



Early Childhood Education and Care In England

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England has universal health care, job-protected and paid parental leave, child allowances, and universal preschool for 4-year-olds. Reform initiatives aim to decrease child poverty, increase opportunity, address social exclusion, and improve health. As a living laboratory for such reforms, England has much to teach the U.S.

BY SALLY LUBECK

IMAGINE a young mother in an economically depressed area in the Midlands as she enters the Pen Green Early Excellence Center for the first time. The center is one of 100 that are being recognized by the government as “beacons of good practice” in the provision of health, education, and social services.¹ The former head of center and current research director, Margy Whalley, describes how this mother and her infant could become involved:

She might start to use the baby clinic, which [is] run very informally with big cushions, sagbags, easy chairs, and toys for the children. Volunteers [are] on hand to make coffee, health visitors [are available]

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to offer counseling and support; and digital scales [are] provided so that parents [can] weigh their own babies. She might then meet some other parents and decide to join an Open University study group during the day; or she might work with the pack on “Living with Babies and Toddlers” in the evening. She might later want company and different kinds of play provision and join a parent and toddler session either run by nursery staff and community service volunteers or by nursery staff and parents. There, in comfortable, roomy surroundings, very young children get the chance to explore with clay, sand, and paint more freely than would be possible at home. In this way, parents decide how they use the center.²

As her child grows, the center offers other services: a toy library run by parents, a parent-run home visiting scheme, groups for divorced fathers, immunizations and checkups for adults and children, a day care for children under three, and a nursery for children between 3 and 5 years of age. In this area of high un-

employment, where many parents did not experience school success. fully 85% of mothers and up to 60% of fathers have participated in child study groups. Working with other parents and staff members, they analyze daily logs and video clips (with camcorders borrowed from the center) to understand and support their children's learning.

Once the child enters primary school, she might attend the after-school and homework club that comes to life when the day ends at the local primary schools and school-age children pour into the center, some lugging tubas and trumpets for band practice. She might see senior citizens in the computer lab, learning how to use e-mail. Her mother could take a crafts class or classes in adult basic education, or she could pursue a university degree on site. The list goes on. Pen Green is a work in progress, animated by long-standing efforts to work with rather than for parents and to base services on what people need and want. The staff members have adopted a public statement that links the up close and personal with broader social goals: "What a good and wise parent desires for his or her own children, a nation must desire for all its children."

Pen Green is an example of coordinated service delivery tailored to the needs of local communities. Yet the Early Excellence Centers Pilot Program is but one facet of a new, broad-based social agenda. Public funds are being used to support a number of initiatives aimed at improving children's life chances, encouraging employment, and combating social exclusion. Since 1997, England has been engaged in reform of "the early years."

Until quite recently, however, English and American approaches to early childhood education and care (ECEC) were seen as more similar than different. In an earlier effort to make sense of cross-national differences, a team of researchers suggested four models of child-care policy, models they labeled Latin-European, Scandinavian, Socialist, and Anglo-Saxon.⁴ Since this framework was developed, global and local changes have affected ECEC in all the countries studied. Still, the distinctions remain instructive. In the first three models, a central authority played a strong role in funding, coordinating, and regulating services. The Anglo-Saxon model, by contrast, was described as "a highly decentralized, fragmented collection of child-care arrangements, most involving little coordination with other social services affecting children or families."⁵ Indeed, in the recent study of ECEC policy and provision in 12 nations, sponsored by the Organisation for Eco-

nomie Co-operation and Development (OECD), the authors of the "country note" on the U.S. wrote that there was "no 'system'" of early education and care in the United States.⁶

England has now veered away from this approach, moving toward universal part-time preschool education for all 3- and 4-year-olds and developing a comprehensive, but still separate, strategy for the expansion and improvement of child care for children from birth through age 14. This article is based on work done in conjunction with the OECD's recent "Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy." It explores English ECEC reforms by surveying current forms of provision, describing recent reform initiatives, and considering the implications these policies might have for the United States.

ECEC PROVISION IN ENGLAND

Not all nations make a distinction between care and education, and early childhood professionals continue to point out that children, regardless of age, need both. For nations that have made a long-standing distinction between them, however, there are three overriding policy questions: How will children from birth to age 3 be cared for while their parents work? How will young children be served prior to entry into formal schooling? And how will school-age children of working parents be cared for before and after school?

In England, as in the United States, a hodge-podge of services has evolved over time to meet the diverse needs of working and nonworking parents and their children. Currently, there are at least 25 different types of group-based and home-based service, variously sponsored by local education authorities (LEAs), local social services, the voluntary sector, the private sector, and LEAs and social services departments working together. The British "system," like that in the U.S., has been characterized as diverse and unequal. Since the Labour Government came into power in 1997, however, it has taken strides to integrate services through what it calls "joined up" thinking. This involves efforts to integrate education and care, as well as education, health, adult training, and family support at national and local levels.

FROM BIRTH TO AGE 3

Parents are primarily responsible for financing child care for very young children — with a few important

exceptions. First, since 1945, all children (up to age 16 and to age 18 for children with special needs) have been entitled to monthly child allowances, and the current Labour Government has increased these allowances, with the intention of improving support for all families that have young children. Second, everyone, including children, is guaranteed health care under the national health insurance system. Finally, paid parental leave has been available to most working parents upon the birth of a child.

Recent policy initiatives aim to provide additional assistance. In 1999 paid, job-protected maternity leave was increased from 14 to 18 weeks, with the possibility of extending it to a total of 40 weeks, and paternity leave was adopted for the first time. A parent now qualifies for these benefits after one year of full-time employment rather than two. Mothers receive 90% of their salaries for the first six weeks and a flat rate for an additional 12 weeks. Parents are also entitled to 13 weeks of unpaid leave, with job guarantees, from the time the child is born until age 5. These policies essentially bring the United Kingdom (U.K.) in line with the minimal standards on maternity/paternity and parental leave set by the European Union. Today, more than two-thirds of employed mothers return to work after maternity leave, representing a 50% increase since 1987.⁹

The provision of affordable, high-quality child care is a current and prominent concern of the Labour Government. As the OECD background report on the U.K. states, "Current provision of education and care for the under 3s in the U.K. is uneven, of mixed quality, and in short supply."¹⁰ A 1997 report estimated that 93% of the cost of child care in England was incurred by parents,¹⁰ and child-care costs in the U.K. are among the highest in Europe.

A new Childcare Tax Credit is expected to provide some tax relief to low-income working parents of young children, although it is dependent on the cooperation of employers. To qualify, a parent with children aged 0 to 14 must work 16 hours per week or more. Children 0 to 8 must be in registered care, and those 8 to 14 (up to 16 with special needs) must be in approved care. The maximum amount of the credit is £70 (roughly \$105) per week for one child and £105 (roughly \$158) per week for two or more children.¹¹

In general, children's participation in the ECEC system increases with age, with children of different ages in different types of care settings. A 1999 study of parents' use of services reported a trajectory com-

mon at the time.¹² Children younger than 3 tended to be cared for in the private sector or by childminders, 3-year-olds attended preschool/playgroup, younger 4-year-olds attended a state-funded nursery class, and older 4-year-olds attended a primary school reception class. Compulsory schooling begins at age 5, when most children attend state primary or infant school classes. As this litany of options suggests, the British system is both complicated and in flux, and George Bernard Shaw's claim — that the U.S. and the U.K. are two great nations separated by a common language — is all too apparent.

It should be noted that children from low-income families would probably attend a community nursery, usually belonging to the nonprofit voluntary sector and operating with some support from a local education authority.¹¹ Because such a variety of forms had evolved over time, at least one scholar suggested that the entire system be jettisoned and the Scandinavian approach be adopted.¹² Rather than attempt such a radical transformation, however, reforms were "bolted onto the long-standing system."¹⁴

Local education authorities and social services departments sponsor combined centers that provide both care and education, and many nursery schools have now added separately run child-care facilities. The government has identified Early Excellence Centers, such as Pen Green, described above. By 1999, 29 centers had been designated, and a total of 100 are to be identified over time. The centers are intended to serve as demonstration sites for the development and dissemination of different approaches to integrated service provision.¹⁶

FROM AGE 3 TO AGE 5

Recent reforms have altered the picture of provision for children aged 3 to 5. Since 1998, a free, part-time place has been guaranteed to all 4-year-olds, and at least two-thirds of 3-year-olds are expected to have a free place by 2002. Consequently, in areas where they are in competition with publicly funded schools, voluntary sector preschools and playgroups are on the wane. Increasingly, young 4-year-olds are in state-financed placements for 2½ hours a day, while children from 4 to 5-plus are in a reception class in a state-funded school for 6½ hours a day during the year prior to compulsory schooling.

The reception classes have essentially become the new entry point into state-funded education, and this has raised concern among early childhood profession-

WHILE INCOMES IN THE HIGHEST ECONOMIC QUARTILE

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— WHICH INCLUDES MANY CHILDREN — ARE UP ONLY 15%.

als who fear that children will be expected to perform academic tasks at too young an age. As we shall see, these concerns might, indeed, be warranted. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, children as young as 2 years of age were admitted to state primary schools when their mothers had to work. Photographs from the period depict large groups of very small children sitting passively on stiff wooden benches. The nursery school movement, for which England is rightly famous, was an effort to provide a type of experience that seemed more appropriate for very young children. Yet as very young children again return to school, an emphasis on readiness skills for later schooling is already in evidence. Admission to formal compulsory schooling occurs at age 5 in England, Scotland, and Wales and at age 4 in Northern Ireland. These are the earliest school starting ages in Europe.

As in the U.S., care arrangements for school-age children have been in short supply and are sometimes beyond parents' ability to pay. Children may go to the home of a relative, neighbor, or childminder, or they may return to an empty house or apartment. A stated purpose of the National Childcare Strategy, however, is to provide every community that needs it with out-of-school child care for children from birth to age 14. In England, before- and after-school clubs provide extended care for preschoolers and school-age children whose parents are employed. These clubs have benefited from start-up funding, but they are intended to become self-sustaining through fees. There is concern, however, that clubs located in poor areas are unlikely to survive without subsidies.

ECEC POLICY REFORMS IN THE U.K.

The reform of the "early years" system in the U.K. is one part of a general strategy to effect broad-based social change by encouraging employment, combating social exclusion, and decreasing poverty. The major growth in the labor force is assumed to be the result of increasing female employment, but the U.K.

has the second-highest rate of part-time female employment (after the Netherlands) in the European Union. Western nations generally have seen nuclear families become less stable, but the U.K. currently has the highest percentage (20%) of single-parent families in Europe, and the majority of single parents (60%) were unemployed in 1999. This group includes a growing number of teenage parents who are unable to continue their education.

In 1998 the Treasury Inquiry reported that nearly one out of three children (4.3 million) was living in poverty (defined as a family income less than half the national median). In 1968 the proportion was one child in 10.¹⁷ While incomes in the highest economic quartile in the U.K. have doubled, those in the lowest have risen only 15%, and children are disproportionately represented in the lowest quartiles. These patterns of increasing economic disparity are mirrored in the U.S.¹⁸ The Labour Government has pledged to cut poverty rates in half in the next decade and to eliminate child poverty by the year 2020.

The Sure Start Program is aimed at "helping to break the intergenerational cycle of poor children's underachievement and poverty of aspiration."¹⁹ Its core services include outreach and home visits, support for families and parents, support for good-quality play, learning experiences and child care for children, primary and community health care, and support for children and parents with special needs.

Education Action Zones and Health Action Zones have also been funded. An Education Action Zone is composed of approximately 20 primary, secondary, and special schools in a local area organized by an "Action Forum," which consists of businesses, parents, schools, early years providers, the LEA, churches, colleges, and other community organizations and agencies. Each Action Forum submits a three-year action plan that includes goals, objectives, and strategies for raising educational standards in the area. A zone is eligible for funding of up to one million pounds a year, three-fourths of which will come from the national

government. The funding provides opportunities for local coalitions to address problems in their communities in innovative ways. For example, an Action Forum may develop a reward scheme to attract skilled teachers, or it may decide to vary the national curriculum, support distance learning, or lengthen the school day or year.

Health Action Zones are being established to supplement health provision within local authorities. The purpose is to address more directly such health issues as lead poisoning, asthma, and teenage pregnancy. A zone may work in conjunction with Sure Start or an Early Excellence Center.

If the expansion and improvement of child care and early education services is a key feature of the Labour Government's efforts to address broader social issues, how is the government attempting to transform a fragmented and unequal system into one that is more coherent and equitable? The answer is complex, but the approach can be sketched here in terms of policy priorities highlighted by the OECD: system coordination, funding, curriculum and assessment, and staffing.

System coordination. A key distinction between the governments of the U.K. and the U.S. is that the U.K. is growing increasingly centralized, while the U.S. is decentralized — so much so, in fact, that Robin Alexander recently referred to the latter as the land of “83,000 governments.”²⁰

The process of centralizing has been gradual, but the 1988 Education Act established a national curriculum and national assessments, including a “baseline assessment” when children enter primary school. The national government, LEAs, and schools still share administrative and fiscal responsibility, but a considerable share of funding now goes directly to schools, thereby decreasing the power of the LEAs.²¹ The previous Tory Government had largely supported a neo-liberal agenda based on a modified free-market approach to the expansion of services. Prompted by concerns that the early years system was diverse and fragmented, the current Labour Government has spearheaded reforms to extend and enhance service delivery. There had been a long-standing division between care and education in the U.K. In 1999 the Labour Government united them within the Department for Education and Employment (now the Department for Education and Skills). Since that time, the inspection of early years services has also been consolidated within the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED).

In 1998 the Labour Government launched a National Childcare Strategy, with plans to invest £8 billion to expand and improve child-care services for children from birth to age 3 and out-of-school provision for children under age 14 (age 16 for those with special needs).²² The National Childcare Strategy is intended to be a comprehensive, market-based approach to service delivery, including plans for expansion, funding, and improvement of child care.

Margaret Hodge, the former deputy minister of the Department for Education and Employment, explained the two-pronged approach. Central government was to establish priorities and standards, while a “bottom-up” mechanism was devised for the planning and delivery of services. Places for up to a million children are to be created by 2004, primarily by galvanizing expansion in the private market.²³ There were no large private chains in the U.K. in 1997. Today, there are 20, and more are on the way. Because of the high rate of part-time maternal employment, each child-care place will be used by three children. The Labour Government has also instituted a minimum wage and adopted a Childcare Tax Credit as part of the National Childcare Strategy. These reforms are intended both to raise the wages of the lowest-paid child-care workers and to refund some child-care expenses. Childcare Information Services (CIS) have been established locally to help parents find child care. In addition, efforts are under way to improve the existing system through the development of an integrated training scheme and uniform regulatory practices. The clear intent of this national strategy is to address issues of quality, affordability, and access.²⁴ However, families still have the primary responsibility for funding child care for children from birth to age 14, while part-time provision for children 3 and 4 years of age will be state funded and universally available.

The Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCP) now function in local areas as the primary mechanism by which the provision of universal education for 3- and 4-year-olds and the National Childcare Strategy are being realized. Ideally, these partnerships consist of representatives from the public, private, and voluntary sectors; from local education, health, and social services; from employers, trainers, single-parent advisors, and parents. Members of the partnership serve on a volunteer basis. Their role is to assess the current provision of care and education in the local area and to develop plans for future expansion. Working in cooperation with its partner

LEA, each local EYDCP does an audit and draws up an annual plan that takes into account the plans and reviews previously developed by the local authorities. The EYDCP plans are then linked to national targets for the provision of early education places for 3- and 4-year-olds and are required to address the need for expansion and improvement of child care in their area.

Funding. The primary funding sources for public schools in the U.S. are state and local taxes, with the federal government playing a relatively minor role through Title I. Federal funding for early care and education is targeted and programmatic, and, with the exception of Head Start, most federal funds are passed to the states. In Britain, school funding is centralized, and thus major reform has been possible because the Labour Government, bolstered by a healthy economy, has increased the allocation of funds to schools and to the early years. In 1999, for example, £40 million in new funds was allocated to create free, part-time places for 3-year-olds.

Curriculum and assessment. Early learning goals for children and guidance for teachers have been written to provide a curriculum framework for early years practice in the U.K., and a framework has also been developed for a national training and qualifications system.²⁵ These efforts have been strongly shaped by the broader curriculum reform movement in England. Alexander is concerned that the drift toward centralization is responsible for narrowing the curriculum and de-skilling teachers.²⁶

The early years are now being aligned with primary schooling, not only through inspections conducted by OFSTED but also through curricular and training initiatives. The early learning goals establish expectations for children to reach by age 5 to 5-plus. The goals are subdivided into six areas: 1) personal, social, and emotional development; 2) communication, language, and literacy; 3) mathematical development; 4) knowledge and understanding of the world; 5) physical development; and 6) creative development. Play is still described as quite important. However, some of the literacy and numeracy goals are so ambitious that it is feared that efforts to achieve them will override all other concerns. Regarding literacy, for example, it is expected that most 5-year-olds will be able to:

- hear and say initial and final sounds in words and short vowel sounds within words;
- link sounds to letters, naming and sounding the letters of the alphabet;

- read a range of familiar and common words and simple sentences independently;

- write their own names and other things such as labels and captions and begin to form simple sentences sometimes using punctuation; and

- use their phonics knowledge to write simple regular words and make phonetically plausible attempts at more complex words.²⁷

When the goals were drafted, early years professionals were successful in stressing the importance of play and in getting the language changed from "early learning outcomes" to "goals." However, there has been concern in the field that the inclusion of goals such as these will shift early education practice toward direct instruction and rote learning. A "baseline assessment" is given to all children at the end of the "Foundations Stage" (at age 5 to 5-plus), prior to entry into the first year of compulsory schooling. At the time of this writing, it is still unclear what effects these initiatives will have.

Staffing. The Labour Government has expressed its intention to create "a learning society," in which people, regardless of status or qualifications, will be able to learn throughout their lives. Learning opportunities are beginning to be supported through distance learning, flexible modes of study, modular courses, work-based study, and access to funding. A training and qualification system in the field of early education and care is part of this broader initiative. The Early Years National Training Organisation (EYNTO) was constituted in November 1998 as one of 75 NTOs set up to improve the knowledge and skills of workers in each sector. The EYNTO includes everyone except teachers working in the early years field. It is collaborating with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to develop a "climbing frame" that will link care and education training schemes nationally. The Labour Government has also increased funding for training child-care workers.

At a time when the early years system is undergoing rapid expansion, the success of the overall strategy hinges on a qualified and committed work force. However, since the majority of child care is still provided in the marketplace by private for-profit enterprises, wages are low, and working conditions are often poor. As in the U.S., an estimated 30% of the staff working in U.K. nurseries leave their jobs each year.²⁸ Although the clear intent is to consolidate care and education, staffing continues to be bifurcated according to these categories. Training, staff/child ratios, and

hourly pay rates differ across the education/care divide.³⁹ A "qualified teacher" has a three-year degree and a one-year postgraduate certificate of education or a four-year degree. However, only about 20% of the early years work force has acquired "graduate-level" qualification (equivalent to a bachelor's degree in the U.S.). A "nursery nurse" or qualified classroom assistant has two years of post-16 specialist training. There are no training requirements for childminders, nannies, and au pairs, with the exception of five to 15 hours of training now required of childminders in some local authorities. Fully half of the staff in nurseries, playgroups, after-school clubs, breakfast clubs, and holiday play schemes have no training, and classroom assistants in reception classes have not received specific training to work with young children. As these examples suggest, the scope and complexity of the issues that will need to be addressed are truly daunting, yet reform initiatives are proceeding rapidly. Margaret Hodge called the early years workers the second-fastest-growing sector in the labor force; perhaps as many as 250,000 additional people will be needed in the U.K., if the expansion and improvement initiatives are to be achieved.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

Since 1997 the Labour Government has launched a number of initiatives to reform early education and care in Britain. Yet education is not simply a matter of doing something efficiently or showing results. It also involves speculation about the reasons for making choices and taking action. When surveying the policies and programs of other nations, therefore, it seems appropriate to reflect on the goals and purposes they serve.

Several academics have applied to education an analytic framework developed by Jürgen Habermas, and the categories he suggests can usefully be applied to policy making.⁴⁰ *Technical* policy making is outcome oriented, asking how goals will be achieved without reflecting on the goals themselves. *Practical* policy making questions goals and tries to formulate appropriate goals and the means to achieve them. Finally, *critical* policy making questions means and goals for their capacity to create or sustain a just and equitable society. These categories are useful when considering ECFC policies in the United States as well as policies formulated by other countries.

Technical policy making. Within the U.S. and the U.K., women and minorities are expected to repre-

sent the major growth in the labor force. In addition, globalization is affecting the organization and nature of work, and future workers will need to be more highly educated than ever before.⁴¹ As a consequence of these and other changes, there have been extensive efforts to reform schools in both countries, and these reforms are now being extended to early childhood education, in the hope of improving the achievement levels of all children, but especially those who have been traditionally disadvantaged.

Policy initiatives have aimed to establish clear education goals, to keep track of progress toward those goals, and to devise means to assess school/program quality and child outcomes. Teachers are expected to devise explicit teaching objectives, to track students' progress, and to be accountable for children's learning. Although different means have been used to effect change in the U.S. and the U.K., some of the ECEC reform initiatives are strikingly similar. In England, for example, early learning goals and guidance for teachers have established a curriculum framework for work with young children. In the U.S., the National Association for the Education of Young Children has written guidelines for teachers and standards for curriculum and, in concert with other professional associations, has supported the explicit teaching of literacy and numeracy.

Assessing program performance and child outcomes has also become an important part of the discourse in both nations. In England, a baseline assessment is now given before entry into compulsory schooling (at age 5 to 5-plus); in the United States, standardized assessment will commence at age 8.

Finally, in both countries there are efforts to reform teacher education and to create career trajectories within the field. These initiatives aim to ensure that all children will be taught effectively and thus be able to assume a place in the future work force.

Practical policy making. In practical policy making, a feedback loop brings goals themselves under scrutiny. The primary goals of U.S. reform initiatives, including the emerging reform of early childhood education, are to raise the skill levels of young children and to increase teacher competency so that this can be achieved. Both the U.S. and the U.K. have a minimum wage and child-care tax credits, and the U.S. provides targeted funds to low-income families — for example, in the form of block grants to states and Head Start. However, in terms of child and family policy, the British government has identified a considerably broader range of

CRITICAL POLICY MAKING REQUIRES DISCUSSION OF MEANS AND GOALS AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES FOR A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY.

goals and committed substantial resources to effect social change. Through the combined effects of Labour Government initiatives and directives of the European Union (EU), the U.K. now supports policies that have yet to gain a foothold in the United States. These include universal health care, job-protected and paid parental leave, leave to care for a sick child, child allowances, and universal preschool. Recent reforms such as the National Childcare Strategy, Early Excellence Centers Program, and others also invite and challenge us to think beyond the narrow goals related to education reform.

In October 1999 the U.K. government published its first report on poverty. The report identified future policy milestones and indicators of success in the eradication of child poverty.³⁷ The Early Excellence Centers Program, the Sure Start program, and the Education and Health Action Zones are intended to serve as key mechanisms for decreasing child poverty, increasing opportunities, addressing social exclusion, and improving health. Pen Green, described at the beginning of this article, is a stunning example of how children and parents who experience economic disadvantage can gain access to education, health, and social services and become integrated into the community. Additionally, the Sure Start program has set clear targets for communities to achieve in specific time periods. As one indication of improved health, there is to be a 5% reduction in low-birthweight babies in each Sure Start area by 2001-02.³⁸ Similarly, to meet the objective of improving the ability to learn, at least 90% of children are expected to have normal speech and language development at 18 months and 3 years. Local programs have the flexibility to determine how to meet these objectives.

Early care and education policy today is perhaps one thread in a more fundamental reweaving of Anglo-American relations, as the U.K. gradually adopts EU directives and is more likely to side with other European nations on multilateral initiatives such as the Kyoto accords on climate control. Within the U.S.,

decisions to act in our own interest can seem reasonable to many, yet beyond our borders people are astonished and dismayed when the U.S. refuses to support international efforts to ban land mines or control global warming. Indeed, only the U.S. and Somalia have failed to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.³⁹

In addition to a technical approach to policy making, the Blair government has adopted a discourse prominent in Europe, one concerned with rates of child poverty and issues of social exclusion and social cohesion. It is a way of talking that gets little air time on Capitol Hill or — with the exception of campaigns by the Children's Defense Fund and other advocacy groups — in the American media. Yet Sweden and other Nordic countries have practically eliminated child poverty through taxes and transfers.⁴⁰ As Sharon Kagan and Lynda Hallmark (this issue) point out, the way we socially construct our children has profound consequences for how we serve them.

Critical policy making. Critical policy making requires discussion of means and goals and their consequences for a democratic society. It requires an educated citizenry that questions the moral basis for policy making, identifies unjust or unequal practices, deconstructs rhetoric that diverts attention from deep-seated inequities, and searches for alternatives that create new possibilities for individual and social life. Amy Gutmann writes that a democratic society depends on democratic education, which demands that every child be given an education adequate to participate in the political process: "Take away the process [of democratic deliberation] and the educational institutions that remain cannot properly be called democratic."⁴¹ In the U.S., there is evidence that traditional forms of participation in society have been on the decline since the 1970s, suggesting the importance of concerted efforts to invent new forms and to educate children to participate in dialogue and collective decision making from a young age.⁴²

Democracy demands open debate of public policies, and, in the recent election debates in the U.K., government policies came under challenge from the Right and the Left. Conservatives asked, "Where has all the money gone?" while others complained that the government's expectation that poverty rates could be cut without redistributive taxation was unfounded. Some argued that Sure Start, the Early Excellence Centers, and the Education and Health Action Zones were aimed at helping people to help themselves and not at fundamental questions of income inequality. And the National Childcare Strategy was criticized as short-term funding or lottery money intended to stimulate the private market to meet demands for child-care places — not the subsidized system that was needed.

The Blair Government has enacted a reform agenda in an astonishingly brief period of time, and it has done so largely through centralized planning and locally administered funding, with government control of curriculum, assessment, teacher training, and regulation. While some see ECEC reform initiatives as bringing greater coherence to a diversity of services, others argue that England had reasonably good collective intermediary mechanisms (local authorities, communes), which the government effectively downgraded in order to create a more competitive, marketplace environment for education and other services. Alexander's criticism, for example, is that, in the past, these intermediary bodies were more effective and democratic forms of delivery and self-regulation.¹⁸ Thus, while the local Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships, Sure Start, the Education and Health Action Zones, and the Early Childhood Research Forum would seem to offer new possibilities for citizen participation, it remains to be seen if they will have a strong voice in the policy process.

Since devolution, Scotland has exercised considerable autonomy in interpreting ECEC reforms. For example, Scotland has no reception classes. While England has a single regulatory body for care and education, Scotland does not. Instead of early learning goals or a statutory curriculum, there is a set of guidelines for preschool and higher grades. The preschool curriculum framework emphasizes learning through play, and Scotland has no baseline assessment. A self-evaluation guide based on performance indicators has been under development. Finally, the Scottish Executive (the new Scottish parliament) opted not to establish an Early Excellence Centers Program on the ground that calling attention to the best centers would be divisive

and discouraging to other centers. Instead, an Early Years Best Practice Initiative supports a *Share* newsletter, national conferences, and local seminars that enable centers to share approaches.

As these examples suggest, there is no one right way to work toward a more just and equitable society, but it seems crucial that reforms be open to debate in a broad range of public forums and that ECEC reforms not focus so narrowly on skills and outcomes that democratic education and institutions are undermined in the process. England has undertaken a quite visible reform agenda, while the reform of ECEC in the U.S. has begun more slowly, using the policy levers that are available. This means that reforms are being undertaken through the work of professional associations and government-sponsored commissions in support of teacher education reform, more challenging curriculum, and explicit teaching of foundational skills.¹⁹ It is important that these efforts be given serious consideration, but it is equally important that they express a broad concern with children's well-being and that they be open to democratic deliberation. The U.K. experiments are a living laboratory for ECEC reform. As such, they have much to teach us.

1. Tony Bertram and Christine Pascal, *Early Childhood Education and Care in the United Kingdom*, OECD Background Report (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1999), p. 51. Much of the information cited in this article is taken from this report and from *Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in the United Kingdom: OECD Country Note* (Paris: OECD, 2000). Only direct quotations will be noted.

2. Margy Whalley, *Learning to Be Strong: Setting Up a Neighbourhood Service for Under Fives and Their Families* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1994), p. 21.

3. This statement was adapted from the Plowden Report, which borrowed it from John Dewey, "The School and Society," in *The Child and the Curriculum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 7. Dewey refers to the community rather than the nation.

4. Nancy Robinson et al., *A World of Children: Daycare and Preschool Institutions* (Monterey, Calif.: Brooks/Cole Publishing, 1979). Other more recent resources include Sheila Kamerman, "Early Childhood Education and Care: An Overview of Developments in the OECD Countries," *International Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 33, 2000, pp. 7-29; Pamela Oberhuemer and Michaela Ulich, *Working with Young Children in Europe: Provision and Staff Training* (London: Paul Chapman, 1997); and Helen Penn, *How Should We Care for Babies and Toddlers? An Analysis of Practice in Out-of-Home Care for Children Under Three* (Toronto: Center for Urban & Community Studies, 1999).

5. Robinson et al., p. 108.

6. *Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in the United States of America: OECD Country Note* (Paris: OECD, 2000), p. 18.

7. *Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care* (Paris: OECD, 2001). In this special section, Michelle Neuman and John Bennett (p. 246) provide a summary of this report. Background reports and country notes for the participating countries can be accessed on the Web at

www.oecd.org.

8. *Making the Most of the National Childcare Strategy* (London: Daycare Trust, 1999).

9. Bertram and Pascal, p. 21.

10. *Working Wonders. Quality Staff. Quality Services* (London: Daycare Trust, 1997).

11. Doreen McCalla-Chen, Helen Penn, and Chris Dover. *Nurseries for Local Communities: The History and Prospects for Neighbourhood* (London: National Children's Bureau, forthcoming).

12. Gillian Prior, Gill Courtney, and Emily Charlin. *Second Survey of Parents of Three and Four Year Old Children and Their Use of Early Years Services* (London: Department for Education and Employment, Research Report RR120, 1999).

13. McCalla-Chen, Penn, and Dover, op. cit.

14. Peter Moss. "Renewed Hopes and Lost Opportunities: Early Childhood in the Early Years of the Labour Government." *Cambridge Journal of Education*, vol. 29, 1999, pp. 229-38.

15. Personal communication, Department for Education and Employment administrator, December 1999.

16. See Christine Pascal et al., *The Effective Early Learning Project: A Professional Development Programme* (Worcester: Amber Publications, 1997).

17. *Opportunity for All: Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion* (London: Department for Social Services, 1999). According to the relative rates reported by UNICEF, the child poverty rate of 37% in the U.K. was effectively reduced to 19% by taxes and transfers; the comparable figures for the U.S. were 27% and 24% respectively. See *A League Table of Child Poverty in Rich Countries* (Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Centre, 2000), reprinted in *Starting Strong*, p. 35.

18. See, for example, Sheldon Danziger and Peter Gottshank. *America Unequal* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), chap. 3.

19. *Sure Start: A Guide for Second-Wave Programmes* (London: Department for Education and Employment, 1999), p. 2.

20. Robin Alexander, *Culture and Pedagogy: International Comparisons in Primary Education* (London: Blackwell, 2000), p. 103. By his count, the U.S. has one federal, 50 state, and 83,000 local governments.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

22. *Making the Most of the National Childcare Strategy*, p. 4.

23. Margaret Hodge. "Closing Speech," Conference on Children, Family, and the Community: Sharing Best Practice in Early Education and Care: The U.K. and International Experience, London, 28 February 2001.

24. *Making the Most of the National Childcare Strategy*, p. 1.

25. *Early Learning Goals* (London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1999); *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (London: QCA, 2000); and *Early Years Education, Childcare, and Playwork: A Framework of Nationally Accredited Qualifications* (London: QCA, 1999).

26. Alexander, p. 142.

27. *Early Learning Goals*, p. 27.

28. *Working Wonders*, p. 3.

29. *Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in the United Kingdom: OECD Country Note*, p. 20.

30. See, for example, Eric Bredo and Walter Feinberg, *Knowledge and Values in Social and Educational Research* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); Stephen Kemmis, "Action Research and the Politics of Reflection," in David Boud, Rosemary Keogh, and David Walker, eds., *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), pp. 139-64; and Sally Lubbeck, "Nested Contexts," in Lois Weis, ed., *Class, Race, and Gender in American Education* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), pp. 43-62.

31. Martin Carnoy, *Globalization and Educational Reform: What Planners Need to Know*, vol. 63 (Paris: UNESCO International Institute of Educational Planning, 1999).

32. *Opportunity for All*.

33. *Sure Start*, p. 1.

34. "The Convention on the Rights of the Child," 1989, is available on the UNICEF website at www.unicef.org/crc/fulltext.htm.

35. *Starting Strong*, pp. 34-38.

36. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (1987; reprint Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 287.

37. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

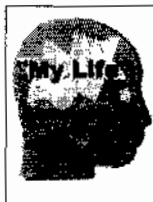
38. Alexander, chap. 6.

39. See, for example, *NC, ALL Program Standards: Initial and Advanced Programs in Early Childhood Education* (Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2000); National Research Council, *Ready to Learn* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 2001); and National Research Council, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1998). ■

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