

# Pedagogy in Early Childhood Services with Special Reference to Nordic Approaches

**John Bennett**\*,  
Ph.D., researcher of Early Childhood Policy,  
Visiting Fellow, Thomas Coram Research  
Unit, University of London

This article first outlines the importance of social and family context when making policy for young children. It then treats briefly of the wider goals that early childhood policy can seek – not only economic and social aims but also an early introduction to democratic practice for young children. The Swedish Curriculum for Preschool expresses it thus: *Kindergartens shall promote fundamental values such as a sense of community, care for others and joint responsibility, and shall represent an environment that supports respect for human worth and the right to be different.* There follows an analysis of different conceptions of pedagogy and approaches to young children that are current in Europe, again highlighting the great respect for young children shown by the Nordic countries. The Russian tradition of kindergarten has much in common with Nordic practice. In terms of structural features, such as the pre-service training of educators or the number of children per staff, many PEI centres in the Russian Regions compare well with most Western countries. In some Regions, more than half the educational staff have university degrees, child:staff ratios are relatively low (though at the moment, under great pressure) and the quality of buildings and amenities, though not without weaknesses, can be extremely high. In seeking to improve quality even further, the Nordic countries offer an excellent model for Russian policy-makers to follow.

**Keywords:** early childhood education, childcare, traditions, Nordic, pre-school, pedagogy, Russia.

## I. Introduction

### ***The family and social context of young children***

Before addressing the question of pedagogy in early childhood services, it is well to note that the development of a child depends to a great

extent on the quality of the child's home and family context. In turn, the quality of the family context can be deeply influenced by the quality of the welfare state into which a child is born. In countries with a strong commitment to full employment, greater social equality, the reduction

---

\* bennett.paris@gmail.com

of poverty and high levels of social security, the outcomes for children are likely to be better. It is true that good early childhood services can help greatly children from disadvantaged backgrounds, but early education services, by themselves, cannot resolve all issues or keep excluded children in school. In this respect, Ed Zigler's (one of the founders of Head Start) famous remark about Head Start is relevant: "We cannot inoculate children in one year against the ravages of a life of deprivation" [8].

**The wider outcomes from ECEC**

A second remark is that in the overall evaluation of early childhood systems, there are other outcomes that policy-makers can address in addition to the education function of early childhood services. The following are some of the other important outcomes that early childhood systems produce:

*Economic outcomes:* In all the major OECD economies, the early childhood system is, in its own right, a significant industrial and employment sector. Hundreds of thousands of person are employed in the sector and in some countries, the number employed may rise to several million workers. In addition, a sufficient volume of early childhood services allows women – increasingly better educated than men – to join the workforce and contribute to the economy and to family budgets.

The provision of early childhood services is also a necessary condition for improving the employment/population ratio. Compare for example:

- The Nordic economies with close to 80% women working, of which 26% work part-time
- With the Mediterranean economies with less than 50% of women working, of which just 30% work part-time.

It is clear that the productivity of the Nordic economies is greatly enhanced by their ability to employ 30% more of the female population.

*Social outcomes:* The pursuit of social outcomes from early childhood services also motivates government investment. Early childhood services can contribute positively: to parental care and upbringing of children; to the provision of care and nurturing of children with spe-

cial needs or from low-income or 'at-risk' families; and to the respectful social integration of immigrant or ethnic families and communities. The provision of services is also a necessary condition for greater gender equality – allowing women to take their rightful place in society, e.g. 47% of the Swedish parliament is female compared to the USA with 16%. The much higher rate in Sweden is not caused directly by the provision of early childhood services, but these services do make it easier for women to have professional careers.

*Democratic outcomes:* Like education systems in general, early childhood services can contribute to civic education and to the practice of values that sustain democratic societies. These values include not only respect for individual freedoms but also social and political values e.g. the awareness of community and the equal rights of all persons, the early prevention of discrimination and bullying, the pursuit of equivalent opportunities for all children. Here are some quotations from the early childhood curricula of the Nordic countries:

*Kindergartens shall promote fundamental values such as a sense of community, care for others and joint responsibility, and shall represent an environment that supports respect for human worth and the right to be different. Human equality, equal opportunity, intellectual freedom and tolerance are important social values that shall provide foundations for the care, upbringing, play and learning in kindergartens.*

*The equality of the genders shall be reflected in the education provided by kindergartens. Kindergartens shall bring up children to relate to and create an equal society.*

**Source:** Norwegian Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens.

*Democracy forms the foundation of the pre-school. For this reason all pre-school activity should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values. Each and everyone working in the preschool should promote respect for the intrinsic value of each person as well as respect for our shared envi-*

ronment... . *The attitudes of adults influence the child's understanding and respect for the rights and obligations that apply in a democratic society. For this reason adults serve an important role as models. Upholding these fundamental values requires that the attitudes from which they are derived are clearly apparent in daily activity.*

**Source:** Swedish Curriculum for pre-schools (Lpfö, 1998).

In sum, where the quality of kindergartens – and of education systems – is concerned, responsible ministries will move beyond their own immediate horizon (education, health, social affairs...) to recognise the wider goals of early childhood services and will collect data regularly to evaluate whether these goals are being achieved.

## **II. The Starting Strong position vis-à-vis pedagogy**

Let us now focus on pedagogy. The second *Starting Strong II* report [6] noted that radical changes had taken place in education systems during recent decades. Some governments consider education, not as upbringing and personal development, but as a means of promoting economic growth and competitiveness. Curricula are designed to reflect this narrowed viewpoint and propose primarily 'core' subjects (literacy, numeracy and scientific knowledge); teachers and schools are regulated and made 'accountable' for pre-defined learning outcomes; and children are tested on the acquisition of 'useful' knowledge, generally through literacy, numeracy and cognitive testing. Much energy is expended on controlling what takes place in schools, rather than on recruiting high level leaders and educators, as for example, in Finland.

This approach to education also influences early childhood policy. The goals named by the dominant research paradigm in early education, that is, the English-language paradigm,

tends to stress readiness for school, with emergent literacy and numeracy as priority goals. In contrast, child care may not be considered educational but as a means of caring for children while mothers work.

*Starting Strong II* voiced reserves about seeing education solely in these terms:

*In addition to learning and the acquisition of knowledge, an abiding purpose of public education is to enhance understanding of society and encourage democratic reflexes in children. Today, societies seem to be less concerned with such ideals. Reflecting the growing marketisation of public services, consumer attitudes toward education and knowledge are increasing. Individual choice is put forward as a supreme value, without reference to social cohesion or the needs of the local community<sup>2</sup>. In many schools, a focus on 'test-prep' knowledge threatens the broad liberal arts tradition that sustains informed and critical thinking. In the early childhood field, an instrumental and narrow discourse about readiness for school is increasingly heard. Faced by this challenge, it seems particularly important that the early childhood centre should become a community of learners, where children are encouraged to participate and share with others, and where learning is seen as primarily interactive, experiential and social. Learning to be, learning to do, learning to learn and learning to live together are each important goals for young children [6].*

In addition, the two OECD *Starting Strong* reports underlined that the Nordic countries hold a unique position in early childhood practice, and are consistently rated as having high quality early childhood services. These reports contrast the Nordic approach to young children with the tighter early education approach adopted in traditional preschool systems in which early education for 3–6 year olds is treated like a junior school. Some of the contrasts are presented in the table below:

<sup>2</sup> On reflexion, this criticism is unfair. Although individual choice is promoted, schools and universities generally offer skills, competences and knowledge that are useful for society as a whole, and not least, for economic growth and societal cohesion.

Table 1

Features of two curricular traditions

	Preschool as preparation for school	The Nordic tradition
Understandings of the child and childhood	The child is a young person to be formed, as a literate, compliant well-behaved student... Education is conceived as an investment in the future of society. State and adult purposes are fore grounded. Pedagogy is focussed on 'useful' learning, readiness for school... A tendency to privilege indoors learning.	The child as a subject of rights: to autonomy, well-being... and the right to growth on the child's own premises. The child as agent of her own learning, a rich child with natural learning and research strategies... An outdoors child of pleasure and freedom. A time for childhood that can never be repeated
The early childhood centre	Generally (though by no means always), the centre is seen as a service based on individual demand, a matter of 'choice' for the individual parents. It is viewed as a place for individual development, learning and instruction. Children will be expected to reach pre-defined levels of learning (goals to be achieved at each stage).	The centre is seen as a public socio-educational service, in which the community interest – as well as the interests of individual parents – must be taken into account. It is viewed as a life space, a place in which children and pedagogues learn "to be, to know, to do and to live together" (Delors Report, 1996). The elasticity of child development and learning is recognised.
Curriculum development	Frequently, a prescribed ministerial curriculum, with detailing of goals and outcomes is proposed. Assumption that the curriculum can be 'delivered' by the individual teacher in a standardised way whatever the group or setting.	A broad national guideline, with a devolution of curriculum and its implementation to municipalities and the centres. Responsibility falls on the centre staff, a collegial responsibility... A culture of research and observation on children's interests and how they learn.
Focus of programme	A focus on learning and skills, especially in areas useful for school readiness. Mainly teacher directed (Weikart et al., 2003). Teacher-child relationships may be instrumentalised through large numbers of children per teacher and the need to achieve detailed curriculum goals.	Focus on working with the whole child and her family – broad developmental goals as well as learning are pursued. Programmes are child-centred – interactivity with educators and peers encouraged and the quality of life in the institution is given high importance.
Pedagogical strategies	A balanced mix of instruction, child initiated activities and thematic work is encouraged, managed by each teacher. The national curriculum must be 'delivered' correctly. Where children are concerned, an emphasis is placed on individual autonomy and self-regulation.	The national curriculum guides the choice of pedagogical themes and projects. Confidence is placed in the teachers' professionalism and in the child's own learning strategies, that is, on learning through relationships, through play and through educator scaffolding at the appropriate moment.
Targets and goals for children	Prescribed targets – often focussing on learning areas, such as emergent literacy and cognitive development – may be set at national level to be reached in all centres, sometimes translated by each year of age.	Broad orientations rather than prescribed outcomes. Goals are to be striven for, rather than achieved. A diffusion of goals may be experienced, with diminished accountability unless quality is actively pursued.
Indoor and outdoor spaces for young children	The indoors is considered to be the primary learning space, and resources are focussed here. Outdoors is generally seen as an amenity, a recreational area and perhaps as important for health and motor development	Indoors and outdoors have equal pedagogical importance. Much thought and investment given to the organization of outdoor space and its use. Young children may spend 3 or 4 hours daily out of doors and in organised visits.. The environment and its protection is generally an important theme

Assessment	Learning outcomes and assessment often required, at least on entry into primary school. Goals for the group are clearly defined. Graded assessment of each child with respect to pre-defined competences may be an important part of the teacher's role.	Formal assessment not required. Broad developmental goals are set for each child by negotiation (educator-parent-child). Goals are informally evaluated unless screening is necessary. Multiple assessment procedures are favoured.
Quality control	Quality control based on clear objectives and frequently, on pre-defined learning outcomes. Standardised testing may be used in programme evaluation, but in most centres, child testing is not allowed. Assessment of skills mastery is generally ongoing and the responsibility of the lead teacher. An external inspectorate may also visit centres, but may be under-staffed (especially in child care) or staffed by personnel without training in ECEC pedagogy	Quality control is more participatory, based on educator and team responsibility and, depending on country, supervised by parent boards and municipalities. Documentation used not only to mark child progress but also as collegial research on staff pedagogical approaches. A wide range of child outcomes may be sought, and assessed informally in multiple ways. External validation undertaken by municipal pedagogical advisors and/or inspectors. The focus is on centre performance rather than on child assessment

Source: Bennett, (2005) revised.

**III. The Nordic approach to pedagogy**

The contrast in approaches to pedagogy adopted by different groups of countries leads naturally to questioning the meaning of pedagogy. In the Swedish curriculum for preschool [3] the 'pedagogical task' of the preschool is defined in a broad sense:

*The preschool should lay the foundations for lifelong learning. The preschool should be enjoyable, secure and rich in learning for all children. The preschool should provide children with good pedagogical activities, where care, nurturing and learning together form a coherent whole. The development of children into responsible persons and members of society should be promoted in partnership with the home<sup>3</sup>.*

The reference to 'care, nurturing and learning' forming a coherent whole goes back at least two centuries, to the work of Wilhelm Humboldt (1767–1835), the Prussian educator and philologist. In the Germanic traditions, the word 'pedagogy' embraced simultaneously the notions of 'care', 'upbringing' and 'education'? As rapporteur for Germany within the Starting Strong reviews, Professor Peter Moss wrote.

*Originating in 19th century Germany, Sozialpädagogik (social pedagogy) is a theory,*

*practice and profession for working with children (but also often young people and adults). It has become established in many Continental European countries, though varying somewhat in form and role from country to country. The social approach is inherently holistic. The pedagogue sets out to address the whole child, the child with body, mind, emotions, creativity, history and social identity. This is not the child only of emotions – the psycho-therapeutical approach; nor only of the body – the medical or health approach; nor only of the mind – the traditional teaching approach. For the pedagogue, working with the whole child, learning, care and, more generally, upbringing (the elements of the original German concept of pedagogy: Bildung, Erziehung and Betreuung ) are closely-related – indeed inseparable activities at the level of daily work.*

This approach to early childhood is still strongly felt and practised in the Nordic countries. One hears, particularly in Denmark, that there should be 'a time for childhood'. Much depends on the age and interests of the child, the pedagogical means used to encourage these interests, and the time devoted to focussed learning. The particular needs of certain groups of children need also to be taken into account, e.g. those of second-language

<sup>3</sup>Curriculum for the Preschool. Lpfö 98, p. 8.

children. Recent Swedish research on how children learn shows the importance of listening to children and speaking with them in a challenging way about their learning, their concerns and theories about the world [7]. This research also underlines that the child's self-regulation of her own inner life (socio-emotional development) is a necessary pre-condition of effective learning, for example, children's ability to play and work with other children; their growing recognition of organisation and the time needed for tasks; their appreciation of effort and perseverance; their ability to transfer knowledge or skills acquired in one area to another...

### Conclusion

Despite a much stronger focus on health (no doubt due to the deteriorating child mortality rate during the 1990s), the Russian kindergarten has much in common with the Nordic tradition. In most Regions, investment in young children remains high. In terms of structural features, such as the pre-service training of educators or the number of children per staff, the PEI centres in the Regions compare well with most Western countries<sup>4</sup>. In some Regions, more than half the educational staff have university degrees, child: staff ratios are relatively low (though at the moment, under great pressure) and the quality of buildings and amenities, though not without weaknesses<sup>5</sup>, can be extremely high.

Understandings of childhood and early childhood services also seem excellent. Russian kindergartens pay attention to the holistic de-

velopment of young children, and curricula are child-oriented and based on a strong tradition of research. According to all reports, the system has become more child-centred, with more active and interactive learning approaches offered to children. There is also greater local control and more respect for diversity and difference.

No doubt, pressures will come to make the PEIs more like schools, with a stronger focus on early literacy and numeracy, particularly for the children reaching 6 years. Pleas to test children's outcomes at classroom level will be heard. These pressures need to be examined critically in the light of the best available research. Certainly, the Nordic professional bodies are not enthusiastic about this narrower conception of children's lives and learning. The Swedish Preschool Curriculum, Lpfö 98, is clear on the subject:

*In the preschool, the outcome of the individual child is not to be formally assessed in terms of grades and evaluation. The preschool provides pedagogical activities which children can begin and participate in at different ages over varying periods of time. The preschool should be secure, developmental and rich in providing learning opportunities for all children participating on the basis of each child's individual conditions.*

In sum, the Nordic countries offer an excellent model to inspire Russian policy-makers to follow in their efforts to meet new challenges and improve an impressive early childhood system even further.

### References

1. Bennett, Shmis and Umarov. Early childhood quality initiatives in six Russian regions: a comparative analysis in the light of international research and best practice (in preparation).
2. Framework Plan for Content and Tasks for Kindergartens. Ministry of Education and Research. Oslo, 2006.
3. Norwegian Framework Plan for Kindergartens Oslo, Ministry of the Family. 1996.
4. OECD German Country Note, Paris, Author, 2005.
5. OECD Starting Strong II, Paris, Author, 2006.
6. Pramling, I. "Why do children involve teachers in their play and learning?" // European Early Childhood Education Research Journal. 2009. 17(1).
7. Zigler, E. "Forty Years of Believing In Magic Is Enough" in Social Policy Report, 2003.

<sup>4</sup>A weakness, however, is the low ratio of educators to overall staff employed, in several regions, less than 50%.

<sup>5</sup>In the less wealthy and rural areas, many kindergartens are without running water and heating.