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Policy Rationales for Early Childhood Services

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This article explores the rationales and the research paradigms that countries have used to underpin policies on early childhood education and care (ECEC) services and to justify expenditure on them. Globalization – here narrowly defined as the global spread of theories and practices about early childhood mainly emanating from Euro-American sources - has led to some convergence of rationales, especially economic rationales. But within countries rationales almost always have deep historical roots, and reflect cultural ideas of motherhood, family, childhood, work and the role of the state. Perspectives may be incompatible yet sit alongside one another without the contradictions being addressed. Policy development and implementation are rarely straightforward or coherent, particularly when early education and care spans several policy areas. The article summarizes the differences between rationales and indicates in which country or groups of countries they are most likely to be found.

Key words: early childhood education and care, policy rationales and implementation

Introduction

Changing Theories, Changing Disciplines

The theoretical ideas and research which inform policy rationales for ECEC, and the academic disciplines from which they are drawn, are shifting. Academic discourses in general are more global, more wide-ranging and more contentious. The discussion of early childhood is based on current perceptions of the needs and interests of young children but whilst this has most often been viewed from a child development perspective, new fields of study have emerged giving a somewhat different picture of how children's interests are best described and served. Most research in the field of child development has been derived from a narrow population of children (mainly from North America and Europe) and may well not be easily generalizable beyond its original catchments (Benson, 2003; LeVine & New, 2008). A new awareness of the inter-disciplinarity of interpretations of childhood is reshaping rationales and justifications for promoting early education and care (Canella & De Soto, 2010). Paradoxically, at the same time as there is greater homogenization and convergence of ideas in systems of early childhood education and care across the world, there is also more contentiousness and more awareness of difference and of how the upbringing of

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Professor of Early Childhood and co-director of the International Centre for the Study of the Mixed Economy of Childcare(ICMEC) at the University of East London, Cass School of Education, Stratford Campus, Romford Road, Stratford, London E15 4LZ, UK. Electronic mail may be sent to h.penn@uel.ac.uk children is deeply culturally embedded (De Loache & Gottleib, 2000).

Economics and Marketization

As well as changing theories and changing disciplines informing ECEC, another important trend is increasing reliance on economic arguments (Penn, 2008). It is claimed that economics is a quantitative, empirical, and scientific way of describing societal transactions, and has led to "a golden age of discovery" (Coyle, 2007, p. 232). Certainly ECEC has become an object of scrutiny for economists (Kilburn & Karoly, 2008). James Heckman (2004, 2008) a Nobel prize-winning economist has argued that investing resources in young children is a good investment. These ideas are widespread and discussed in more detail below.

In economic terms, investment in childcare is increasingly seen in some countries as more cost-effective and more flexible if undertaken by entrepreneurs rather than by the state; rearing young children is seen not as a communal obligation –like education- but as the financial responsibility of parents, who must bear, if not all, then the bulk of the costs.

Sandel (2009) has argued, by contrast, that making a profit from of the needs of vulnerable individuals, like children or old and frail people is morally repugnant, and undermines basic communal solidarity and caring. For-profit childcare is increasingly the main form of childcare in neo-liberal English speaking countries, although much less so within the European Union. For-profit entrepreneurs making money out of providing childcare may exploit not only the parents paying for the service but the workers delivering it, unless sufficiently stringent regulatory conditions are in place-such as capping fees at around 15-20% of household income, or imposing high level competencies for staff.

At the very least entrepreneurial services shape access and equity; services that are provided as part of a childcare market tend to be highly socially stratified, since the access to the service depends on the ability to pay the fees, and the poor experience the worst quality services. Much of the research from the USA, which is widely cited in the child development literature, takes the for-profit market for granted; it fails to take account of the context of marketization. Without tight regulatory controls an entrepreneurial system produces distortions in access and equity for children and families (OECD, 2006). These economic arguments are reflected in one form or another in many of the rationales discussed in this article.

Changing Services, Implementing New Policies

There are relatively few countries where policies have remained static. Within Europe, new targets have been set, of delivering *high quality* services to 33% of children under three and 90% children 3-5 on a fair and equitable basis (EU, 2011). In other countries internal and external pressures have lead to reformulations of policies. The rest of this article explores some of the rationales that are currently being used, their policy implications, their research basis, and the countries where they are most likely to be upheld. This is first of all set out in Table 1 below.

RATIONALE 1: ***Early intervention is a good investment in that it mitigates the expense of remedial action in primary and secondary schooling and results in subsequent adult productivity, and in the relative absence of anti-social behaviour.***

This rationale is derived from human capital theory, which focuses on the economic productivity of individuals over time, and the conditions which enhance it. Investing in people, especially investing in educating them, brings substantial pay-offs. Heckman, the leading theorist of human capital theory argues that investment in early childhood brings greater economic returns than investment in any other stage of education.

Human capital theory has highlighted early childhood intervention as a particularly effective

Table 1
Rationales for ECEC provision

Rationale	**Research Perspective**	**Policy Focus**	**Countries/International organizations using rationale**
Early interventions are a good investment in that they mitigates the expense of remedial action in primary and secondary schooling and results in subsequent adult productivity, and in the relative absence of anti-social behaviour.	Economics, human capital theory, long-term societal benefits: Draws on large-scale longitudinal aggregated data sets and cost- benefit studies of early childhood interventions.	Provide targeted services for the most vulnerable children, for whom investment offers biggest returns.	Neo-liberal English speaking countries , USA, UK, Canada, Australia, Hong-Kong World Bank and other financial institutions and think tanks
Early education (and care) is only a good investment if it is of high quality. Poor care may do more harm than good for the most vulnerable children.	Child development research that suggests good child-staff ratios, staff training and good programmes are essential aspects of quality	Provide targeted early education services with emphasis on defining and monitoring quality	Neo-liberal English speaking countries concerned about extensive private sector provision and how to control it
Early education benefits all young children, enhances dispositions for learning and socializes them for starting school , especially children from poor or migrant families	Child development research about children's leaning processes and teachers pedagogic practices	Provide universal early education as part of an education system ensure access/support for the most vulnerable. Quality includes sensitivity to special educational needs and subsequent school outcomes	Social Welfare countries, countries with universal provision eg France, Nordic countries EU, OECD
Education and lifelong learning essential to competitive knowledge economy. Education promotes social mobility	Education research and comparative education data from OECD and other trans-national sources	Provide free universal early education as part of education system Quality includes subsequent school outcomes	EU, OECD
Women are essential contributors to a dynamic economy.	Economics, cost benefit studies of labour market participation, gender studies	Remove disincentives to women's participation by the provision of full-time affordable childcare (Barcelona targets) Quality includes levels of provision and women's workforce participation	Nordic countries, transitional countries pre-1990 EU, OECD

Table 1
Rationales for ECEC provision (cont'd)

Rationale	**Research Perspective**	**Policy Focus**	**Countries/International organizations using rationale**
Working mothers contribute to tax revenues and lessen the need for social security payments; they make an important contribution to family income	Welfare economics, emphasis on workplace participation of single parents and other parents who would otherwise bed dependent on state benefits	Maternity, paternity and parental leave and provision of full-time childcare, work support schemes Quality measured by mother's (and fathers) well-being and levels of provision	Neo-liberal English speaking countries
Low birth rates below level of replacement a societal problem	Demography, social welfare studies of population growth	Pro-natalist policies, child benefit, maternity and paternity leave, childcare. Quality measured by mother's well-being and rise in birth rate	Some EU and post transitional countries, Taiwan, and other countries with low birth rates
Mothers need to be involved with their children; parents are a child's first educators.	Child development research which stresses critical early period and importance of family environment and mother-child attachments.	Home visiting schemes, parenting classes, mothers as volunteers Quality measured by improved nature of mother-child interactions	Neo-liberal countries with strong maternalist/paternalist traditions World Bank/Unicef/WHO concerned with child survival
Child poverty impacts severely on children's educational performance, their sense of self-worth and their subsequent societal contributions.	Social welfare research on the impact of poverty on families	Redistribution of taxes and benefits and other social policies to mitigate child poverty; labour market legislation such as minimum wage Quality measured by reduction in child poverty	Social Welfare countries, mainly Nordic countries UNICEF
Children, including young children, are rights bearers and *all* children have a right to protection, provision and participation	Legal requirements of Human Rights/Child Rights legislation Legal/sociological studies investigating children's experiences and well-being in the here and now, and children's agency	Broad approach, including reduction of child poverty, health and welfare support; defining provision from children's perspective. Quality measured by children's reported well-being	Nordic countries UNICEF

economic investment. The evidence is derived from controlled trials of centre-based early intervention with long-term follow-up, i.e. for at least 15 years, following a young child into early adulthood. As such studies are very expensive and time consuming to carry out, there are not many of them. The studies on which Heckman has largely relied are Perry High Scope (Barnett, 1996); the Abecedarian (Ramey et al., 2000); and the Chicago Child-Parent Centres (Reynolds, 2000). These interventions took place in the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's and were carried out in ghettoized areas in the USA. The populations investigated were overwhelmingly Black African and Hispanic. The Abecedarian study investigated a particularly deprived population. The first two were randomized controlled trials and the third used a control group. Each of the three intervention studies has spawned a series of publications over decades. The three interventions differed from each other in their aims, the age ranges of the children, the length of time of the intervention, the role played by mothers, the outreach facilities available, and in various other ways. The cost-benefit calculations based on the studies follow broadly similar and acceptable economic procedures. These are, however, reliant on specific local school models for their costings (repeat years, nature of remedial assistance) and use USA databases to make other financial projections, for instance on juvenile offending rates and crime compensation. Victim compensation is uniquely high in the USA because of the high incidence of gun-related crime in the USA (Aos, Phipps, Barnoski, & Lieb, 2001) so it is unlikely that savings of the order reported from early intervention in these studies would accrue in any other country.

There are many questions to be asked about the wisdom of generalizing from micro-level interventions with highly vulnerable groups of ethnic minorities. Jerome Kagan, for example, an eminent Harvard psychologist, argues that the claims for long term benefits arising from early interventions are put forward, despite lack of convincing evidence, because the alternative, the recognition of deep inequalities in the USA and the *lack* of social mobility is so painful, and contradicts the rhetoric of opportunity for those who work hard. In addition, increasing taxation to pay for services is politically unacceptable (Kagan, 1998).

But even if the evidence on which Heckman relies is parochial, does targeting in early childhood make sense? If there is not enough money to provide services for all children, should services for some children be prioritized? The policy focus of much of the economic work on ECEC is to suggest that targeted interventions are the most cost-effective in producing better outcomes. All governments must ration resources and prioritize, and targeting the children who can benefit most is a useful strategy.

Gary Becker, another Nobel prize-winner, has forcefully argued that investment in early childhood interventions is only cost-effective for vulnerable children. Even then it should be in the form of vouchers which poor families can spend on any approved private daycare. In his view, the market will ensure a sufficient and adequate supply of provision, and competition would ensure sufficient quality, for all types of demand. This approach is informed above all by the neo-liberal view that the state has a minimalist role and more tax is always bad (Becker, 2005).

The OECD report *Starting Strong II* (2006), on the contrary, suggests that targeting vulnerable children has significant drawbacks. The report cites the adage "a service for the poor is a poor service." Targeted provision is more likely to be located in poor areas, and to be poorly staffed and staff may have lower aspirations for children. Targeting is associated with stigmatization and may be unpopular with the very families for whom it is designed, so that take-up is low. The social segregation involved in targeting at a pre-school level is likely to continue into primary schooling, in so far as the targeted provision is attached to a primary school. The problems of boundary maintenance between the poor and non-poor and the administrative resources needed to decide on eligibility for scarce places may be inefficient. Targeted programmes for vulnerable children may only have short-term funding and be vulnerable to political trends. Finally, as the history of the USA *Head Start* programme suggests, targeted programmes get sidelined and do not feed into the mainstream (Zigler & Styfco, 2004). Nonetheless neo-liberal conservative administrations invariably support targeted interventions for the poorest, because such an approach fits in with other deeply felt political beliefs about the place of the poor and how to deal with them.

The rationale for targeted early interventions then is much less robust than it might appear.

RATIONALE 2: ***Early education (and care) is only a good investment if it is of high quality. Poor care may do more harm than good especially for the most vulnerable children.***

Two reviews by Paul Leseman (2002, 2009) suggest that there are well-known basic criteria to ensure minimum quality including generous adult-child ratios, well trained adults and a stimulating cognitive environment. The policy challenge is to

> "*(re)build (current) systems of ECEC to meet crucial design features*" to provide quality ECEC services for *all* children that are "*integrated and attractive and affordable to all families regardless of social class or minority status*", yet sensitive to differing educational needs (2009, p. 39)

McCartney comments that "the importance of child care quality is one of the most robust findings in developmental psychology" (2004, p. 5). Good quality ECEC provision produces good outcomes, and conversely poor provision leads to worrying outcomes. Children who have experienced poor care may behave in negative or aggressive ways. Their social and language development may be impaired.

These quality factors are deemed to operate across all kinds of provision. In fact, research is emerging which suggests that for-profit care may be problematic, not only because of issues of access and equity, but because it offers poorer quality care. Studies in a number of countries suggest that for-profit care is usually of lower quality than either non-profit care or state provided care. Noailly and Visser (2009) suggest that the introduction of a free market and demand led subsidies in childcare in the Netherlands has led to a shift away from non-profit provision in poorer areas to for-profit provision in high-income urban areas. Cleveland and his colleagues (2007) reanalysed large scale Canadian data sets and came up with an estimate of the difference in quality between for-profit and non-profit care to be between 7.5% to 22%. Using the NICDH data, Laura Sosinsky and her colleagues (2007) examined the relationship between childcare quality, cost and type of provision, and concluded that for profit-care, especially corporate care, was likely to have more poorly trained staff, to pay them less, and to be rated lower for quality than non-profit provision . In the UK, the inspection service OFSTED reports that the poorest care is to be found in the poorest areas.

Quality issues in countries where services are provided on a marketized basis have raised real concerns. But mainstreamed state services are certainly not exempt from criticism. There is discussion in the OECD report of the *schoolification* of early education and care (OECD, 2006). Where ECEC services are regarded as a downward extension of the school system, rather than as a system specifically designed to meet the needs of young children, provision may be inappropriate – formalized teaching of large groups over-relying on didactic approaches, an over-emphasis on targets and testing, and rigid regimes taking place in unsuitable spaces. This criticism has been levelled for instance at both the French system (Brisset & Gosle, 2006); and at the English system (Open EYE Early Years Campaign, 2008).

RATIONALE 3: ***Early education benefits all young children and socializes them for starting school, especially children from poor and migrant families.***

There is more or less unanimous agreement in the child development literature that children's earliest experiences and learning form the basis for subsequent learning. "Skills beget skills", and infancy and early childhood are critical periods for learning. There is widespread agreement that early learning is extensive and important as a basis for subsequent dispositions for learning; for language, cognition, numeracy and emotion regulation, although theoretical conceptions of the processes involved may differ. The evidence from the field of child development has been very adequately reviewed by Leseman (2002). He comes up with the same holy grail of integrated services, an optimal arrangement that in practice, has been so very hard for most countries to achieve.

> The ideal early education system is both integrated and differentiated, ensuring both common developmental and educational goals, yet is adaptive to individual needs and preferences, and works both in a child centred and family centred way. The system joins up the different kinds of care, education and support that are provided and is marked by equivalent quality regulations for all systems. (2002, p. 40)

Some commentators have felt it necessary to try to use neuro-scientific evidence to underpin arguments for early education. The argument has been used by UNICEF-IRC, for example in its 2008 report card on ECEC. It is fairly well established that the brain shows remarkable plasticity and adaptivity and grows extremely rapidly in the first few years. The stimulation of the brain through "appropriate" care giving, (that is by the carer talking, singing and reading to very young children), is said to develop neural networks and promote brain growth. But these claims have been pumped up by the media. There is *no direct* neuro-scientific evidence to back up the claim that teaching mothers and carers how to stimulate their children makes a significant difference to long-term outcomes. Critical periods are exceptional, rather than typical in brain development, brain development is life-long but above all the study of the human brain is in its conceptual infancy. Most neuroscientists point to the extreme complexity of the brain and caution against such extrapolation. (Thompson & Nelson, 2001)

There is a widespread consensus, that *quality* early education benefits ***all*** children, and extends and enhances the learning that is naturally taking place, especially in the domains of cognition and in emotional regulation (UNESCO, 2010). Most European countries have accepted this argument and offer an entitlement to nursery education for all children from aged 3 or 4 years, as part of a wider state education system.

However, there is not a consensus about how much nursery education should be provided, at what age it should be provided or what the content of it should be, or indeed how teachers might be trained to deliver it. The nature of the entitlement varies considerably across countries, by type of provision and number of hours of entitlement. Preschool and childcare are used interchangeably in the literature but in practice they may refer to many different kinds of arrangements. Nursery education is by definition located within an education system in which explicit (national) curricular goals are set, and in which the educational performance of the child is measured according to national expectations and standards. The staff usually has pay and working conditions which are negotiated with teacher unions and are nationally set in line with the hours and holidays offered by primary and secondary schools, but which preclude the more flexible arrangements that care services offer.

In all countries take-up of nursery education is very high and has increased in recent years as more provision has become available. It is a clearly popular service, not least because it is free and is seen as a useful preparation for school. Parents see it as being a valuable service for their children, and there is almost 100% take-up in those countries where it is offered, unlike targeted services where there is frequently a problem of uptake by the most vulnerable families.

RATIONALE 4: ***Education and life-long learning are essential to a competitive knowledge economy. Education promotes social mobility.***

Across the EU there is concern about the competitiveness of the economy, and the role that education – and the state - has to play in providing and updating individuals with the skills they need in order to be productive citizens, and in order to promote inclusiveness. Children are viewed as potentially productive individuals, whose most important contribution lies in the future - hence the emphasis on preparing them for their productive future through appropriate education reforms. Conversely, it is important to avoid lack of productivity, and to ensure that children are not excluded from these ambitious futures, or take paths that undermine the future of others – such as crime. Social inclusion policies aim to ensure that all children are involved in the drive towards productivity.

Children have different endowments at birth; genetically, environmentally, and in their opportunities for family life and material support. If equity is considered as an important goal for education, that is providing all children with equal opportunities to benefit from their educational experiences, then early education is doubly important.

In some countries, despite significant recent investment in early years, social mobility appears to have decreased. The evidence strongly suggests that poverty and vulnerability are multi-causal. Education, including early education, may make an important contribution but cannot redress wider inequalities or produce social mobility per se. The greater the degree of inequality, the more difficult it is to achieve social mobility (Dorling, 2010).

RATIONALE 5: ***Women are essential contributors to a dynamic economy.***

In 2000, the EU Lisbon Summit stressed the need for the EU to retain a competitive edge and recognized the employment of women made an indispensable contribution to the economy.

Human capital theory stresses *individual* productivity and economic progress over a lifetime, and has come to replaced social welfare models which see productivity as a supportive partnership between individuals, families and the state. For women and children this shift from family welfare concerns to competitive individualism has been a setback. Jenson (2008) argues that human capital theory in its emphasis on life-long learning, and on the economic contribution of successful and productive individuals by default ignores or downplays the particular conditions and circumstances of women and children - which are not the same as those of men. Structural issues are of less importance in human capital theory than is the encouragement of individual striving. But women have legitimate concerns - for example care for the very young and elderly - which are at odds with the demands of a competitive economy.

In order to enable women to participate fully in the workforce other measures are necessary too – work and family life have to be reconciled. Maternity leave and parental leave arrangements have to dovetail with care and education, in order for mothers to hold down jobs. There is a broad consensus that rather than provide care for the very youngest children, it may be better in the interests of the child as well as in the interests of the mother to offer mothers and fathers maternity/paternity leave to cover up to the first year of life. Some countries offer considerably more than this, up to 3 years. At a minimum, the leave policies need to relate to the availability – and perceived desirability of – formal childcare. In most countries the majority of very young children (under three) with working mothers are cared for informally. Many mothers are heavily reliant on the assistance of their family, sharing care with husbands or partners or with grandparents or other family members.

Plantenga and Remery (2009) provide a comprehensive review of the inter-relationships between childcare and leave arrangements in Europe.

Mothers are more willing to work if they have flexible employment conditions, if they have adequate maternity, paternity and parental arrangements, and *if they are satisfied with the childcare available to them* – its affordability, availability and quality. In France, for example, there are clear correlations between parental leave, the provision of childcare and mother's workforce participation. But there are also countries which have a very high level of participation of mothers with young children, and do not have either the childcare or the leave arrangements – most notably the USA and Canada. Because mothers work despite the absence of these arrangements, some economists take it as a sign that they are not necessary. Aggregate figures of mothers workforce participation on which such judgements are often based conceal substantial variation within and across countries and obscure the dilemmas expressed by mothers, and the problematic circumstances of children who attend poor quality childcare provision.

These leave arrangements of course apply only to those countries where work is regulated. Within the EU There have been many directives about working conditions, in order that one country does not have an unfair advantage over another. Even so in most, if not all, countries there is an informal economy, by its very nature unrecorded, where jobs are paid in cash, no questions asked. Women – mothers – take up these jobs in catering, in hospitality, in care work, in cleaning and in agriculture. Often these jobs are done by migrants. Several writers have identified what is called "the care chain" whereby mothers from poor countries such as the Philippines or the Caribbean islands leave their families behind, and come to rich countries to look after other people's children and elderly relatives (Ehrenrich & Hothschild, 2003). Mothers can buy in nannies and au pairs, and go out to work, but they may do so at the expense of other women who have left their families a continent away. This is a common phenomenon in well-to-do families in richer countries.

In poor countries, there is a great deal of migration from rural to urban areas. In these situations mothers leave their rural communities, and struggle to survive in townships or favelas. They work very long hours as domestic servants or as market traders. Nurseries have mushroomed rapidly in urban centres to cater for them but are usually of very poor quality. About 30% of young children are simply left at home to fend for themselves. So in rich countries, and in Europe, there are some privileges for mothers at work; but other mothers are conveniently overlooked. For mothers in poor countries gender equality may appear unrealisable (Heymann, 2006).

RATIONALE 6: *Working mothers contribute to tax revenues and lessen the need for social security payments; they make an important contribution to family income*

One reason for encouraging mothers into the labour market is that social security payments to single mothers and mothers in low income households are regarded as a drain on the national economy, but once in work, such mothers contribute instead of taking from tax revenues. There is then a net benefit to the treasury. Another reason for encouraging mothers of young children to work is that the poorest households tend to be workless households and wages critically augment family income.

Mothers are more likely to work if they have flexible employment conditions, good parental leave and good childcare. But the local job market is also likely to be a critical factor. Work is more difficult for mothers if they have to add travelling time to their working day. If there is only factory work or shift work or some other kind of low paid inflexible employment mothers may be better off, financially and emotionally, by not working officially (although they may have cash in hand jobs). The ratio of costs and benefits in individual households may not be sufficient to entice women to work. Immigrant women may have particular difficulties in obtaining employment.

So although policy makers have homed in on mothers' waged work, especially single mothers and mothers from low income families, and this forms part of standard economic reasoning about women's workforce participation, the evidence is contradictory. The participation of mothers in the workforce differs considerably within and across countries; without the spectrum of support mothers are less likely to work.

Countries where the spectrum of support *is* available tend to have very high mothers' labour force participation rates, assuming that the jobs are available. In many ex-communist countries work was *compulsory*, but the leave and childcare arrangements were also in mostly place. The labour market for women shrank after transition and so did the childcare (UNICEF-IRC, 2006).

RATIONALE 7: *Mothers need to be involved with their children; parents are a child's first educators*

One rationale that is often put forward, in apparent contradistinction to efforts to persuade mothers of young children to work, is that mothers have an important job to do in bringing up children. Caring for others is a task which involves commitment and reciprocity. Caring for children in particular is time consuming and physical. Time use studies on the impact of children on adult time suggest that mothers are overwhelmingly preoccupied by their young children; fathers much less so. Employed mothers typically work what is called "the double shift", and have to undertake their caring role alongside their paid work frequently at personal cost such as the loss of leisure and the loss of sleep (Craig, 2009). The use of the word "parent" blurs this gender inequity in the distribution of childcare and household tasks.

Studies of mothering suggest that mothers focus on the material and emotional welfare of their children, that they pursue a different "ethic of care" from that of teachers. Mothers' knowledge and relationship to their children is not scientific and generalized, but anecdotal, subjective, ad hoc, and continuous - developing and changing over time within a specific context. Mothers usually love and protect their children; they have intense and intimate relationships with their children, especially when they are very young and they dream about their futures. Teachers and professionals, on the other hand, tend to hold more abstract, norm-related knowledge and expectations of children, unrelated to context, and without expectations of reciprocity or continuity. Young children in turn develop rapidly but are dependent physically and emotionally on their mothers and other carers.

Those commentators who have attempted to extrapolate from neuro-scientific studies of the brain argue that the mother's role is a key one in stimulating cognitive growth and developing the brain (Mustard, 2006). Others are considerably more sceptical about the use of such studies in justifying particular approaches to parenting (Penn, 2011). The evidence does suggests that mothers from poor homes do worse in preparing their children for the specific requirements of school, irrespective of ethnicity or any other variables (Feinstein et al., 2008). A mother's educational level and social class is strongly correlated with child outcomes. The differences in the willingness or capabilities of families to take advantage of educational opportunities exacerbate social class differences and limit actual equality of opportunity.

The importance of the home environment, and in particular the vulnerability of children from dysfunctional homes, has led some countries to invest in home visiting and parental education programmes. If the role the mother plays is crucial in determining a child's initial progress and subsequent readiness for school, so it makes sense to focus on the home environment and home-school relationships in the early years. The literature on parental involvement however tends not to disaggregate gender, and makes assumptions about the availability of mother's time and willingness to engage in such programmes. In addition recent evidence suggests that home visiting and parent education do not significantly affect children's outcomes, although they may in some cases alter parental behaviour (Waldfogel, 2004).

But it is also a global experience that families are more diverse. There are more parents choosing not to marry; more divorce, more single parents; more role reversals between men and women, with men choosing to stay at home, and women choosing to work; older mothers, more mobility within and across countries, and so on. So it is sensible to explore and make explicit the assumptions about family life that are being used as a basis for early childhood intervention.

Given the pressures mothers encounter, the challenge for ECEC services is how to support mothers, those living in vulnerable circumstances, but also working mothers, by recognizing the hours women work inside and outside the home, and by acknowledging their rights as parents. Both the UNICEF-IRC report and the OECD *Starting Strong II* report argue that services should ideally recognize mothers' and fathers' *rights* within services; their right to be informed, to comment, and to participate in key decisions concerning their child.

RATIONALE 8: ***Low birth rates below the level of replacement are a societal problem.***

There is yet another rationale which has prompted countries to invest in ECEC services, this time a demographic one. Almost all rich countries are facing falling birth rates. This fall in birth rates is especially acute in post-transition countries such as the Czech Republic. This is a serious problem because of demographic forecasts about the capacity of some countries to ensure future labour supply and maintain present economic growth. In these countries, parental leave policies tend to be longer and stronger, to support mothers at home.

Family patterns are changing, with educated women choosing to have families later or not at all. A combination of employment, family and ECEC measures to facilitate families in bringing up children undoubtedly supports women's labour force participation, although, as this review has been at pains to point out, the picture is a complex one. Although those countries with the best packages (France and the Nordic Countries) tend to have the highest birth rates, so do Ireland and the UK, which do not have good packages. This lack of a clear correlation between compensatory measures and birth rates has led commentators like Gary Becker (2005) to claim that such compensatory packages are economically wasteful, even if mothers strongly welcome them. They require state expenditure yet there are no direct economic benefits or predicable outcomes (well-being of mothers and children not being counted as an economic benefit). In addition mothers have an important role in bringing up children. Again this paternalistic view is more likely to be found in neo-liberal countries.

The falling birth rates have led some EU countries to reconsider their position about women with young children in the labour market. The February 2009 EU Czech presidency conference *Parental Childcare and the Employment Policy* brought together demographers, family policy experts, and advocacy organizations to reconsider the issue, particularly changes in policy which might encourage mothers to stay at home with young children. The global recession is also likely to throw into question policies concerned with women's employment.

RATIONALE 9: ***Child poverty impacts severely on children's educational performance, their sense of self-worth and their subsequent societal contribution***

There is a substantial literature on child poverty and this is an extremely brief summary. It is unequivocally known that child poverty adversely affects educational outcomes and that relative wealth or poverty is a crucial aspect of child well-being. The issue that concerns us here is the extent to which ECEC services are redistributive, and can combat child poverty.

Bradshaw et al. (2007) have pioneered child focused methods of estimating poverty. They argue for the following indicators of child poverty: material situation, housing, health, subjective well-being, education, children's relationships, civic participation and risk and safety. The team has provided pan-European comparisons using these criteria.

In neo-liberal economies public attitudes towards poverty tend to be hostile; poverty is due to lack of effort rather than to structural inequalities. There is a culturally entrenched public view that poverty is associated with laziness and lack of striving. Wealthy individuals are seen as deserving of their income; and conversely, income inequality is not a major concern. The attitude is that everyone can make it if they try hard enough. In reality some children get off to a flying start, and others face almost insurmountable obstacles (Esping-Anderson, 2004).

Total income is of less importance than inequality. The well-being of children is affected by their and society's perception between their lives and the standard of living enjoyed from more affluent backgrounds. Inequality has also been a concern of the recent UNESCO Education for All Global Monitoring Report (2009) and of the OECD *Growing Unequal? Income Distribution and Poverty in OECD countries* (2008).

In general, child poverty depresses expectations and aspirations. Poverty is not merely income poverty; it typically includes a cluster of adverse factors. Children in low income families are more likely to be living in poorly functioning families; more likely to be living in problem neighbourhoods where there is drug use and high unemployment rates; and more likely to encounter problems with disability –vision, hearing, sight or mobility. Parents from poor and vulnerable families are less likely to seek ECEC services, and children in poverty will have poorer educational outcomes than other children.

The *redistributive* role of ECEC services is discussed in the OECD report *Starting Strong II* (2006). Those countries with universal ECEC services tend to have lower rates of child poverty, but they also tend to be the countries where there are other redistributive measures in place, e.g. redistributive taxation, generous benefits for families with children, etc. Targeted early intervention approaches may enable children to gain some respite from their adverse circumstances and *may* some gains for the small population of children who are targeted, not least some respite from their home circumstances. But family poverty continues, unless other redistributive actions are also undertaken (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). It is for these reasons that targeted services are unlikely to be very effective. It is a burden on those providing such services to expect them to cure poverty, although they can perhaps make its effects less harsh for those they work with.

RATIONALE 10. *Children, including young children, are rights bearers and all children have a right to protection, provision and participation*

Children's daily experiences are vivid and deeply felt, and bad or mediocre experiences whilst possibly not harmful in the long run may lead to considerable unhappiness in the present. The wellbeing of children in the here and now is becoming an important consideration

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) stresses that children are *citizens* who have rights by virtue of being members of a community. The UNCRC has led to many new interpretations of policy and practice in ECEC services, not least the work being undertaken by international organizations. The UNESCO 2007 Monitoring Report on *Education for All* focused mainly on an interpretation of UNCRC in early years. UNICEF has developed benchmarks for ECEC services in rich countries in the light of

UNCRC. The General Secretary of the United Nations has recently issued a report to the General Assembly outlining the agreement on UNCRC(UN, 2010).

UNCRC has spawned a considerable legal and sociological literature. Sociologists have attempted to conceptualize the position of children as a social group holding certain attributes in common, much as sociologists have previously distinguished race, class and gender as separate social categories worthy of study. Others have explored the notion of competency. Children, even very young children, are seen as social actors in their own right, as people with agency who make decisions about their own lives in the here and now within the constraints set by adults. There is increasing interest in how conceptions of childhood in poor countries may differ from or overlap with those of children in rich countries, especially in relation to child work.

A child rights approach offers challenges to current futuristic economic thinking in that it focuses on and organizes effort on the experiences of children in the here and now, and solicits their participation. Early intervention is not something that is done to young children in the hope of (re)shaping their future, but a collaborative venture with them. This point of view about services is most commonly elaborated in relation to ECEC services in Northern Italy where pedagogic practices are organized on the basis of 'a pedagogy of well-being'. This approach emphasizes participatory processes at various levels, with children, with parents, with staff and with the wider community. It highlights the importance of the peer group. Unlike conventional assumptions of learning which privilege adult instruction and regard the child as an individual learner, a participatory approach views learning and emotional support as critically deriving through the peer relationships of children (Mantovani, 2007).

It is no exaggeration to say that from the perspective of children's rights, ECEC services need to be rethought. Brougere and Vandenbroek (2007) have produced an overview of new developments in ECEC in Europe, stemming from this rights based perspective. Advocacy organizations also increasingly tend to espouse a child rights perspective.

Policy rationales for ECEC have many sources, some of them contradictory or incompatible. This article has attempted to summarize some of the main reasons given for developing early childhood education and care across countries.

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