

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Margaret M Clark and Tim Waller

We hope this book will help you to understand the similarities and differences between the developments in early childhood education and care across the United Kingdom (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and the Republic of Ireland. As far as we are aware there is no current publication that distinguishes the developments across these five countries. Indeed many publications are misleading in that they refer to the United Kingdom, then discuss only developments specific to England.

The impetus for this book was our awareness that:

- Many of those involved in framing government policy, and its implementation, may not consider the broader picture.
- Not all Students are made aware of just how different developments are in those parts of the UK other than where they are studying or working.

Bearing these points in mind, this book is planned to meet the needs of a wide readership in the UK and overseas.

## THE AIMS OF THE BOOK

---

The following are important features of this book:

- It is planned as a textbook for students of Early Childhood and Early Years education and care (interpreting the term student widely).
- It should be of interest to practitioners working with children in the age range birth to eight years of age.
- It should help readers to appreciate the differences in policy and practice across the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.
- The reality for young children and their families of current provision is brought alive by case studies of children born in 2000.

## 2 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

- Developments in early education and care across the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland are compared with those in other countries.
- Key issues and discussion points are highlighted throughout the book.

### THE UNITED KINGDOM AND THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

---

You will see from the map of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland (Figure 1.1) that the British Isles – as, a geographical and not a political area – lies off the west coast of the mainland of Europe. The United Kingdom consists of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Northern Ireland covers about 20 per cent of the north east of the island of Ireland: the remaining 80 per cent form the Republic of Ireland, an independent democracy. The terminology used to describe the area that might geographically be referred to as the British Isles is confusing; this you will discover if you try to access any statistics on the web! Furthermore both the terminology and the relative autonomy of the various parts have changed over time. The problem is also exacerbated by a tendency for publications, even statistical analyses, to use the terms ‘United Kingdom’ or ‘Britain’ for information that does not apply to the whole of the UK.

The majority of the UK’s population lives in England, with only about 16 per cent in the remaining three countries (see Table 1.1). However, if you look at the map you will see that the areas covered by the remaining three countries are extensive; in Scotland and Wales in particular there are many rural communities, and Scotland also encompasses island communities. The population of the Republic of Ireland in 2006 was about 4.2 million, an increase of 318,000 since the previous census in 2002.

The most comprehensive source of background information on the many aspects of life relevant to education and care – including population trends and distribution, family make up and minority ethnic groups – is the census that takes place every ten years in the United Kingdom, with the most recent in 2001. However the data for England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are reported separately, with some questions differing and the results also processed separately (see [www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk)).

TABLE 1.1 The United Kingdom population in 2004

Country	Population	Percentage of UK population
England	50,093,100	83.7
Scotland	5,078,400	8.5
Wales	2,953,500	4.9
Northern Ireland	1,710,300	2.9

The following information for the United Kingdom is taken from mid-2004 (see [www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk)).

Over the intervening years further analyses have taken place using the census data, some with important implications for the education and care of young children. These can be accessed on the web in a user-friendly format which is helpful for school projects and for researchers. In two articles (Clark, 2003; 2004) the implications of the 2001 census for education in Scotland, England and Wales are discussed. The information for these articles was taken from the analyses as these were appearing on the web. As the census takes place every ten years it is possible to study whether the population is growing: if it is an ageing population; the ethnic distribution; the urban/rural distribution; whether there is a drift away from the cities – all relevant to expenditure on education and care.

It should be remembered that major changes may take place over the ten-year period, and concern has been expressed at possible unreliability in recent census returns. It is necessary to consult different sources for statistical information on the Republic of Ireland as the census there is taken on a different date; the last census in the Republic of Ireland was in 2006, and so by 2007 detailed analyses should begin to appear (see [www.cso.ie](http://www.cso.ie)).

There have been a number of changes in population since the census of 2001 as a consequence of inward migration (particularly in England). By the time of the last census in 2001 the population of the UK had risen to 59 million. It is predicted that the population of the United Kingdom will further rise by 7 million by 2031, with different trends in the four countries and the majority of the rise in England.

The case studies will help you to appreciate how the provision for young children and their families varied between countries, and differed when some moved from one part of a country to another.

Imagine you are the parent of young children. How might you find out what provision is available in your area, and how suitable it might be for your family's needs? One source of such information would be the web. It is worth attempting this task as it is a problem faced by many parents.

What aspects of population trends are important for those planning early education and care for young children? For example, why are the following important in ensuring that provision meets need – the predicted age distribution, the urban/rural pattern, minority ethnic population trends and their distribution across the countries?

#### A BRIEF OUTLINE OF DEVELOPMENTS TOWARDS DEVOLUTION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM AND THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

---

1922 the setting up of the Irish Free State meant that Ireland, apart from Northern Ireland, was no longer ruled by Britain.

#### 4 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

1937 the written constitution of Ireland was adopted that defines Ireland as a sovereign, independent and democratic state.

1948 the Irish Republic was declared with its parliament based in Dublin. As you will see from the map (Figure 1.1) this applies only to part of the island of Ireland (see Chapter 4 for further details).

The United Kingdom refers to England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. However, powers over a number of aspects of life including education and care have progressively been developed as follows:

1973 the Northern Ireland Assembly was set up to govern Northern Ireland, based in Belfast. However, during the intervening years direct rule was reintroduced (see Chapter 3).

1999 a Scottish Executive was established, answerable to a re-established Scottish parliament based in Edinburgh (see Chapter 5).

1999 a National Assembly was created in Wales, based in Cardiff and with executive powers including those for education. Further developments are currently underway (see Chapter 6).

It should be noted that the Channel Islands (between the south coast of England and France) with a population of about 150,000 consists of two separate dependencies, Jersey and Guernsey. The Isle of Man (in the Irish Sea and almost equidistant from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales) with a population of about 76,000 is a UK dependency. Early education and care in these communities are not covered in this publication.

With devolved government developing in the United Kingdom, and Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales gaining greater power over their own destinies, the policies for early education and care for children from birth to eight years of age are likely to diverge further. The differences and continuing similarities in policy and practice should become clearer to you after reading the following chapters.

In Chapter 7 itself we will help you to relate developments in the five countries to each other and to developments elsewhere.

#### OECD REPORTS ON DEVELOPMENTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

---

In 1996 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) initiated a review of early childhood education and care. This review over the period 1998–2004 involved 20 countries, with expert teams evaluating each country's policy for children from birth to compulsory school age. The report covering the first 12 countries was published as *Starting Strong* (OECD, 2001). The second report, *Starting Strong II*, was published in 2006 and covers all 20 countries, also assessing progress in the original 12 countries. The countries involved provide a diverse range of social, economic and political contexts and also approaches to policy. The

reports for each of the participating countries are to be found in the appendices to *Starting Strong* (OECD, 2001) and *Starting Strong II* (OECD, 2006). There are 'Background Reports' for each country, which precede and inform the 'Country Notes'. There are also brief résumés for each country under the following headings:

- developments
- country context
- provision
- staffing and training
- policy issues.

You can access the summary and the detailed reports on the OECD website (see [www.oecd.org/edu/earlychildhood](http://www.oecd.org/edu/earlychildhood)). This is a useful source for you to compare developments in these 20 countries.

Among the original 12 countries were the Republic of Ireland (referred to as Ireland in the publications) and, as it appears on the list, the United Kingdom. When you look more closely you will find that much of the information given is either specific to England, or it is difficult to determine whether or not it applies to all four countries of the UK. The detailed *Background Note* Bertram and Pascal, (2000), for example, is misleading as its title is 'Early Childhood Education and Care policy in the United Kingdom'. While in places it is possible for someone knowledgeable about differences in the constituent parts of the UK to appreciate what does and does not apply as a whole, this would not be clear to the general reader. Furthermore, the reference list cites no official sources other than those that apply to England. In the brief 'Country Notes' in the appendix to *Starting Strong* (OECD, 2001) the heading is 'United Kingdom (England)' and in *Starting Strong II* (OECD, 2006) the heading reads 'United Kingdom', but underneath in brackets states 'most of the following profile applies to England only'.

These recent publications reinforced our conviction that a book such as the present one is timely in which the differences between policy and practice in the various countries that make up the United Kingdom are clearly identified. This is not possible from either of the two OECD reports mentioned above. *Starting Strong* (2001) could have left readers assuming there is a general policy for early education and care in the UK, or that only minor differences existed. In their introduction to the *Background Report for the United Kingdom*, Bertram and Pascal report that:

The component elements of the United Kingdom – England, Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland – are each developing slightly different systems of ECEC, a process that will gain greater impetus from the recent measures devolving greater political autonomy. In this document, the authors have focused primarily on the English system and have attempted to show where and how there are differences in the other countries and province which make up the UK, including evidence on Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland where appropriate. (Bertram and Pascal, 2000: 6 – also available on the OECD website under the authors' names).

## 6 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Readers of that report could be forgiven for believing that the differences were minor and that the government institutions controlling the developments were the same. This is not so, and indeed as far as Scotland is concerned the Secretary of State for Education, the DfES and Ofsted have never had powers in that country; there have been no 'Key Stages', nor has *the* National Curriculum ever applied there. Different Education acts existed even before a Scottish parliament was re-established in 1999 (see Chapter 5).

Elsewhere, while policy for education in Wales may have mirrored that of England's in many respects until the Government of Wales Act in 1999 and the establishment of the Welsh Assembly, since then policies still current in England have increasingly been rejected (see Chapter 6). The situation in Northern Ireland has been complex over the many years of what has been referred to as 'The Troubles', with tragic effects on the lives not only of adults but also of children and their families. In recent years policy differences in Northern Ireland have also been on the increase since the Belfast Agreement of 1998, although as we write the Northern Ireland Assembly is currently suspended (see Chapter 3).

You will find information on the Republic of Ireland in both *Starting Strong* reports; in the 2006 report there is both an appraisal of developments in the Republic of Ireland, and an assessment of the extent to which recommendations made in the earlier report in 2001 have been implemented, (readers are alerted to these points in Chapter 4).

John Bennett, programme manager for the OECD's early childhood reviews, has stressed the importance of not leaving early childhood provision at the mercy of the market; that a strong infrastructure provided by government is required. In addition he identifies a need to strengthen parental leave policies and full-time home care for children in their first year. This he argues is needed to produce a life-work balance and reconcile family responsibilities with employment. He also expresses concern that the conceptual divide between education and care that still remains in many countries has negative consequences for children, inducing an over-emphasis on the cognitive development of children in education to the detriment of care and social attachment (Bennett, 2003: 44).

Consult the OECD website (available at [www.oecd.org/edu/earlychildhood](http://www.oecd.org/edu/earlychildhood)) and assess the extent to which the 20 countries involved in the review differ with regard to the issues identified by Bennett (2003), namely government infrastructure versus market forces, parental leave to enable life-work balance, full-time home care for children in their first year and the emphasis on cognitive development in the curricular guidelines.

### CONCEPTS OF CHILDHOOD

---

As in the five Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden), the differences between the developments in the five UK countries

and the Republic of Ireland, as considered in this book, are no doubt underpinned by common assumptions about childhood not made explicit in the policy documents (see *Nordic Childhoods and Early Education*: Einarsdottir and Wagner, 2006). However, as in the Nordic countries there are real differences in some aspects of provision for education and care across the constituent parts of the UK and also the Republic of Ireland.

We should remember that what we do to and for young children is not 'natural', but to quote Spodek 'rather a cultural invention that was created over a period of time' ... We value childhood, but one is not sure that we appreciate the nature of childhood itself ... too often we value childhood as preparation for later life rather than as a stage of life in its own right'. Spodek, as an American writing the preface to *Nordic Childhoods and Early Education* (Einarsdottir and Wagner, 2006), stresses that any study of the policies and practices in other countries not only enables us to learn about their approaches, but also should help us to gain a greater understanding of the cultural assumptions that underpin our own practices.

Einarsdottir and Wagner in Chapter 1 of their book stress that Nordic people generally view childhood as important in its own right, not simply as a platform from which to become an adult. Furthermore they begin formal schooling later than children in many other parts of the world, so Nordic children have both the time and freedom during their early childhood years to play and explore the world around them, unencumbered by excessive supervision and control by adults.

Some of the contributors to *Nordic Childhoods and Early Education* express the fear that more formal and academic curricula are beginning to spread from other countries into the Nordic countries. The Nordic region includes five countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden), each with their own language, and while all are distinct in important ways (which is possibly more apparent to themselves than to outsiders), they each share deeply cherished views of childhood and children as reflected in their social welfare and educational policies. Children's right to free play has been a core value in Nordic early childhood education as has the almost universal right of access to preschool, which is not the case in some countries where targeted provision is the norm. The authors comment that a recent United Nation's report claims that the Scandinavian societies are the world's most equal, especially economically and between genders.

In the Nordic countries the following characteristics would be stressed:

- An holistic approach to caring, upbringing and learning.
- A resistance to sequential discipline-based learning, cognitive skills and school readiness.
- A disapproval of testing and assessments that rank young children.
- The primacy of play. From an oral presentation by Thomas Moser at the EECERA 16th Conference in Reykjavik 2006.

Moser stresses the fear common amongst Early Years practitioners in the Nordic countries that the pedagogical curricula currently being introduced might change the focus from social learning and play – with children as the

## 8 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

active creators of their culture and as actors of their own development and learning (child-based not teacher-based) – to an emphasis where school readiness, teacher-directed learning and testing become the norm.

You will find that in the Nordic countries early childhood, and the views of children themselves, have been paramount in policy decisions. Thus there is a tendency for childcare to be provided as a universal right. There has also been respect for the rights of women and for gender equality for many years: these perceptions influence the provision of childcare, and indeed mean that maternity and paternity leave have each been regarded as a right. In contrast you will also find that in the UK and the Republic of Ireland, as in some other countries, (at least so far) early education and care have tended to be ‘targeted’; aimed to provide for the most disadvantaged, to eliminate poverty and enable lone parents to work or to study.

Four of the five Nordic countries took part in both OECD reviews *Starting Strong* (2001) and *Starting Strong II* (2006) (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden), so you can find further information on the recent developments in these four countries on the OECD website ([www.oecd.org/edu/earlychildhood](http://www.oecd.org/edu/earlychildhood)).

Further information on these issues is to be found in the comparison of developments in early education and care in England, Scotland and Sweden, based on research between 2000 and 2002. In *A New Deal for Children? Re-forming education and care in England, Scotland and Sweden* (2004) Cohen et al. report on a research project undertaken across these three countries. They consider how the national government in each has been changing the relationship between three types of children’s services:

- Early childhood education and care (all the services for children below compulsory school age).
- Schools (for children of school age and beyond).
- School-age childcare.

The research reveals large differences between the position with regard to early education and care in England and Scotland and that of to Sweden at the time of the study, as well as a growing divergence between developments in England and Scotland. They stress that in England and Scotland, the reform process inherited a particular economic and political context very different from that in Sweden; high levels of poverty in families with children and fast-growing employment but with specific groups lagging behind, especially women with low educational attainment and lone mothers. In England, they claim, the rhetoric may be of universality yet so far the evidence has shown targeted provision.

Sweden’s high level of childcare, before and outside of school provision, dates from much earlier than in the British Isles, appearing in the 1970s to meet the needs of working parents and to promote gender equality by enabling women to enter the workforce. However, provision in Sweden should not be seen only in terms of promoting gender equality. As noted earlier, with

reference to *Einarsdottir and Wagner's Nordic Childhoods and Early Education* (2006), Sweden places a high value on childhood in its own right. In that book important issues are raised about current developments within provision for children and how these may affect the childhoods lived by such children. It also stresses that we are passing through a period when childhood is being increasingly institutionalised and brought into the public sphere, and at a much earlier age. Early childhood education and care provision is increasingly being demanded and used. This may be to free parents to enter the workforce, or to begin the process of education at an earlier age.

A very different perspective from that in the Nordic countries is to be found in a recent publication by Zigler et al., *A Vision for Universal Preschool Education* (2006), where the aims of such education in the USA are set out as a in summary and recommendations. The authors stress that research has demonstrated the positive effects of high-quality pre-school programmes. Benefits are listed as including:

- Improved school readiness.
- Reduced grade retention.
- Reduced need for costly remedial and special education services.
- Improved educational test scores. (Zigler et al., 2006: 262)

The United States also took part in the OECD review (2001, 2006) so further information for comparison is available on the OECD website ([www.oecd.org/edu/earlychildhood](http://www.oecd.org/edu/earlychildhood)).

Concern has been expressed recently in the UK in a speech by the chairman of the Education and Skills Select Committee of the House of Commons. Barrie Sheerman claimed that 'children should not start formal schooling until the age of seven'. He suggested that young children are being robbed of their childhood and he contrasted the type of developments in England in particular with those in other European countries that afford a high standard of care for under sevens without putting them in formal education. This issue, which has so far received scant attention in any policy documents in the UK, was reported under the headline 'Early schooling robs kids of childhood' in a weekly online publication available to subscribers to the *Education Journal* (see *Education*, 232, 4 August 2006).

It is important that as you consider the differences in developments across the UK you give thought to some of the commonly held beliefs about childhood and the role of the state in influencing these.

Waller (2005) also gives an overview of current international literature and research that underpin the study of early childhood. Chapter 5 in *An*

## 10 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

*Introduction to Early Childhood* provides a contemporary account of the young child, identifying the following five key tenets of modern theory:

- There are multiple and diverse childhoods.
- There are multiple perspectives of childhood.
- Children are involved in co-constructing their own childhood.
- Children's participation in family, community and culture makes a particular contribution to their life.
- We are still learning about childhood. (Waller, 2005: 77)

A complex model of childhood is further articulated, which is fundamentally different from a narrow 'developmental' approach. This model acknowledges that there are multiple and diverse childhoods. There are local variations and global forms, depending on class, 'race', gender, geography and time. This model also acknowledges that whilst there are multiple perspectives of childhood, it would be wrong to ignore or disregard developmental insights. Views of childhood have changed and are still changing. Waller argues that:

a critical difference between contemporary and traditional views of childhood is that the former recognises the differing contexts of children's lives, children's agency and the significance of children's involvement in co-constructing their own childhood through participation in family, community and culture. (Waller, 2005: 95)

Do you view childhood as a stage in its own right, or mainly as a preparation for adulthood? What are the implications for young children and their families of the expansion of early education and care and the encouraging of mothers of young children to return to work? How important would the type of curriculum advocated be? Do you think there is truth in the statement that 'Early schooling robs kids of childhood'?

### DEVELOPMENTS IN EARLY EDUCATION AND CARE

---

Child-rearing practices and labour patterns had led many governments by the late 1980s to invest in, or greatly expand, early childhood services. Previous policy initiatives in early education were often curtailed because of economic vicissitudes, or a feeling still held by many of those in power that a mother's place was in the home, at least while her children were young (see Chapter 4 on the Republic of Ireland). This new priority, in some instances aimed to eradicate poverty, was both to enable women to participate in the workforce and also to allow women with young children equality of opportunity with regard to work. Recent research has also emphasised the value of positive early childhood experiences in promoting the cognitive and social experiences of children and their long-term success at school.

## INTRODUCTION II

Major changes have been taking place in the early education and care of young children and the following represent important issues in many countries:

- An increase in the quantity of provision.
- The relationship between care and education.
- The quality of provision.
- The appropriate curriculum for young children.
- The training of Early Years professionals.

Not only is there an increase in funding for Early Years services in many countries, but there is also a change in the way such services are delivered.

The early education and care of young children under five years of age, and out-of-hours care for children in schools, currently have a high profile with all political parties in the United Kingdom, in part driven by a desire to encourage more mothers of young children to enter the workforce, or to train to do so. It has yet to be seen whether such rhetoric will be transferred into practice.

Concerns have been expressed by Sylva and Pugh in an article entitled 'Transforming the Early Years in England', where they consider whether the government's promises can indeed be delivered. Though the focus in the article is on England, many of their comments are generally applicable to any government-led initiative (Sylva and Pugh, 2005). Such concerns are worth bringing to your attention before you turn to the following chapters.

- To what extent is the expansion focussed on the needs of children for high quality early education, or is it mainly driven by a wish to enable as many parents as possible to return to work?
- Will there be high quality early education led by well-trained staff, or edu-care provided by a poorly-paid and low-paid workforce?
- How successfully can professionals be integrated into teams when they have different professional cultures, training, salaries and conditions of service?
- Is there a danger that further expansion of the non-statutory sectors may compromise quality?
- Might a government as an election comes closer curtail expansion, or sacrifice quality and put quantity higher up the political agenda? (adapted from Sylva and Pugh, 2005: 24)

As Sylva and Pugh claim, the vision is an excellent one but tensions remain; can we travel this far so fast (p. 22)?

The OECD review team for the UK stressed that provision for early childhood education and care had started from a very low base compared to many other countries (*Starting Strong*, 2001: 180). A number of issues for policy attention were identified in 2001:

- Co-ordination issues.
- Progress requires continued funding.
- Staff recruitment, training and status must be addressed.

## 12 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

- Creation of a quality assurance and inspection regime that will respect diversity.
- A need to increase work-family supports. (adapted from *Starting Strong*, 2001: 180–1)

However, if the emphasis is on structural change, this may hide the need for cultural change as different workforces with different ways of working come together. There are other policy issues that have scarcely found their way on to the agenda. The government may have failed to recognise the enormity of the transition required to implement such changes.

As you read the following chapters it would be helpful for you to check the extent to which the developments described do reflect the aspects noted above: whether there are other initiatives seen only in certain regions/areas and whether indeed there are 'policy issues that have scarcely found their way on to the agenda'. We will return to these issues in Chapter 7.

When you turn to the following chapters you will find that although there are many new initiatives, provision of education and care is 'patchy', they may be too expensive, or may not meet the needs of many women, for example lone mothers who of necessity must work (see Ball and Vincent, 2005). There is ample evidence of this in the stories of those children born in 2000 that start each of the following chapters of this book – how fragile was the provision for many, how easily it could terminate or cease to meet their family's needs. Many of these children had numerous transitions to face by the age of six. Some, as you will see, had to attend several pre-school settings, some of these even concurrently, whilst other families had to call on the support of grandparents at short notice to fill the gaps.

We now have further evidence, from a longitudinal study in the UK, of the positive benefits of high-quality pre-school provision (Sylva et al., 2004; see also Clark, 2005). The findings of the EPPE research (The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education) by Sylva et al. are cited as an additional reason by policymakers for expenditure on expanding the provision of early childhood education and care, and for improving the training of practitioners. Well before entering school, young children have acquired what Sylva and Pugh refer to as 'learning dispositions' as well as key cognitive skills (Sylva and Pugh, 2005). Numerous research studies have illustrated the powerful effect of early education on children's readiness for school and their later success. However, the word 'quality' has now entered the debate with the finding that poor quality childcare may have no, negative or otherwise effect.

The EPPE study has not only confirmed the positive effect of high quality early education, it also 'points to a significant positive influence of the home learning environment' (quoted in Clark, 2005: 80). The design of the research made it possible to go further and look at the particular pedagogic models and

practices in the most effective settings. It was found that the children tended to make better intellectual progress in fully integrated centres that combine care and education, in nursery schools and in settings with staff who have higher qualifications, especially where a large proportion are trained teachers (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004, as discussed in Clark, 2005: 81–2).

Many publications are now available based on the EPPE and linked researches in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. You will find these provide a helpful framework against which to assess current developments, the relative quality of different types of provision and pedagogical approaches (see [www.ioe.ac.uk/projects](http://www.ioe.ac.uk/projects)).

### A CURRICULUM FOR THE EARLY YEARS

---

In his keynote address to the EECERA conference in 2004 John Bennett, programme manager of the OECD early childhood reviews, presented an analysis of curriculum issues in national policy making (Bennett, 2004). According to Bennett in the early childhood context it is probably not appropriate to consider the curriculum in the traditional sense – as a plan of instructional activities; however, he stresses that in the last decade a greater awareness has developed of the need for curricular or pedagogical guidelines. From the evidence in the review he suggests that there is some agreement that programmes should be active, play-based and encourage a wide range of key learning experiences, a view also expressed by the EPPE researchers referred to earlier. First however there are, Bennett argues, two broad types of curriculum along a continuum from broad developmental goals to focussed cognitive goals. Second, he indicates that there is a growing interest in a curriculum for children under three. Thus when considering developments in early education and care in any country one important consideration is the recommended curriculum for the early years, to examine where it lies on this continuum and the consequences for transition to the later stages of education.

Over recent years many Early Years professionals have been concerned that the introduction of written curricular documents for the pre-school years may formalise and narrow the experiences provided for young children (for example, as noted earlier in the Nordic countries). Professionals in England in particular have been concerned that the balance and breadth of the curriculum in the early years in primary schools were being sacrificed in attempts to raise standards of literacy and numeracy, and a demand for primary schools, in England at least, to rank highly in league tables (see Chapter 2). We can take some comfort not only from pledges of massive increases in funding, but also the content of some of the more recent curricular documents, and the stated aim to improve the qualifications of those involved in the education and care of young children.

## 14 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

You will see from Chapters 2–6 that the curriculum in the early years in primary schools differs greatly across the UK; in its breadth, its formality and the extent of continuity with pre-school settings and play-based learning. The transitions faced by young children such as those whose stories we will highlight here, from birth to six years of age – and some even falling within a single day – must still give cause for concern, as must the possible trauma faced by the young child whose initial experience of ‘formal’ education is within the first year in primary school.

As you will find there appears to be no discussion in the UK or the Republic of Ireland as to whether children might be starting school at too young an age, and certainly much earlier than in most other countries. Variation exists in the precise ages of the children entering primary school in the five countries discussed here, however, in all cases it is well before the children are six years of age. In England the introduction of the Foundation stage in 2000, which in 2006 now lasts for two years, may delay the introduction of more formal curriculum ‘subjects’ though the abrupt change that could follow still gives cause for concern. As you will find discussed in Chapter 6, in Wales the Foundation phase lasts for longer. In Scotland, in an attempt to achieve continuity in children’s learning, plans for a 3–18 curriculum are being piloted that will shortly replace the national guidelines for ages 5–14.

For comparisons of policy and developments with regard to age when starting formal schooling as described by the 20 participating countries in the OECD (2006) study see the OECD website ([www.oecd.org/edu/earlychildhood](http://www.oecd.org/edu/earlychildhood)).

### UNDERSTANDING EARLY YEARS POLICY

---

Policy documents often contain statements as facts as though there can be no argument about them, when indeed they may will reflect personal beliefs, cultural norms of the country concerned, or the political leanings of those involved in drafting the documents. Be cautious about accepting statements in documents as facts even where there appears to be a general consensus.

In their recent publication *Understanding Early Years Policy* (Baldock et al., 2005), the authors stress the major impact that policy decisions have on the daily life of Early Years practitioners and the need for practitioners, and particularly those in managerial positions, to understand the process by which policies are developed and implemented. Every setting has its own policies;

however, the policies of central and local government determine both the level of resources provided and also the constraints on how these are spent.

Some of the developments referred to by Baldock and his colleagues are specific to England, and as they remind readers Scotland and Wales now have greater autonomy in this area of policy as well as in many others. Their book is proving a valuable resource to all those interested in Early Years policy.

The authors define policy as:

an attempt by those working inside an organization to think in a coherent way about what it is trying to achieve (either in general or in relation to a specific issue) and what it needs to do to achieve it. (Baldock et al., 2005: 3)

There is an inevitable tension between central government wishing to set policies for the nation and local authorities having to implement said policies. Baldock et al. give examples of where there can be a lack of clarity, an inconsistency between policies arising from different contexts, or even conflict (see p. 5). Broad objectives may be set; however, for these objectives to be achieved there may be a need for changes in the law and not merely the provision of resources. Furthermore, new organisational structures may have to be put in place and new funding found.

The policies of government are heavily influenced by the views of a wide range of organisations, the media and the general public and even short-term political expediency. The government is then dependent on many different agencies and the general public for successful implementation.

How many different departments are likely to be involved in the successful implementation of policy initiatives (see Baldock et al. (2005: 8) for a list).

It is important to bear in mind the warning by Baldock and his colleagues that those outlining a policy may be clear as to the identity of those it is hoped to benefit, *but less clear on the identity of those who may be put at a disadvantage*. They claim that a consensus across political parties in the UK on the importance of Early Years services is a new thing. They also list policies they think will continue over the next ten years at least, regardless of whichever political party is in government in the UK (see p. 12 for details).

Make your own list and consider what developments are likely to have priority, then compare your list with that given by Baldock et al.

Baldock and his colleagues argue that the current UK Labour government's Early Years policy in their first term was aimed, to a significant extent, at getting people off welfare and into work. Some might claim this was placing the

## 16 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

needs of children second; others might claim that reducing child poverty, which has had a high priority, did put children centre stage. However, one outcome of the policies so far had meant that the expansion was more targeted rather than inclusive (with the latter being applicable in the Nordic countries). It may be that some of the new developments currently underway are creating more state structures with a focus on the needs of children and their families; others may indeed be having a negative impact on family life.

Some of the posts now being established in the UK mirror posts established much earlier in the Nordic countries, where childcare was based on more gender equality and equal opportunities for all children rather than on targeted priorities for deprived areas or families.

### OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

---

This book is about developments in policy and practice in the early education and care of children from birth to eight years of age. In Chapters 1 and 7 we consider general issues and indicate ways in which the information in Chapters 2–6 can be used to develop an appreciation of the similarities and differences in policy and practice across the four constituent parts of the United Kingdom (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and in the Republic of Ireland. The authors of these chapters are intimately concerned with developments in early education and care in their respective countries. Each chapter is introduced and brought alive by two case studies, or stories, describing the experiences of children born in that country in 2000. The authors relate the experiences of these children to recent policy initiatives and in the final section of each chapter they discuss how the experiences might differ for children born in 2006 and for their families.

We hope this book will give you an appreciation that there are real differences in the historical background and many aspects of early education and care in these five areas. As you read the 'stories' about the selected children you should hopefully come to appreciate just how dangerous it is to make generalisations about early education and care in the United Kingdom, as is so frequently done even in recent textbooks, in some official publications and often in the media.

No superiority is intended for England from the fact that it is the first country to be considered; the countries are presented in alphabetical order! In Chapter 2 on England, the scene is also set for the subsequent chapters with a number of general references; these you will find of relevance for a broader consideration of policy elsewhere. In Chapters 3–6 you will find details of official publications and websites particular to Northern Ireland, Scotland, the Republic of Ireland and Wales, to enable you to obtain more detail on the policy developments in these countries; these websites will provide sources to enable you to continue to update your knowledge.

### TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

---

What are the implications for young children and their families of the expansion of early education and care? Consider the advantages and disadvantages.

What effects might there be on family life as a result of the encouragement in many countries for the mothers of young children to return to work?

What is the evidence that 'Early schooling robs kids of childhood'?

What kind of curricular documents might reflect a child-centred approach to early education and care?

Curricular documents are now appearing covering children from birth to three years of age. How might these affect the self-esteem of mothers of young children?

We will return to these issues when you have read Chapters 2-6.

You might find it helpful before you turn to a detailed study of Chapters 2-6 to read the ten case studies as tasters to set the scene for what is to follow.

### REFERENCES

---

- Baldock, P., Fitzgerald, D. and Kay, J. (2005) *Understanding Early Years Policy*. London: Paul Chapman.
- Ball, S.J. and Vincent, C. (2005) 'The 'childcare champion? New Labour, social justice and the childcare market', *British Educational Research Journal*, 31 (5): 557-70.
- Bennett, J. (2003) 'Starting Strong', *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 1 (1): 21-48.
- Bennett, J. (2004) *Curriculum Issues in National Policy-making*. Keynote address, EECERA conference, Malta Paris: OECD.
- Bertram, T. and Pascal, C. (2000) *The OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care: background report for the United Kingdom*. Available at: [www.oecd.org/edu/earlychildhood](http://www.oecd.org/edu/earlychildhood)
- Clark, M.M. (2003) 'Education in Scotland: what can we learn from the census', *Primary Practice*, (35): 31-3.
- Clark, M.M. (2004) 'Education and England and Wales: what can we learn from the census', *Primary Practice*, (36): 35-8.
- Clark, M.M. (2005) *Understanding Research in Early Education: The relevance for the future of lessons from the past*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Cohen, B., Moss, P., Petrie, P., and Wallace, J. (2004) *A New Deal for Children? Re-forming education and care in England, Scotland and Sweden*. Bristol: Policy.
- Einarsdottir, J. and Wagner, J. (eds) (2006) *Nordic Childhoods and Early Education*. Greenwich, CI: Information Age.
- Moser, T. (2006) 'The Nordic Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (ECEC) in a Pan-European Perspective'. Oral presentation EECERA conference, Reykjavik.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2001) *Starting Strong: Early childhood education and care*. Paris: OECD.

**18** EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early childhood education and care*. Paris: OECD.
- Sylva, K. and Pugh, G. (2005) 'Transforming the early Years in England', *Oxford Review of Education*, 31 (1): 11–27.
- Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. and Taggart, B. (2004) *The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project: Final Report. A longitudinal study funded by the DfES 1997–2004*. London: SureStart/DfES. Available at: [www.ioe.ac.uk/projects/epe](http://www.ioe.ac.uk/projects/epe)
- Waller, T. (ed.) (2005) *An Introduction to Early Childhood: A multidisciplinary approach*. London: Paul Chapman.
- Zigler, E., Gilliam, W.S. and Jones, S.M. (2006) *A Vision for Universal Preschool Education*. New York: Cambridge University Press.