

A FRAMEWORK FOR QUALITY: A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

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THE EUROPEAN UNION

The European Commission *Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile Employment and Family Responsibilities* was set up in 1986. Networks are semi-official working parties on areas of concern within the European Union, with expert representatives nominated from each member state.¹ The Childcare Network has been gathering information and providing analyses of services for young children in the European Union for ten years.²

Quality Targets in Services for Young Children, published in 1996, is the outcome of a series of seminars, meetings and working parties held in different venues across Europe, looking at different aspects of quality and how these might be transformed into a policy framework which could serve as a guide to member states.

Europe is very diverse. The European Union encompasses 12 major languages, many more minor languages, and many different traditions and histories and patterns of government. In this context Anglo, or Anglo-American, ideas about childcare are in a minority. Despite this diversity and complexity, it was possible for the Childcare Network to achieve consensus about a broad policy framework for early childhood services.

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT ACHIEVING QUALITY SERVICES

The rationale for developing quality targets as a basis for a policy framework was derived from a Council of Ministers recommendation in 1992 to adopt a *Framework Directive...(to guarantee) the development of publicly funded, widely available and good quality childcare services for children at least until the age of 10...(recognizing that) it is essential to promote the well-being of children and families, ensuring their various needs are met.*

A number of assumptions underlie the Network's approach to shaping childcare policy and offering guidelines on quality. Firstly, "quality" is a relative concept, based on core values and beliefs about the nature of the child and her place in society, beliefs which need to be articulated. Discussion about these core values and beliefs means providing on-going opportunities to share, discuss and understand values, ideas, knowledge and experience, with different groups including children, parents and families and professionals working in services, as well as with different language and cultural groups. The needs, perspectives and values of these diverse groups may well differ, so regular review and reworking is an essential aspect of quality. Definitions of quality **cannot** be merely based on **empirical research**, since they emerge from consensus about core values and their practical application.

For example, Swedish policy states as a core value that services must:

ensure that children and young people grow up in good and secure conditions...to give children ample and comprehensive opportunity to develop their emotional and intellectual potential and become open and considerate individuals, capable of empathy and co-operation with others, of learning to seek knowledge for themselves and of forming their own opinion.

Secondly, a fundamental assumption of this approach is that services must be **publicly funded**, if not publicly provided, because the price of services for young children can only be met in the marketplace at the cost of equity; many families will be unable to afford the market price of services, and inequities between families in work and families out of work will thereby be accentuated, as well as unfairness of access and discontinuities for children themselves.

Regulation is necessary for private services, but only minimum standards can be applied because otherwise the cost would be passed on directly to parents.

A POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES

The following interdependent areas make up the framework. They all have to be addressed and their linkages established. Taken separately and without reference to each other, they lose their impact.³

Targets for policy - A comprehensive policy would include **a national statement of intent setting out principles** for early childhood services, specifying objectives, defining priorities and setting targets; **a legislative framework** to outline the competencies of national, regional and local government in implementing the statement; **a single administrative framework**, both at national and local levels to take forward the implementation; and **an infrastructure for planning, monitoring, review, support, training, research and service development**.

Examples:

Spain (LOGSE) the 1990 Education Act, defined policies for early childhood services within a broader framework of a comprehensive education act.

Denmark has a comprehensive welfare based policy which states the importance of providing *universal* welfare services for *all* children.

Targets for finance - Policies, however well-meaning, are unworkable unless the different aspects of the policy are properly costed. On average European countries spend 5% of GDP on education. (7+% in Nordic countries). It is reasonable to assess the costs of the period 0-5 of a child's life as a proportion of this budget, so that **a minimum of 1% of GDP should be spent directly on early childhood services**.

Around **5% of this early years services budget should in turn be spent on infrastructure**, on in-service training, research, support and advice and so on. Where expansion is necessary, **capital budgets should also be specified**. It is also reasonable to assume a level of parental contribution towards meeting these costs - in most European countries these have been set at around 15% or less of household income.

Examples:

France spends nearly 2% of GDP on early years services but 28% of the costs of services are recouped from parents fees, 46% is met by local authorities, and 23% is drawn from employer contributions.

Finland spends 8.3% of GDP on education. Over 2% of GDP is spent on early childhood services. These form the largest single item of the welfare budget at local authority level.

Targets for levels and types of services - It is possible to have good policies, and comprehensive coverage without being prescriptive or centralized. Within a broad policy framework, **flexibility and diversity of services, sensitive to local need**, are to be welcomed. Publicly funded services do not necessarily mean publicly provided services, and in some countries decentralization, within a clear policy framework, means that **local organizations and local communities can be funded to provide appropriate services**, for example with bilingual provision or as parent co-operatives etc. All services should aim to provide **local places for children with disabilities**. However local authorities/states have to co-ordinate provision, to ensure the required **levels of service for full-time places for 90% of children aged 3 to 6 years and for at least 15% of children under three years**.

Examples:

Denmark has publicly funded services for *all* children 0 to 6 whose parents require it - e.g. currently 58% of children 6 months to 3 years, and 84% of children 3 to 6 years; services are also provided by a wide range of agencies at local level.

Belgium provides for all children 3 to 6 years, and 13% of children under three, excluding children who are not yet three but in nursery schools; each child with a disability receives a 150% subsidy.

Netherlands sponsors some bilingual Dutch-Moroccan, Dutch-Surinam and Dutch-Turkish bilingual groups, for immigrant families.

Targets for education and curriculum - *All services, whether administratively welfare based or education based, should have an explicit educational philosophy.* This should be broadly based and include guidance on such issues as: the child's autonomy and concept of self; convivial social relations between children, and children and adults; a zest for learning; linguistic and oral skills including linguistic diversity; mathematical, biological, scientific, technical and environmental concepts; musical expression and aesthetic skills; drama puppetry and mime; muscular co-ordination and bodily control and stamina; health, hygiene and nutrition; and community awareness.

Examples:

Spain defines two phases of infant education 0 to 3 and 3 to 6 each with its own broad pedagogic objectives, which can be developed according to regional and local priorities and concerns.

UK sets out comprehensive learning goals for all children 3 to 5, whether in publicly funded provision or not. The nursery education tradition in the UK is put into practice through a methodology which (until very recently) has stressed free play and autonomous choice for children.

Targets for staff-child ratios - The concept that underlies the notion of high-staff ratios, that a very young child learns best through the close emotional security of a relationship with one adult, is a culturally specific one, and is not generally shared throughout member states. There are considerable differences in approach about how children are grouped, the regularity and continuity of those groups and the age diversity within them, the pace of their routines; and about who should be looking after such groups of children, with what terms of reference. All these aspects need to be made explicit and thereby open to debate. Moreover there are many tasks which may or may not be included in the job description of the worker; janitorial cooking and cleaning duties, which also affect the nature of the childcare work. So specifying adult-child ratios is a simplistic exercise, and should only be undertaken as part of a wider specification of standards; but they are a useful safeguard for the private sector.

In general, *ratios for collective care should reflect the objectives of the service and their wider context and be directly related to group age and group size and be not less than 1:4 for children under 12 months; 1:6 for children 12-23 months; 1:8 for children 24-35 months; and 1:15 for 36-71 months.*

Examples:

UK regulations under the 1989 Children Act specify ratios of 1:3 for children under three; and 1:8 for children over three. All family daycarers are allowed 3 children under five including their own. Regulations are enforced by annual inspection.

Portugal has sponsored family daycare schemes, whereby 12-20 carers are attached to a public nursery, and supported by a social worker and a teacher. Each daycarer can have up to four children including her own.

Targets for employment and training - Better pay and working conditions and a high level of training in general improve quality. A minimum of **60% of staff working in group daycare**

should be fully trained and **training should be a minimum of three years post 18**, available on a modular basis for late entrants or those in work. **Continuous in-service training** and upgrading of skills is likely to be as important as initial training, as ideas about what children need and how they learn are revised. **Men should be encouraged to work in services** to challenge gender stereotyping, and **trades union affiliation should be supported**. **Pay and conditions should match that of other public sector workers** such as teachers.

Examples:

Denmark training for childcare is 4 years post 18 undertaken on a modular basis. 60% of workers in services have obtained this basic training. About 20% of workers in services are men. Most workers are affiliated to BUPL, which represents Danish childcare workers and undertakes research on their behalf.

Italy does not have national requirements for initial training, but in some regions in-service training is regarded as highly important; workers have a 36 hour week of which 6 hours is non-contact time for planning and training. Groups of 10-12 nurseries are serviced by pedagogues or co-ordinators, who organize the training.

Targets for environment and health - The notion that space is liberty informs provision in a number of countries. **All environments in early childhood services should meet basic health and safety** requirements but should aim to do more: **the planning of the environment and its spatial organization should reflect the educational philosophy of the service and take account of the views of parents, staff and other interested parties**. Staff need space too, and **5% of internal space should be available for adult use**.

Examples:

Germany is highly environmentally conscious and new buildings must meet strict ecological requirements. In Frankfurt and Berlin there have been outstanding new building programmes for kindergartens which emphasize the importance of good architecture for children as well as careful ecology.

Denmark has more than 120 woodland kindergartens which operate on the outskirts of towns throughout the year as a resource for daycare centres.

Targets for working with parents and the community - Family lifestyles and structures have changed considerably in the last twenty years, and such family diversity has to be accepted. **Parents are collaborators and participants in early years services. As such they have a right to give and receive information and the right to express their views, both formally and informally**. Most services for young children are local services and the children who attend them come from the local neighbourhood. **Services should adopt employment procedures which emphasize the importance of recruiting employees who reflect the ethnic diversity of the local community**.

Examples:

UK provision is diverse but some publicly funded nurseries call themselves community nurseries; all children and staff come from the local community. The nurseries cater for working parents and offer educational opportunities to non-working parents through informal classes and courses for subjects as diverse as parenting skills, yoga or writing clubs.

France funds *crèches parentales* - nurseries for children under three run by parents who also work with the children alongside regularly employed workers. Through the *contrats enfance* programme it also funds other community based arrangements for *crèches*.

Targets for measuring performance - No publicly funded service should be without scrutiny, but in a developing service this should involve internal and external assessment, qualitative as well as quantitative measures. **Services should demonstrate how they are fulfilling their**

objectives and how they have spent their budget. The views of parents and staff, as well as **monitoring the progress of children** should contribute to this assessment. **The views of parents and the wider community should be an integral part of the assessment process. Staff should regularly assess their performance and/or be assessed.**

Examples:

Italy has a number of projects where local authorities work closely with local universities in devising assessment programmes which incorporate educational, organizational and management perspectives.

Belgium has a public agency which monitors services for young children, including participatory observation scales.

SUMMARY

Equal access to good quality early years services is a goal of the European Union. Good quality services are a necessary part of the economic and social infrastructure. Equal access to these services is essential for equality of opportunity between men and women; for the well-being of children, families and communities; and for productive economies. It is a goal to be espoused at all levels - local, regional, national and European - and a goal for which all of these levels can and should work together.

This has been a review of:

European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile Employment & Family Responsibilities. (1996). *Quality targets in services for young children*. Brussels: European Commission DG5 Equal Opportunities Unit.

¹ The European Union now consists of 15 member states Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Austria, Portugal, Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The European Union has a secretariat, the European Commission, which services the European Parliament. Decisions of the Parliament are ratified by a Council of Ministers, each nominated from the current cabinet of each member state, and each with a veto. The Parliament has historically been dominated by centre left parties, but the Council of Ministers, because of the power of veto of right-wing Governments, has been more traditionally been more cautious.

² The European Childcare Network, like other networks, had a limited lifespan, and is now discontinued.

³ In each framework area cited, one or more European countries has *already achieved and implemented* the criteria which are put forward, although no one country has yet fully implemented all of the criteria suggested in all the areas.