social needs, funded by charitable organisations, while the first kindergartens were set up in the 1890s to offer part-time early education for middle class children (Taguchi, Munkammar, 2003).

In most countries, whether in the North or South, this division between care and education strongly influences the organisation of ECEC services. Typically, the two sectors in these 'split systems' are governed, in terms of policy making and administration, by social welfare and education ministries respectively, and are also structured in very different ways with respect to types of service, workforce, access criteria, funding and regulation. Given their distinct historical roots, 'childcare' and 'early education' services in these split systems embody different visions and understandings of children, programme goals, approaches and contents.

For example, in the Flemish-speaking Community of Belgium, there is a clear division of responsibility for childcare and early education. Childcare services, including family day care, for children from birth to 3 years and out-of-school provision are under the responsibility of *Kind en Gezin* (Child and Family), an agency that reports to the Flemish Ministry for Welfare, Public Health and Family. The responsibility for *kleuterscholen* (public pre-school provision) for children aged two and a half and above is with the Flemish Ministry of Education. Subsidised childcare services are open at least 11 hours daily for the whole year, facilitating working parents, whereas *kleuterscholen* operate seven hours daily during the academic year. Nearly all (98 %) children aged 3 to 6 years attend *kleuterscholen* while about 65% of children aged from birth to 3 years are in formal childcare arrangements on a part-time or full-time basis or else have started attending *kleuterschool*. In terms of staffing, subsidised childcare centres engage certified *kinderverzorgsters* (childcarers) with a post-secondary (1 year) professional diploma. *Kleuterscholen*, on the other hand, have *kleuteronderwijzers* (nursery school teachers) with 3-year tertiary qualification. As for funding, 96% of the costs of *kleuterscholen* are covered by public funding and the rest by parental contributions. (Peeters, 2009, 2013). By contrast, subsidised *crèches* and family day care services in France are funded by public subsidies and parental fees which are set according to family income (parental fees come to 26% of the total budget for *crèches* and 60% for family day care) (OECD 2006).

Split systems have been the subject of critical discussion since the 1970s. More recently, actual or potential problems of split systems are noted in *Starting Strong I and II: Early Childhood Education and Care* (2001 and 2006), reports compiled on the basis of ECEC policy reviews in 20 OECD countries. These and later analyses have suggested that the following problems may be more common in split systems:

- Fragmentation of services between those within the welfare system, which are predominantly for the youngest age group, and those within the education system, predominantly for older children.
- Education seen to begin from the age of 3 or 4 years, with younger children defined primarily as needing only minding or care while their parents work; at the same time, strong 'schoolification' of services in the education system, leading generally to junior schools for children 3 to 6 years and educational neglect of children under 3 years.
- Government assuming greater responsibility for education services for children over 3 years than for welfare services for children

under 3 years, with correspondingly weaker funding and less availability for the younger children. This can be especially adverse for children from more disadvantaged families.

- Differences between services in welfare and education in key areas such as access, regulation, funding and workforce, leading to inequalities, discontinuities and problems for children, parents and workers. For example, levels of training and pay for workers in services in the welfare system are usually lower than those for workers in the education system, though group sizes and staff ratios are often worse in the latter; services in the education system are free of charge to parents but parents must pay at least part of the cost of services in welfare; services in the education system are available for shorter hours than those in the welfare system, requiring many parents to make additional care arrangements.

Challenges of integration

Some countries have adopted a more integrative response, starting by consolidating national responsibility for ECEC into a single ministry. There is considerable variation as to how far countries go in the integration process: integration should be seen as a dimension ranging from limited to complete.

Therefore, the integrative systems are characterised by:

- a redefinition of public (state) and private (family) relationships concerning children's affairs;
- the recognition of the rights of the child who socialises and is cared for in a wider social context than that of the family;
- the recognition of the family's right to share the care and education of the child with society;
- the recognition that childcare is a professional task which, along with education in a broader sense, constitutes a new way of promoting the child's full development.

The Nordic countries pioneered the policy approach of administrative integration into a single government department in the 1960s and 1970s, bringing together national responsibility for ECEC within social welfare (with the exception of Iceland, which integrated it within education from the start).

Since the late 1980s, the trend has been toward integrating ECEC within education (Neuman, 2005; UNESCO, 2006). The overall national

responsibility for ECEC in Sweden and Norway was moved from social welfare to education in 1996 and 2005 respectively. Other countries that have adopted the approach of integrating ECEC within education include England (1998), Jamaica (1998), Iceland, New Zealand (1986), Romania (2009), Scotland (1998), Slovenia (1996), and Serbia (2003, 2010).

Only Denmark and Finland still have ECEC services fully integrated within social welfare. Responsibility for ECEC at federal level is also integrated within social welfare in Germany (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth), but arrangements vary at Länder and municipal levels, which play a leading role in ECEC. Some Länder have integrated responsibility – in education or social welfare; some operate under split responsibility, with children under 3 years under social welfare and 3 to 6 year olds under education. A range of analyses, including the OECD reviews (2001, 2006) and some studies published by UNESCO (e.g. Choi, 2005), has put forward possible advantages of integrating ECEC responsibility within a single ministry, such as more coherent policy and greater equality and consistency across sectors in terms of social objectives, regulation, funding and staffing regimes, curriculum and assessment, costs to parents, and opening hours, in contrast to high fragmentation of policy and services.

OECD (2006) has argued that it matters less in which ministry – education, social welfare, family affairs or gender equality – responsibility for ECEC is integrated, but that the ministry has a strong focus on young children's development and education. To what extent does the whole ECEC system share an understanding of what it is for and what it is doing, and how far is this expressed in a common language? In short, has the system got beyond thinking and talking about 'childcare' and 'education'? Of course, thinking and talking need not convert into policy and practice, so we might best consider this as a necessary but not sufficient condition for deep integration of the whole system.

Serbia and ECEC policy

Dominant cultural pattern in Serbia with a tendency to overprotect children and mistrust the competence of children (Trebješanin, 1991), is transferred into institutional contexts of upbringing and education of children. It seems that the traditional concept of the child as "weak, feeble, non-independent" being (Trebješanin, 1991) who needs care and guidance from adults is still present. Social, regional and sub-cultural differences in Serbia, heritage, traditions and cultural systems are reflected in terms of institutional education of young children.

Ever since the construction of the system of child protection in 1974, the kindergarten has been developing into preschool institutions as a basic institutional part which has been getting a lot of attention and insurance for the development worthy of needs of families and children, whilst preschool education is being defined as a part of a unique system of education which constitutes a whole along with family education, through the main activities of: nurture, education, health care and organisation of vacation and recreation for children (Pešić, 2000)

Changes in regulations that followed until 1992 (Law of kindergartens in 1957, and 1965, the Law on Immediate Child Protection and Financial (Parental) Aid in 1967, and 1972, the Law on Pre-School Education in 1974., the Law on Social Care of Children in 1987, 1990, and 1992) have not changed the status of these institutions. In order to define the provision of pre-schools, we started from the fact that they meet the needs of parents to take care of children while they are at work, provide appropriate preventive health and sanitary-hygienic living conditions of children, and together with relevant psychological and pedagogical contents, procedures and methods, meet the developmental needs of children and materialize a process of education. Economical, political and ideological factors have influenced the equation of the education of young children and child's day-long stay (day care) in kindergartens (Pešić, 2000). The half-day educational forms, resulting partially from the educational function of kindergarten, are now present only in the one year before school – pre-school program – and with the title itself emphasizes the child's role expressed as “waiter in the waiting room of life” (James, Prout, 2005). Thus defined, the activity and therefore the identity of the kindergarten, was retained as such to this day.

The legislation from 2003, 2009 and 2010 merged ECEC with the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education has defined three main lines of action for the development of education in Serbia: Equality; Quality and Competitiveness within the European education framework, and Education system efficiency. There is a need for expanding and optimizing the network of preschool institutions as well as for greater inclusion of children in preschool institutions. The Law on Fundamentals of Education System (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 72/09) defines preschool education and upbringing as a genuine part of educational system, the first stage of public education organized by and subject to the Ministry of Education's requirements and instructions.¹ Obligatory schooling

1 Preschool education in 2003 fell under jurisdiction of Ministry of Education (at that time named Ministry for Education and Sport) by the Law on Ministries (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No 6/02). By the *Law on Fundamentals of Education*

starts at age of 5,5 (with Preparatory Preschool Program) and finishes at the age of 16. The new Law opens mainstream educational institutions to all children by requiring that educational systems must provide equal access, equal opportunities, and equal outcomes for all children. The system also has to grant knowledge and skills which are needed for the success of every individual in contemporary societies. This Act sets a framework for the development of all other specific laws and bylaw documents, targeting the specific levels of educational system.

The new Law on Preschool education and upbringing, based on the Law on Fundamentals of Education System, was adopted in March 2010 (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 18/10) with the aim to line up the system of preschool education in the Republic of Serbia with the system of preschool education of the European Union². This document is crucial, as it is the first *Law on preschool education* since it became part of the educational system (2003).³

Preschool education and its organization within the educational system

Preschool education covers children from 6 months to 6 and half years of age. Only obligatory part is preparatory preschool program (5,5 to 6,6 years of age). Work of preschool institutions is multifunctional, it provides to young children education, nutrition, care, preventive health and social care. Work with children from 6 months to 3 years is organized in nursery/ crèches; day care/kindergartens are for children from 3 to 5,5 years; obligatory PPP is for children from 5,5 to 6,5 years. PPP can be organized both in preschool institutions and primary schools.

Preschool institutions offer programs of different duration: whole day (9 to 12 hours per day, 5 days a week); half day (PPP 4 hours per day, 5 days a week); half day (6 hours per day, 5 days a week); half day (6 hours per day, 3 days a week) and more than one day duration (longer than 24 hours, sometimes five days per week).

System (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 62/03) adopted in 2003 preschool education was recognized for the first time as a genuine part of educational system, the first stage of public education.

2 One of the relevant documents is European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth " Europe 2020"

3 From 2003 till now preschool education was regulated by *Law on Fundamentals of Education System* (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 62/03). This was umbrella Law so many important issues for preschool education were not regulated. Before in power was Law on Child's care and protection (1992).

Under the Law, parents have the right to choose a program for their children. Nevertheless, in our opinion, it does not mean that parents really do have a choice. There is no regulation which is compelling LSGs to organize diverse services for young children and their families, and to provide sufficient capacities for all children, so parents choose from limited offers and only if they are in a position to choose.

Preschool institutions are organized at the level of Municipality, Local Self Government (only Belgrade has more than one preschool institution; other cities and Municipalities have only one preschool institution); they have their central building/office and other buildings-premises sprinkled around municipality territory. Currently preschool program is implemented in 159 preschool institutions (with 2160 premises) founded by local self-governments, 56 preschool institutions are founded by other legal or natural persons (private preschool institutions) and 192 primary schools implement preparatory preschool program.⁴

Enrolment of children in Preschool Institutions is conducted upon request of parents. Preschool education is financed from the budget of LSG. Preparatory preschool programs (for children 5,5 to 6,5 age), preschool programs for children with developmental problems and work with hospitalized children is financed from the state budget. Children without parental care, children with developmental problems and children from financially endangered families are free from paying a price per child (other parents are paying 20% of the economic price, while local self-management budgets cover remaining 80% of economic price).

All of this policy solutions of integrated system of ECEC in Serbia still do not solve the limitations defined in 2001: we still have "split competencies between three ministries (Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, Ministry for Social Affairs and Ministry of Health), parts of the existing practice/system are either not legally regulated at all or are inadequately regulated (privately organised forms, non-governmental sector of supply), ununiformed system both on the level of regulation (kindergarten with day-care as the basic regulation) and on the level of hitherto policy and practice, decentralisation on the level of funding and planning the supply has the effect of increasing regional differences, insufficient capacity, regional unevenness of the network and the limited supply of different types of programmes and services (inconsistency with needs), low overall coverage, with the exception of the oldest children in certain places (the overall coverage of all programmes and services for children aged 1-7 is around 32%, which is among the lowest in Europe)".(MoES, 2002).

4 Resource <http://www.mp.gov.rs/>

Conclusion

Consolidating ECEC administration under the protection of the educational system is a growing trend, which has many advantages: it facilitates the development of a coherent policy for regulation, funding, and training, and consistent service delivery across different levels of the educational system, as well as cooperation among early childhood education and elementary school professionals, and a continuity of pedagogical approaches for children in the transition from one education level to another. Furthermore, it increases the probability of making the access to the public school system a right for all children.

Nevertheless, this approach implies some risks. As ECEC becomes more fully integrated into the compulsory school system, services may become more "school-oriented" in terms of structure (opening hours, staffing, adult-child ratio, physical setting) and pedagogical approach, as well as more isolated from other childhood related areas.

Simply moving administrative responsibility for ECEC into education is not enough: it is a starting point for reform. Great attention has to be paid to the subsequent process, including strong re-thinking to complement deep re-structuring. Integration requires re-thinking of concepts and understandings and re-structuring, covering a range of areas including access, regulation, funding, and workforce. Re-thinking the meaning of education and the relationship between pre-school and school is an opportunity arising from integration – but it is also a necessity. In short, integration in education must be matched by opening up the meaning of education, and not just for young children – what do we mean by education? What is education for? Integration in education should also open up the question of the relationship between ECEC and schools systems, leading to the creation of a 'strong and equal partnership' in part through developing pedagogical meeting places.

In today's world, the care and education of children require shared responsibility between governments and society. Without such commitment, one side of the boat – the family and mainly the mothers – will certainly be overloaded. There are many intense external world demands on families: rising competition, increased professional instability, reduction in labour rights, the race for technological knowledge and the constant threat of unemployment and poverty. Under these circumstances, will it be possible to prevent the boat from sinking?

An ECEC integrated system requires firm political will, state responsibility, and a clear awareness of the comprehensiveness of the functions involved. Given these conditions, an ECEC policy should, under government leadership, involve all society in a joint and convergent enterprise.

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