

Early Childhood Education and Care in Hungary: Challenges and Recent Developments

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The article gives an overview of the main features of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services for children in Hungary, tracing their history and outlining some of the challenges. Hungary, as a member of the European Union, is expected to meet the Lisbon and the Barcelona targets related to women's employment and services for children, respectively. However, there are many challenges and problems that are rooted in the inherited system, financial constraints, and policy making. Questions about the length and payment level of available childcare leaves for parents and about the right mix of paid leaves and ECEC services arose within this context.

Key words: early childhood, education and care, childcare leaves, Hungary

In the recently published Innocenti Report Card no. 8 by UNICEF (2008), Hungary is 8th among 25 OECD countries in terms of provision of early childhood care, based on ten benchmarks related to four broad categories: policy framework, access to services and their quality, and supporting context. This place seems satisfactory since the country is ranked next to the North European countries, which are traditionally leading in developing childcare services. Nevertheless, some of the unmet criteria, such as the lack of places for children under 3 in services, give cause for concern and are the foci for continuing improvements.

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This article aims to give an overview of the main features of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services for children in Hungary, tracing their history and outlining some of the challenges faced.

Box 1. Definitions

Nursery (*bölcsőde*): full-time center for children under the age of three

Kindergarten (*óvoda*): full-time center for children between the ages of three and six

Family day care (*családi napközi*): childcare provided by a licensed provider for a maximum of 5 children at his/her own home

Childcare worker (*bölcsőde gondozó*): qualified worker in nurseries for children under the age of three

Kindergarten pedagogue (*óvodapedagógus*): qualified worker in kindergartens for children between the ages of three and six

The trends and directions described highlight some of the debates.

History

The history of nurseries and kindergartens is quite long in Hungary. The first kindergarten was founded in Buda¹ in 1828, to provide protection for children from poor families. Its task was “*nevelés*” (upbringing): developing skills and emotions, by creating loving relationships, setting good examples, and singing. The first nursery was opened in Pest in 1852, in order to look after children of poor mothers while they worked. The task was to nurse and care for the infants and to contribute to the improvement of family life in this way. Working mothers could leave their child in the nursery early in the morning, where the children were bathed and checked by a doctor. During the day they were given meals and could play under the supervision of adults. Their mission was modern at the time, addressing child protection and family support.

During the years of socialism after the Second World War until 1989, early childhood education and care service provision became a state responsibility, and were highly centralized and uniform for a given age group. Supporting women’s equality, rights to employment, and public role required different types of state support and the expansion of nursery and kindergarten places. Employment was compulsory, but during the 1960s childcare leave and allowance became available until the third birthday of the child. Consequently, the demand for, and the number of nursery places was low since most childcare was provided in-home. At the same time, more kindergartens were needed to achieve full coverage of children between the ages of three and the onset of mandatory schooling. The first national guidance for working with children in nurseries and kindergartens was published in 1954 and 1953, respectively. Even though nurseries and kindergartens came under

different auspices (health and education), the idea of providing a full-time service for children to cover the work hours of parents was the same. Traditionally, the authority for childcare for children under three was with the ministry responsible for health, whereas the authority for children between three and six years of age was with the ministry in charge of education.

The year 1989 brought the end of socialism. The ensuing transition years were not only the times of political changes but also the beginning of the move from a planned economy to a market economy. Decentralization (establishing a system of local governments and dividing responsibilities and authority) took place during the transition years. The responsibility for service provision was placed with the county and local authorities, within the three-tier system of government (national, county, and local). As a result, today’s central government provides financing for all services for young children through local governments and the disbursement of universal and insurance-based financial support, tax benefits, and the financing for provisions-in-kind. The relevant ministries develop the legal framework and the system of public administration ensures and inspects legal compliance. County and regional governments finance public services that pertain to several settlements and which are not the duty of local governments. Local authorities have the duty to provide services, as well as financial and in-kind provisions. Children’s services (both nursery and kindergarten) became the responsibility of local authorities following decentralization.

The political changes also brought about the dismantling of state property, the modernization of economy, and the mushrooming of private enterprise, resulting in an increase of employment in the private sector. Compared to the previous socialist system which provided universal full-time employment, there are now different work structures, unusual work hours, different demands on the part of employers, and different needs in terms of public services. Employment rates declined substantially as

a result of the decrease in activity rates and a rise in unemployment, with inflation being quite high. The polarization of society happened fast. The changes in the political system and the economy affected the population, especially families with children. It became a priority to balance out these trends by supporting those segments of society which were getting poorer.

None of the successive governments developed childcare services as much as they could have. Demographic goals seemed to override other considerations, and one of the measures intended to address declining birth rates was the development of an extended system of long, paid childcare leaves. Until recently, gender equality has not entered the debates about leave policy and achieving a balance between work and family life. Organizations calling for equal rights for women in the 1990s and the early 2000s focused on reducing domestic abuse, equal pay for equal work, and women's representation among decision makers. Nonetheless, there is an uneven division of labor between men and women in the home. In order to raise the labor force participation of women it has become important to provide more affordable and more diverse services for children.

The reasons for changes in childcare policy and services were numerous. Some of these were related to ideology, some to financing issues, and some to new or unmet needs. The overwhelming majority of locations are still in public centers. Whereas companies previously maintained a substantial share of places for childcare, their involvement has dropped significantly, and now represents a fraction of all child care places. Providing services is possible for non-governmental organizations, however, their involvement is still limited. Emerging flexibility and diversity can be seen (e.g., flexible opening hours, different additional services offered, parent involvement, etc.), and family day care has emerged.

Today, Hungary, as a member of the European Union, is expected to meet the Lisbon and the Barcelona targets (whereby childcare places should be

available for 33% of children under three years old), related to women's employment, and services for children, respectively. However, there are many challenges and problems that are rooted in the inherited system, financial constraints, and policy making (including the perceptions and attitudes of decision makers). Birth rates have been falling for a long time, the society is aging, and these trends are coupled with low activity rates, especially pertaining to women's employment.

Status and Issues Today

Legislation and Licensing

The system of children's services in Hungary is split. Policy responsibility for children under the age of three comes under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour². The Ministry of Education and Culture has responsibility for the services for children three to six years old, which is now seen as the first stage of public education (kindergarten). Schooling age in Hungary is six, and kindergarten is compulsory for five year olds, as preparation for school.

The *1997 Act on the Protection of Children*, and the *1993 Education Act* are the relevant pieces of legislation for nurseries and kindergartens. Regulations govern the system of administration and inspection, define minimum criteria, set educational content, establish quality standards and access to childcare, respite care, long term care services, kindergarten, and after school care. Both pieces of legislation focus on children's rights, equality, and the involvement of parents in the programs. Licensed family day care and home childcare were also included in the 1997 legislation as basic services to be provided for families with young children. A family day care provider can look after a maximum of five children between the ages of 0-14. The laws define the duties of local governments also, and state what basic services they are required to ensure for the population in their area of authority. These duties can

be fulfilled by the localities by setting up and operating programs either directly or in partnerships, as well as by contracting out the services. Nurseries and/or family day care and kindergartens are examples of such basic services. Licensing regimes vary according to the type of service, and are based on the criteria set in legislation for the different services. Local authorities are the issuing agents for operating licenses.

Inspection is done by the county guardianship offices (part of the public administration system) once every four years and by the licensing local authority once a year for nurseries and family day cares. The inspection of kindergartens is the duty of the maintainer, which are mostly local authorities. The maintainer also evaluates the professional work in the kindergarten on the basis of the pedagogical measures and evaluations of pedagogical service, the expert opinion of persons in the national register, the report written by the institutions of public education, and the opinion of supervisory body of kindergartens. Registered professionals have to be asked to comment on plans for setting up or closing down services.

Financing

Financing of childcare services is mainly the responsibility of the central government in the form of earmarked funding, and of the local governments by complementary funding. Between 30 and 40 percent of funding for nurseries and kindergartens is from central government, 10 per cent from parents' fees, which are lowered or cancelled completely for those with low incomes, and the rest is covered by local government. For families receiving a supplemental child protection allowance, meals are free. Since 1996, kindergartens are eligible to receive a double normative grant for each child with a speech-based need or mild mental disability, and a triple grant for each child with a physical or sensory disability, autism, or moderate to severe disabilities.

The decentralized system has disadvantages over full state funding because local governments have many duties to fulfill, and the financing available for these tasks is often not enough. In particular, smaller local authorities tend to have financial difficulties in meeting childcare obligations. Although it is possible for them to contract with private and voluntary sector providers, services are almost entirely public. The reason is the discrepancy between the cost of delivering services and the combined sum of earmarked funding and parental payments. The average income level is low in Hungary, which makes it impossible for most families to cover the full cost of care.

Access

Most of the children under the age of three are cared for at home by the mother, due to the availability of extended maternal and parental leaves. Non-parental childcare for children between the ages of 20 weeks to three years is provided almost entirely in nurseries. Those children whose development is assessed to be lagging behind can receive care in nurseries until they are four years old, and those with disabilities, up to age six. Since 1984, however, both the number of child care centers and their places have dropped by about 60 percent. Today, only about 15-20% of the settlements have nurseries, and most of these are bigger towns. In 2006, there were 24,255 nursery places, providing for 31,153 children, or about 10.7% of the age group (see Table 1). As the data indicate, the number of children admitted was higher than the places nurseries are licensed for, thus the utilization rate was high. Most children attending were in the 24-35 month age range, and about a third were older than 36 months. Special needs children can be integrated into mainstream childcare settings.

Family day care, as a new form of childcare was introduced in 1993. However, upscaling has been slow, due mainly to financing difficulties.

Table 1.
2006 Data for Nursery and Kindergarten Provision in Hungary

	Nursery	Kindergarten
Number of places	24,255	351,825
Number of children enrolled	31,153	327,644
Number of age group	291,130	385,359
Percent of age group enrolled	10.7	85
Ratio of age group related to the number of places	8.3	91.3
Number of workers	5,514	30,550
Adult to child ratio	1:6	1:11

Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office

Kindergarten coverage is much better, since childcare leave and assistance are available for parents only until the child's third birthday. Therefore, the demand for places providing for children older than three years has always been much higher. Kindergartens were developed extensively during the 1960s and 1970s, and survived the transition years with only some closures. As a result, most of the settlements in the country have a kindergarten. In the 2006/2007 school year, there were 351,825 kindergarten places, providing for 327,644 children (see Table 1) comprising about 85% of the 3-6 year old age group.

The ratio of private (non-profit and for profit) providers is about 5% for both types of centers (nurseries and kindergartens), while the rest are public services.

There are several challenges that have to be met. Perhaps the biggest ones are the difficulties in implementing policies arising from the decentralized nature of Hungarian administration. There are more than 3,100 local authorities. Many of them are small with a population of less than 2,000 people, with the same duties as the bigger ones, but with small budgets, which are not enough to finance services. Another challenge is the divergence of interests between central and local governments, which has

consequences for the implementation of policies and the operation of child care centers. Whereas access issues are important for the central government due to plans to increase women's labor force participation, and to meet the Barcelona targets, local authorities often have other priorities. Consequently, access to places in nurseries is uneven, with rural areas usually lacking services. The division between early education and care provision (nurseries and kindergartens coming under the authority of different ministries) makes the provision of children's services even more difficult. Improving access to childcare and kindergarten for children in under-served rural settlements, for children with disabilities, and for Roma children were recommended by the OECD (2004).

Features

Both nurseries and kindergartens provide full time care and education. Opening hours are usually from six in the morning to six in the evening, with some local variations. Children get four meals a day: breakfast, mid-morning fruit, hot lunch, and afternoon snack. Centers usually close altogether for six weeks during the summer and Christmas holidays. However, closing times during the summer vary among centers in a given area, so those children whose parents cannot take leave for those specific days (and whose grandparents cannot look after them either) can attend another nearby center during this time. Both are comprehensive programs, addressing children's total needs by providing an integrated package of services in healthcare, nutrition, and psychosocial stimulation. There are regular visits by health visitors and, according to need, both nurseries and kindergartens can use the services of other professionals, such as psychologists, special education teachers, speech therapists, etc.

Since the political changes from state socialism to democracy in 1989/1990, diversification of the previously uniform services has been taking place. Ways of breaking the uniformity included the

introduction of flexible opening hours, offering additional services (such as mother-toddler groups, parent groups, take home meals, special events for children and families, etc.), opening up to parents and the community, involvement of parents, and reformation of the curriculum.

Hungary has national standards for both nurseries and kindergartens, which cover basic principles of care and education, minimum criteria for the environment, staffing, health and safety requirements, and necessary documentation. These regulations aim to have a core standard while providing enough flexibility for institutions to shape their service to meet local needs. Pedagogy, is practice-oriented, and is designed to support the process of becoming autonomous and independent. The tasks and roles of practitioners also relate to children's play and other activities, relationships with families, drawing children to the centre, communication between workers and children, telling nursery tales and poems, etc. Nursery workers, as well as kindergarten pedagogues believe that the most possible time should be left for playing. Nevertheless, there is some difference in approach that reflects the characteristics of the two age groups. While nursery workers give priority to teaching the children how to do everyday tasks and become self-reliant and autonomous, kindergarten pedagogues also emphasize passing on cultural values and preparation for school. Careworker to child ratios are 1:6 in groups of 12 in nurseries, and 1:11 in groups of 22 in kindergartens (see Table 1). The ratio is better for groups with special needs children. Professional support for nurseries is provided by appointed nurseries, whose staff: (a) monitor other services in a given geographical area, (b) organize ongoing training, conferences, exchange visits, etc. (c) provide consultation and guidance, and (d) circulate information.

The main challenge today is related to growing admission rates to the same number of places. Group sizes have become bigger, and the ratio of children per adult have become worse in nurseries, as there

has been a growing demand for places, and no other solution is easily available to local authorities. Consequently, flexibility cannot be ensured in many places, and additional services might no longer be provided because of the high utilization rates putting greater demand on staff. Part-time care for children has been cancelled in favor of full-time care, for the same reasons. Work with special needs and disadvantaged children has been gaining more attention. Their numbers in services have been growing ever since the transition years due to set policy priorities. This poses many challenges both for nurseries and kindergartens, related to further education of staff about working with such children, securing the services of specialists, necessary alterations in the environments, acquisition of toys and equipment, etc.

Flexibility in opening hours to cover parents' unusual work hours is practically non-existent, particularly when the parents must work at non-conventional times.

Workforce

The name of workers in nurseries is childcare worker, meaning a person looking after/taking care of children. There were 5,514 childcare workers in 2006 (see Table 1). The name of workers in kindergartens is "kindergarten pedagogue". There were 30,550 kindergarten pedagogues in 2006. More than 90% of the practitioners in both centers are qualified. In addition, there are assistants in both types of centers, helping the qualified staff responsible for the work with children. The different names of the workers in the two types of service for young children imply different understandings and approaches to work. However, the difference in practice is not that great anymore. Pedagogy is the overarching link, and supporting children's overall development is the main aim of both professions.

Education for nursery workers and kindergarten pedagogues is not only at different levels, but are offered in different institutions. Both include a

substantial amount of practice. The professional qualification is on the upper medium level for childcare workers, and at the tertiary level for kindergarten pedagogues. The orientation of the two types of education is somewhat different. Nursery workers were traditionally taught many health and medicine-related subjects and only a few dealing with the psychology and pedagogy of children. This ratio has been changing over the years, but practical subjects still dominate. Theoretical aspects have been stronger in the training for kindergarten pedagogues. No qualification is required for family day care providers but they have to attend an introductory course and have to meet certain criteria required for obtaining a license. Qualified workers both in nurseries and kindergartens have to participate in accredited continuing education and collect a certain number of credit points within five years in order to remain registered. Legislation describes the system of accreditation and registration.

Children's services and elementary education are dominated by female workers. There are no men at all in nurseries, and their number is negligible in kindergartens. Those few men who work with young children report facing many difficulties but believe they can bring something new and unique to the lives of children and to traditional female-dominated services.

The average age of the workers is 41 years in both in nurseries and kindergartens, which forecasts problems. The aging of the childcare workforce is clearly not a recent development, though. One may speculate about the reasons why fewer people are entering the profession: maybe the popularity of the profession declined, maybe working with children is not seen as a "profession", maybe more young people choose to study for higher education degrees, maybe the prestige of the work is not high enough. There are no clear answers. Career opportunities are usually linked to the structuring of the workforce and its training. In Hungary, advancement is limited to being the director or deputy director of a nursery or

kindergarten even if workers complete further training courses. Moving to other services is quite limited, due to the specialized nature of knowledge and skills.

Labor shortage is a big problem for the whole ECEC sector and the main cause is the extraordinarily low wages. All these workers are public employees and their salaries are based on a unified wage table. Radical steps have to be taken in order to make the profession inviting for young people. The prestige of the work in society should be raised, and the conditions (including pay, education, and work conditions) should be improved for ensuring the recruitment of new professionals.

Directions Today

In line with European developments, contemporary demographic goals have less importance than in the earlier decades, and there has been a growing interest in leave policies closely related to the attention paid to increasing female labor force participation and balancing work and family life. This change in focus has raised questions about the length and payment level of available maternal, paternal and parental childcare leaves and about the right mix of paid leaves and ECEC services. Economists have been warning that extended leaves are counter-effective to the return to paid work. The longer the period the mother stays home with the child, the smaller the chance that she will be able to return to and re-integrate into the developing labor market. (Balint, M. & Köllő, 2007; Scharle, 2007). The OECD (2007) recommendations for Hungary suggest that extended leaves ought to be cut back from three years to maximum 12 months, and the savings should be used to fund increased support for childcare services. Sociologists, on the other hand, demonstrate the poverty alleviating effect of the benefits tied to leaves in poor families, and argue that long paid leaves are sometimes their main (or only) source of income (Bass

& Darvas, 2008).

The present structure of the Hungarian leave system has been shaped through changes influenced by very different approaches during successive governmental cycles. Probably due to the lack of overall consensus about the function of childcare leave (whether to promote childbirth, children's development, women's labor market participation, women's equality, etc.), there is now one strand (GYES) that is available universally for those who have not had the necessary number of insured days (work) before giving birth, and another one (GYED) for those who had been insured. GYES is paid at a flat rate, equal to the amount of the minimum old age pension. Payment for GYED is at 70% of earnings up to a specified ceiling. Overall, the prevalence of financial support for families has not changed. None of the governments developed ECEC services for children (especially nurseries and family day care) as much as they could have.

Structures have changed quite often and dramatically during the transition years, but the perceptions of women's role in society and within the family have been changing to a lesser extent. A study (Pongracz, 2008) looking at expectations concerning paid work and family responsibilities internationally indicates that the transformations in Hungarian society had no influence on the nostalgia felt for the traditional gender values and the traditional division of family commitments. Nevertheless, there was also agreement that the family cannot afford to forgo the woman's salary. Others (Brayfield & Korintus, 2008) found that both men and women increased their support for women's employment over time, but full-time employment was clearly not desirable for women with children under three. These are in line with the argument (Blaskó, 2005) that the acceptance of the male-breadwinner model after 1989 was mostly due to massive unemployment in the early nineties. The overall picture emerging from another survey (Korintus, 2008)³ indicates that the respondents favored the mother staying home with a young child.

Respondents to this survey also thought that nurseries are used mainly because the mother needs to have a job in order to have enough income for the family and were of the view that a wife would rather work part time, or not work at all, if the husband earned enough to support the family's needs. But the responses have to be interpreted carefully, given the widespread lack of nursery and/or family day care places, and the difficulties to return to the labor market because of a general job shortage and prevailing working-time rigidities, in particular the low availability of part-time jobs.

There are arguments (Ignits & Kapitány, 2006) that during the transition years, the emergence of unemployment and growing social inequality forced the support system of family policy to take over more of the tasks of social policy. Therefore, the effects of the family support system (including childcare leaves and allowances) on alleviating poverty are sizable. Hungarian Central Statistical Office data show that social transfers can effectively decrease child poverty, from 48% to 20%. Even though supporting parents' labor market participation and developing services for children - including developing and better organizing childcare - have been identified as the main means of reducing poverty in a recent government program, the effects of cutting back on leave periods (and therefore, the benefits tied to them), especially the universal one, might worsen the situation of the great portion of those families whose income very much relies on this form of support. According to the data of the 2006 TÁRKI Household monitor (Szívós & Tóth, 2006), about 12% of the population in Hungary can be considered poor. Children and youth are the two age groups with the highest risk of poverty. Compared to the average of 12%, the poverty rate among 0-15 year olds is 15%. In view of these data, affordable childcare services available at times consistent with parents' working patterns and of a high quality are also of high importance, along with parental leave entitlements, both to address poverty and to help bring more

mothers into the labor force.

The government set out to ensure the fight against child poverty. In 2007, the Parliament passed the National Strategy called “Legyen jobb a gyermekeknek (Making Things Better for our Children)” for the years 2007-2032⁴, the goal of which is to reduce child poverty and improve lifelong prospects for children. The strategy considers supporting parents’ labor market participation and developing services for children, including developing and better organizing childcare, as the main means of reducing poverty. However, issues about implementation and scaling up have emerged. Legislation is in place, but questions of financing, insufficient number of qualified workers, training needs, and capacities have to be solved. Otherwise, the legislation will not be implemented as intended on the local level.

One possible way forward is the integration of nursery and kindergarten services. The issue arose within the scope of the discussion about shortening the leave periods and increasing the number of available places for children under age three. Local authorities, especially the smaller ones, do not have funds to build new nurseries. While family day care could be a solution with some funding from local authorities, or with higher parental payments, neither of these seems to be realistic on a wide scale. Therefore, other options must be explored, such as making space available for a nursery group in kindergartens, and changing the legislation to admit two year-olds. These options might be a solution to greater access, but questions about the sufficiency of the workforce would remain. Presently, there is an aging workforce and no one knows who will replace them. The job is not prestigious and it is low paid, so young people are not likely to find it a good career option.

Conclusions

International acknowledgment of achievements is

always appreciated. Services for children are finally in the long deserved focus of attention. Hungary, just as other EU countries, is making efforts to provide good quality, affordable child care places for all children who need them, not just to help women’s employment but also to support children’s development. Additional efforts are made to include those families who are disadvantaged and whose children need the extra support nurseries and kindergartens can provide. New initiatives have been launched to establish programs, which can help those children in poverty and who live in areas without services for children. However, the progress is slow and the road ahead is full of challenges.

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Notes

¹ Buda and Pest were separate cities at the time, and were united as Budapest only later.

² At times, this task was the responsibility of the primary healthcare for children. Later, since the beginning of the 1990s childcare was considered to relate more to social welfare. Law 31 of 1997 currently places responsibility for the 0-3 year old children under social welfare.

³ The study used data from the omnibus survey collected by TÁRKI in 2005

⁴ Parliamentary Resolution 47/2007 (V. 31) OGY