



SUMMARY REPORT OF THE FIFTH SESSION ON 20 SEPTEMBER 2007 IN
BRUSSELS OF THE WORKING GROUP ON THE QUALITY OF CHILDHOOD WITHIN
THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Fifth session: **‘How can we improve in the European Union the Early Childhood Educational Systems?’** with John Bennett, the main author of the OECD Studies ‘Starting Strong I’ and ‘Starting Strong II’.

MEP Karin Resetarits wrote a letter to Chancellor Angela Merkel, then Chairman of the European Union

As a follow-up to the session on 15 May MEP Karin Resetarits wrote a letter to Chancellor Angela Merkel to ask Chancellor Merkel to add two sentences to Article II-84 with respect to the Constitutional Treaty. Mrs Resetarits received a reply from Dr. Ursula von der Leyen, Federal Minister for Families and Youth.

How can we improve in the European Union the Early Childhood Educational Systems

John Bennett explains the content of this study and the context in which it was decided to undertake this work. 20 of the 30 OECD member countries decided to participate in this study.

The result is that for the first time in history a comparison was made of early childhood education and care models (ECEC) of the said countries, which brought a rich harvest of new insights in this area. It turned out that four critical factors have a dominant influence on the quality of the ECEC in a particular country:

- Critical factor 1: To reduce child poverty and ensure equitable educational outcomes for children at-risk; many European countries do not pay sufficient attention to the correlation between on the one hand poverty among children and on the other hand a lower educational performance among children at risk. In this respect, the longitudinal British research – Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (1997-2012) – has made a remarkable contribution, not least its latest findings, which show that only quality in early childhood services has a long-term effect on educational achievement.
- Critical factor 2: Many European countries do not give sufficient attention to the link between early childhood services and equality of opportunity for women;
- Critical factor 3: To attend to the link between children’s services and equality in services for children 0-3 years; it was discovered that it is much better to provide the ECEC services to the children than to give, in lieu of that, the parents financial handouts so that they can themselves buy the ECEC services. In the latter case very often the children at risk are not send to daycare centres or kindergarten and the disadvantages vis-à-vis other children increase more and more.
- Critical factor 4: To turn back the century old tradition of schoolification.

Remark: The group of children most at risk in the European Union are the Roma children. The Roma population in various countries taken together is some 10 million.

The Nordic Approach is more attuned to the requirements of young children than the Schoolification or Pre-School Approach

In the study it became clear that there is a range of ECEC services in the 20 countries between on one side the Nordic Approach and on the other side the Schoolification or Pre-School Approach, which is mainly practiced in France and the Anglo-Saxon countries. John Bennett explains that it was one of the great results of the OECD study to obtain a clear understanding that the Nordic Approach is more attuned to the requirements of children up to 6 years of age than the so called Pre-School Approach. The results are shown systematically in the table below:

Characteristics	Nordic approach	Pre-school approach
Central or de-central approach	A broad central guideline stressing inclusion and democratic values, with local development of the curriculum by the teachers and the parents	Centralised development of the curriculum, stressing autonomy of the child and competition between the children.
Focus of the work	Focus on broad developmental goals and living together in a learning community of educators and peers: the competent child	A focus on learning standards, teachers, classroom environment, preparation for school. Children can or cannot read
Pedagogical strategy	Broad orientations rather than prescribed outcomes: play, music, arts, project work, interaction with peers and nature. The own learning strategies of the child are respected.	Often prescriptive: clear targets and outcomes, detailed competencies.
Educational goals	Individual goals for each child are set with unobtrusive, developmental assessment	Assessments and sometimes testing required
Learning focus	Culturally valued 'topics of learning' privileged, taking into account the interest of the child. A holistic development of the child, which includes aspects like physical, arts, social etc.; attention to social values.	Teaching subjects privileged
Focus on the child versus focus on pre-set standards	A growing focus on individual language and oral competence... and much 'play' reading and writing.	focus on competence in the national language, oral, phonemic... with some formal skills in writing and reading



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Fifth session: **‘How can we improve in the European Union the Early Childhood Educational Systems?’** with John Bennett, the main author of the OECD Studies ‘Starting Strong I’ and ‘Starting Strong II’.

1. OPENING

Mrs Karin Resetarits welcomes the participants and opens the meeting. She first informs the group, that the introductory speaker Mrs Geseke Lundgren is unable to attend because she missed a connecting flight in Copenhagen.

Furthermore she informs the Group that she wrote a letter to Chancellor Angela Merkel on June 15 as a follow-up to the last meeting on May 15, whereby the group agreed to ask Chancellor Merkel to add two sentences to Article II-84 with respect to the Constitutional Treaty.

Mrs Resetarits received a reply from Dr. Ursula von der Leyen, Federal Minister for Families and Youth. In this letter she thanks Mrs Resetarits for her letter and points out that:

- the European Commission adopted a Childs’ Rights strategy;
- that the European Council of 21 and 22 June agreed to prepare a Treaty in lieu of the Constitution, whereby a reference is made to the Charter of Fundamental Rights. In this way this Charter will also become legally binding.

Furthermore Mrs Karin Resetarits remarks that it is good for Mrs Ursula von der Leyen that she is aware of our Working Group and possibly she can come and speak one day in our group.

2. HOW CAN WE IMPROVE IN THE EUROPEAN UNION THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

Then Mrs Karin Resetarits introduces Mr John Bennett, the key-note speaker. She adds that in October the Comité des Femmes will have a meeting about demography in Europe. The outcome of this session could possible be used as input for this Comité.

John Bennett starts by saying that one of the key elements of Early Childhood Educational Systems is the level of poverty of children. In Denmark it is 2.4 %, in Ireland, John Bennett’s home country, 15.7 %. The statistics are derived from the OECD study Starting Strong II.

The Starting Strong work originates in the OECD, a Club of some 50 rich countries, which focuses mainly on economic development. John Bennett: ‘We were lucky to get the topic on the agenda of the Educational Committee of the OECD in 1996. At that time life-long-learning was an important theme. In that context it was argued that early childhood education should also be considered, because in that period the basis for life-long-learning is laid. On the basis of that argument the subject was taken on’.

The next element addressed by John Bennett is the access to Early Childhood Educational Systems and the age children have to go there. In France it is 2 ½, in Italy 3, in the Netherlands 4, in the USA 5. In the Nordic countries children have the right to go to child care facilities from their birth onwards. The quality of their services is also high and for these reasons the Nordic countries are far more successful in this area than the other countries.

The Questions that were examined in the course of the OECD Reviews were as follows:

- what is the social and economic context for children and families
- Is ECEC (=Early Childhood Education and Care) programming systemic and integrated ?
- Is the ECEC system equitable? Does it include appropriately all children?
- What are the access rates? Which children have least access?
- What are the structural features of quality?
- Do staff enjoy appropriate working conditions and professional education?
- Does a participatory approach to quality exist?
- What are the different pedagogical approaches
- Is there a serious approach to data collection and monitoring
- Is there a national agenda for research?
- Is early education (and the education system as a whole) based on democratic values?

John Bennett states, that the valuable thing about the survey was the actual country visits, whereby the OECD team could speak with the government officials in charge of this area. Because of the whole approach important policy areas could be identified country by country. The conclusions in this respect have been written down in Chapter 10 of Starting Strong II.

After the publication of the Starting Strong II report the OECD decided to discontinue the project. However, the national co-ordinators of the member countries requested the OECD Education Committee to continue the network nevertheless. This was agreed upon and The Network, hosted by the Foundation 'Kind en Gezin' (=Child and Family) in Brussels, has received the following mandate from the Committee:

- To bring together senior administrators from the national ministries in charge of children's services in the member countries;
- To organise two workshops annually for country administrators on (emerging) topics important for policy in the early childhood field;
- To maintain the knowledge base established by the OECD reviews - and, in particular, to collect accurate statistical information on the various countries participating in the network, in co-operation with the Indicators and Analysis Division at the OECD.

This group is now called DECET Network, which stands for Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training and it is funded by the contributions of the member countries. The Secretariat is done by the foundation Kind en Gezin, Hallepoortlaan 27, 1060 Brussels. The URL is: www.decet.org, telephone +32.2.5331211.

John Bennett will focus with his presentation on the critical factors in European early childhood policies, which are:

- Critical factor 1: To reduce child poverty and ensure equitable educational outcomes for children at-risk;
- Critical Factor 2: Many European countries do not give sufficient attention to the link between early childhood services and equality of opportunity for women

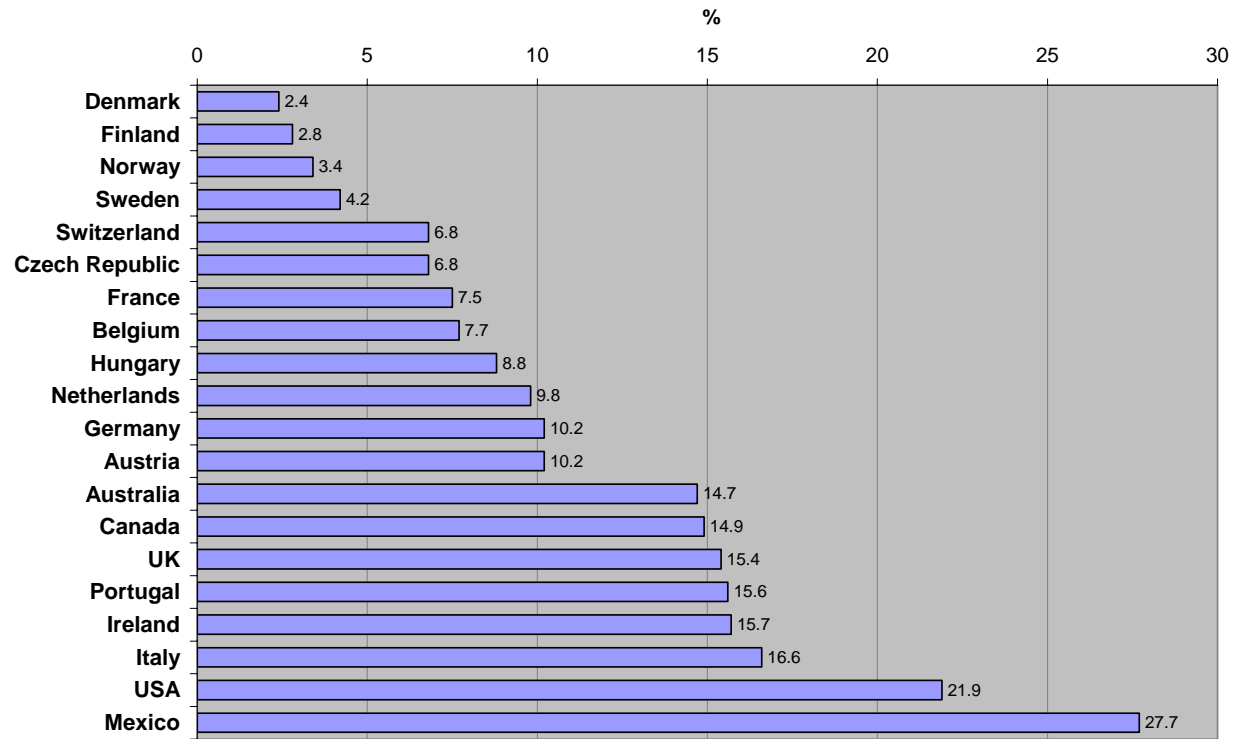
- Critical factor 3: To attend to the link between children's services and equality in services for children 0-3 years;
- Critical factor 4: To turn back the century old tradition of schoolification.

Critical Factor 1: Child Poverty

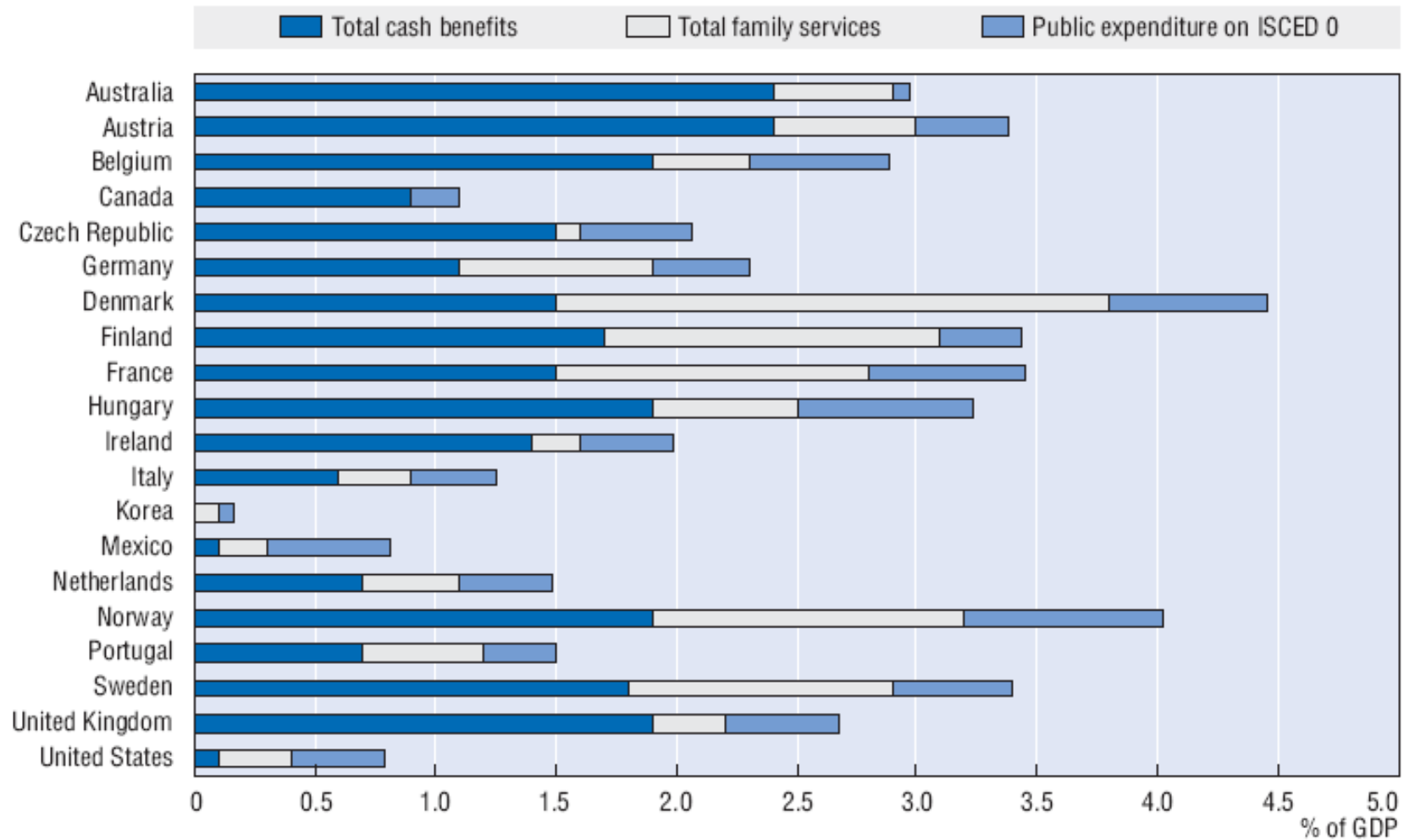
Next John Bennett turns to critical factor nr 1: To reduce child poverty and ensure equitable educational outcomes for children at-risk.

In this context the following slides are shown:

Child poverty in many countries is still too high and the income gap is growing in almost all countries



Spending on Families and Children's Services (figures from around 2000):



Observations and Conclusions:

- The Nordic countries have the best score and are an example for other countries.
- In the study a vocabulary has been developed in the area of Early Childhood Education and Care, with concepts, definitions, statistics etc., thus providing scientists, policy makers and NGO's with an important and effective tool kit to discuss quality issues in this area.
- Many European countries do not pay sufficient attention to the correlation between on the one hand poverty among children and on the other hand a lower educational performance among children at risk. In this respect, the longitudinal British research – Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (1997-2012) – has made a remarkable contribution, not least its latest findings, which show that only quality in early childhood services has a long-term effect on educational achievement.
- The same is true for family services. John Bennet really stresses this element, because according to him it is better to provide services (daycare, medical etc) to families instead of providing handouts to the family for which they then can buy the service. It is his experience, that in the latter case the quality of the service goes down and children at risk do not receive the service in question.

The characteristics of children at risk:

- They live in poverty, which is defined by the OECD as children born into families with less than half the median income of the average family, often occurring among:
 - Children of mothers who are non-nationals or belong to indigenous groups
 - Children in lone parent or unemployed households
- These children often experience low birth weight, malnutrition and poor health; neglect or violence, sometimes on a daily basis. They suffer also from cultural poverty (low educational level of parents; low educational aspirations) and perhaps speak a second language or dialect at home.

Remarks:

- The situation for children in the UK has improved considerably since 2000 and the indicators improved accordingly.
- The group of children most at risk in the European Union are the Roma children. The Roma population in various countries taken together is some 10 million.
- According to John Bennett about 25% of all children in Europe can be considered as poor;
- Mrs Jana Hainsworth: EU institutions use a different definition of poverty: a child in the age range of 0-18, lives in poverty when it lives in a household, consisting of two adults and two children, with less than 60% of the median income in the country in question. According to this definition EUROSTAT estimates that today 18 million children in the EU live in poverty.
- Mrs Karin Resetarits: has religion something to do with the poverty levels? John Bennett replies that this question cannot be answered easily, because many factors play a role.

Mr John Bennett furthermore states that access to children's services and being a child at risk is highly correlated. Children 'at-risk' need:

- Improved access to services
- Highly resourced services: *equal is not enough*. For this reason children 'at risk' in the Netherlands are given extra resources in the form of teacher bonuses and pedagogical resources.

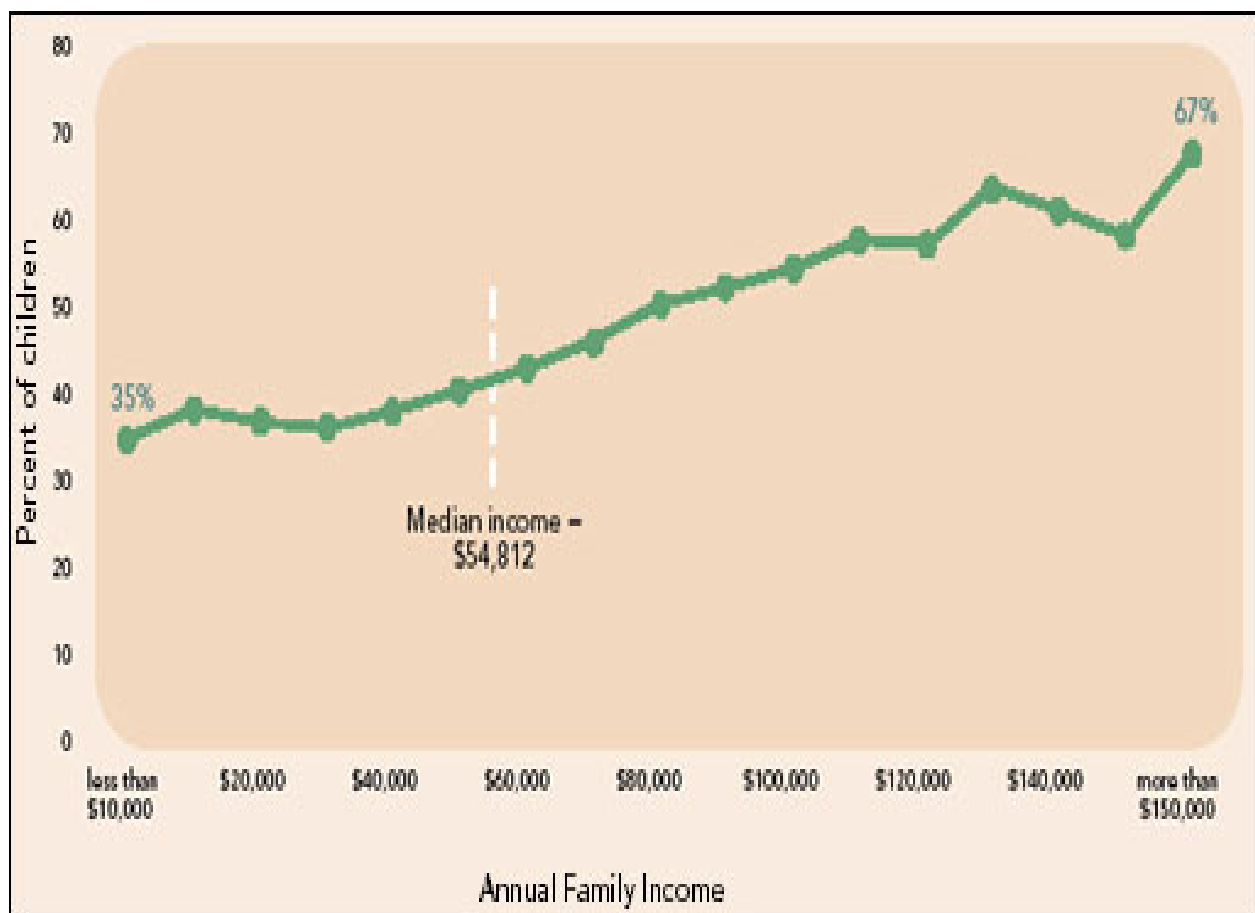
- Greater duration of early education: early access ('first call' on services) in long-day, year long services
- More effective pedagogy, while respecting early education research and the child's natural learning strategies.

John Bennett states that access to child services is a key factor for improving the quality of Early Childhood Education and Care and he illustrates this with an example from Belgium and the USA.

Access to Child Care in Belgium:

Family background	Regular use	No use
All Belgian children	55.7%	34.2%
All ethnic background children:	23.7%	69.5%
- children from 'at-risk' ethnic minority families	12.7%	79.4%

Access to pre-Kindergarten in the USA in relation to family income



Source: John Bennett, who refers to the EPE Research Center 2007

In the USA only 35% of the children from families with an income of US \$ 10,000 or less go to Kindergarten. For the children from families with an income above US \$ 150,000 it is 67%.

This clearly indicates a difference in access in connection with the income level of the parents. John Bennett: this pattern is also true in Europe.

Next John Bennett explains to the group that research has been done to appraise the effect of early intervention. In the first place he refers to the work of James Heckman, an American economist, who received the Nobel Prize, and who did the following pronouncement (Heckman et al. PNAS, 2006):

The most cost-effective strategy for strengthening the future American workforce is to invest greater human and financial resources in the social and cognitive environments of children who are disadvantaged, beginning as early as possible

John Bennett furthermore mentions that the benefits of participation in **quality** ECEC are, among others:

- Health and physical development are improved;
- Children learn routines and competencies useful for transition to school and stay in school longer;
- Better educational outcomes;
- A significant reduction in juvenile crime;
- A reduction in both adult crime and victim costs.

Critical Factor 2: Many European countries do not give sufficient attention to the link between early childhood services and equality of opportunity for women

John Bennett cites Esping-Andersen: ‘the compatibility of motherhood and careers is contingent on the nature of institutional support’, in particular, on public support for parental leave, the provision of early childhood services and the availability of family-friendly jobs.

This statement is true, because in practice children depend more and more on women and the position of women in Europe is characterized by the following:

- A denial of equal opportunity for women both to work and in work;
- Wage discrimination against women. Example: circa 80% of male wage for equal work
- Insufficient supply of childcare services;
- Services: unaffordable for families on modest incomes: case of Ireland
- Family-friendly policies are weak.

Conclusion:

Greater attention to the link between accessible early childhood services and women’s work would lead to:

- greater equality of opportunity for women;
- would ease work-life balance;
- provide increased tax revenues for governments.

Next John Bennett shows a number of slides which support the standpoint that persons, mostly women, that raise children, are discriminated in the work force:

- Women work more part time than men;
- The salaries of childcare and early years workers is much lower than of school secretaries, personal assistants and other secretaries or nursing auxiliaries (UK, 2003).

Then he gives an example of the USA:

'Despite having higher levels of formal education than the average American worker, ECEC professionals earn dreadfully low wages – on average only \$16,980 dollars per year (funeral attendants = \$17,320; garbage collectors = \$25,020). In addition, they rarely receive benefits or paid leave. Not surprisingly, given the low salaries, staff turnover is high in early childhood programmes outside the public schools. Some estimate it to be around 36% a year.'

Kagan & Rigby (2003)

Next John Bennett pays attention to the Global Gender Gap Report 2006, which monitors the inequality between men and women in the many countries in the world. The index is based on four areas:

- Economic participation and opportunity
- Educational attainment
- Political empowerment
- Health and survival.

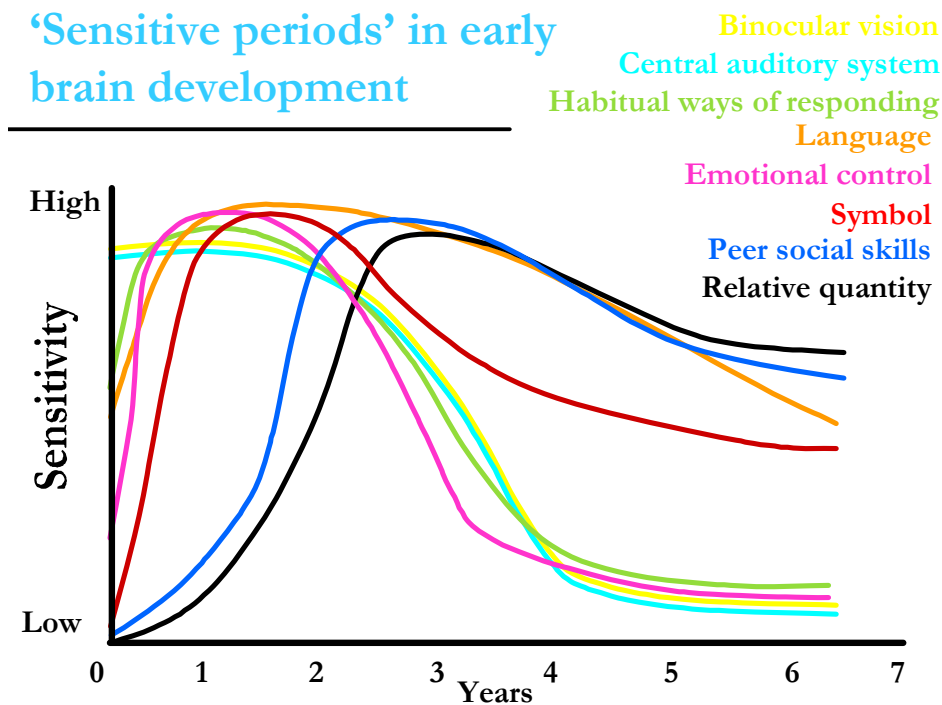
Please find below the score of the top countries in this respect.

Gender Gap Index 2006		
Rank	Country	Score*
1	Sweden	0.8133
2	Norway	0.7994
3	Finland	0.7958
4	Iceland	0.7813
5	Germany	0.7524
6	Philippines	0.7516
7	N. Zealand	0.7509
8	Denmark	0.7462
9	UK	0.7365
10	Ireland	0.7335

*0 to 1 scale: 0=inequality, 1=equality

Critical Factor 3: Insufficient attention is given to the quality of services for younger children 0-3 years

John Bennett explains, that the period from birth to 3 years is crucial for brain development, physical and motor development, concept and language acquisition. He illustrates this with the following diagram:



If those that raise the child do not provide the affectionate, physical, emotional, linguistic and social environment etc. that the child requires, the child is harmed in a profound way, and it is very difficult, if not impossible, and in any case very expensive, to repair later in life, what was omitted in this crucial period.

John Bennett: look at the curve for peer social skills: the sensitivity is peaking between 2 and 5; in that period children learn the basic social skills, including conflict resolution.

In many countries, split systems of child care and early education occur, leading to:

- Universal access and qualified educators in early education, but
- Weak access, poorly qualified staff, weak regulation and quality standards and a large unregulated private day care sector.

Conclusion:

Poor quality in child care, at home or in child care centres, impedes the development of young children.

With regards to the Netherlands John Bennett makes the following remark:

During the past five years the daycare sector was privatized, whereby some welfare standards have been kept, but pedagogical rules were cancelled, thus lowering the quality of these services for children.

John Bennett asks himself: Why such weak attention to the well-being of the youngest children?

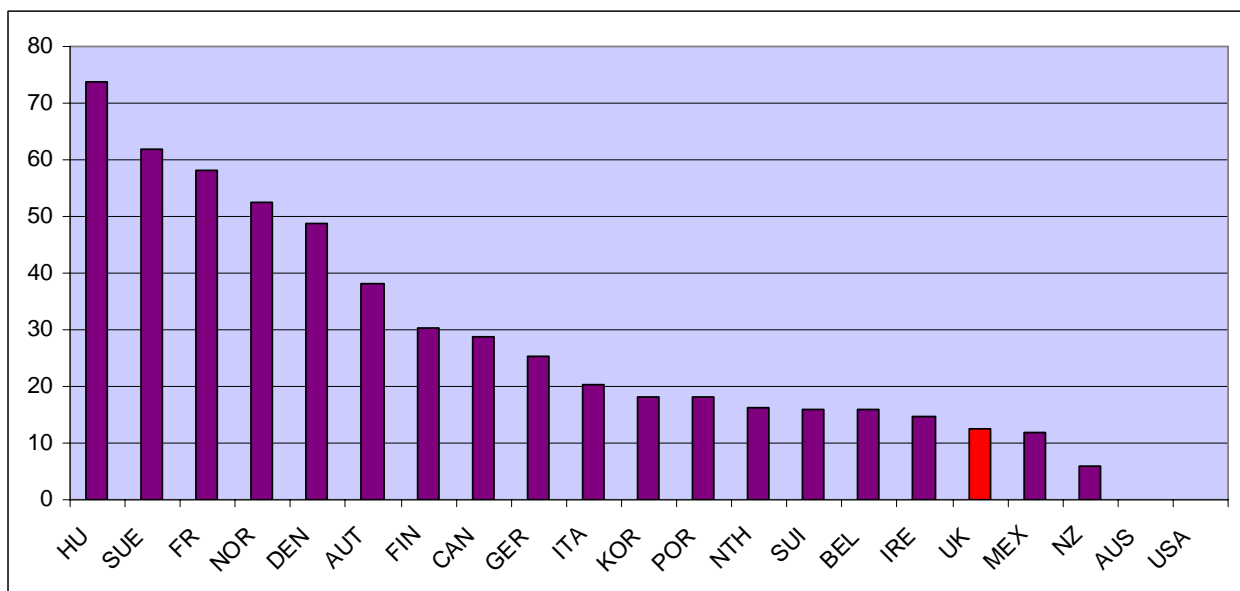
- Societies still adopt the ‘maternalism’ assumption, that is, the assumption that women will continue to rear children, despite their new work responsibilities
- The EU pursues a purely labour market approach toward infants and toddlers, e.g. the Barcelona targets, meaning a percentage of children that should be in daycare etc;
- In many countries, e.g. Belgium, Netherlands a lack of support to parents (especially to mothers) to have time with children, e.g. parental leave measures (breast-feeding period) are weak

Conclusion:

The need to pursue a ‘best interest of the child’ approach alongside the predominant economic model.

John Bennett presents a slide concerning effective parental leave per OECD country.

Y-axis: length of the parental leave in weeks paid.



Critical actor 4: A tendency toward the ‘schoolification’ of early childhood services

In the Starting Strong study a new word is introduced namely ‘schoolification’. With this word John Bennett indicates that ECEC services are set up along the lines of a junior school:

- A subject-based curriculum either named or latent
- A focus on skills and competences useful for schools

John Bennett observes that there is a tendency toward ‘schoolification’ in ECEC services. In this context he makes the following remarks:

- It goes back to 19th century European imperialism and industrialization
- But it no longer accords with:
 - Present thinking about human rights and diversity
 - Research on children’s well-being, natural learning strategies, outcomes
 - The democratic need for a focus on participation.

- The needs of future economies (in so far as we can judge these needs, realistically)
- Assessment of language/literacy and cognition/general knowledge
- Children organised in age cohorts
- Large groups of children with one teacher
- Frontal instruction in large groups
- An early start of schooling in order to achieve later on better intellectual targets.

Schoolification is the dominant ECEC philosophy in the French and Anglo-Saxon traditions.

The motivation behind the schoolification approach is:

- To integrate quickly and efficiently large inflows of immigrants and to teach them quickly and as early as possible the national language;
- To ensure that there is **equality of opportunity in education.**

Next John Bennett explains that early schoolification is not an optimal way of relating to children up to five or 6 years of age. This was one of the broad conclusions of the reviews made for the Starting Strong II Report. On the other hand in these reviews the rich Nordic tradition in the early childhood field was (re)discovered and published.

The Nordic tradition is characterized by:

- **The early childhood centre** is viewed as a life space, a place in which children and pedagogues “learn to be, learn to do, learn to learn, learn to live together”;
- **Curriculum:** a broad national guideline with devolution of decision-making, curriculum content and implementation to municipalities, centres and families;
- **Focus of work:** working with the whole child and her family – broad developmental goals as well as early learning are pursued. Programmes are child centred – interactivity with peers and educators encouraged and the quality of life in the institution is given high importance;
- **Pedagogical strategies** – confidence is placed in the child’s own learning strategies and centres of interest, with educator scaffolding at the appropriate moment. The child’s learning strategies respected: exploration (freedom of movement), learning through relationships, play and expression;
- **Learning focus** – two main foci: to support the holistic development of the child; to model social values and introduce culturally valued ‘topics of learning’ such as, emergent literacy and scientific enquiry, music, song, dance, environmental themes, local topography and history. This is contrary to the pre-school class, which takes care of preparation for school

To illustrate the differences between the Nordic, constructivist approach with the Pre-school approach, John Bennett presents a table whereby both traditions are compared regarding different characteristics:

Characteristics	Nordic approach	Pre-school approach
Central or de-central approach	A broad central guideline stressing inclusion and democratic values, with local development of the curriculum by the teachers and the parents	Centralised development of the curriculum, stressing autonomy of the child and competition between the children.
Focus of the work	Focus on broad developmental goals and living together in a learning community of educators and peers: the competent child	A focus on learning standards, teachers, classroom environment, preparation for school. Children can or cannot read
Pedagogical strategy	Broad orientations rather than prescribed outcomes: play, music, arts, project work, interaction with peers and nature. The own learning strategies of the child are respected.	Often prescriptive: clear targets and outcomes, detailed competencies.
Educational goals	Individual goals for each child are set with unobtrusive, developmental assessment	Assessments and sometimes testing required
Learning focus	Culturally valued 'topics of learning' privileged, taking into account the interest of the child. A holistic development of the child, which includes aspects like physical, arts, social etc.; attention to social values.	Teaching subjects privileged
Focus on the child versus focus on pre-set standards	A growing focus on individual language and oral competence... and much 'play', reading and writing.	focus on competence in the national language, oral, phonemic... with some formal skills in writing and reading

Report by Michiel Matthes.

ACTION LIST OF 20 SEPTEMBER 2007

WHAT	WHO	WHEN
1. The presentation of Geseke Lundgren 'The child indicates itself when it is ready to begin formal learning. How to recognize this moment?' will be done on 6 November.	Geseke Lundgren of the International Association for Steiner / Waldorf Early Childhood Education	6 November
2. prepare a proposal for MEP Karin Resetarits regarding re-installing the EC Childcare Network	Mr. Matthes with the help of prof. Peter Moss	Before 12 October; done
3. deterioration of the daycare services in the Netherlands; to find out the details and to bring this to the attention of Dutch authorities and parliamentarians	Mr Matthes with others	In the coming weeks

Annex 1**PARTICIPANTS OF THE SESSION OF THE WORKING GROUP ON THE QUALITY OF CHILDHOOD ON 20 SEPTEMBER 2007**

Name	Function	E-mail Address
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Mr Claes Solberg Pedersen	Kempler Institute	solborg@get2net.dk
John Bennett	Research	bennett.paris@gmail.com

Annex 2**BOOKS MENTIONED BY VARIOUS SPEAKERS**

OECD Publishing, Starting Strong II, Early Childhood Education and Care, 2006;
 OECD Publishing, Starting Strong I, Early Childhood Education and Care, 2001;
 Technical Paper 11: The Continuing Effects of Pre-school Education at Age 7, A Longitudinal Study funded by the DfES 1997-2003. Part of the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project.

Elly Singer and Dorian De Haan: Kijken, kijken, kijken, Over samenspelen, botsen en verzoenen bij jonge kinderen (in Dutch, not yet translated but the translation of the title would be 'Look, look, look, about playing together, clashes and making up again among young children').



draft

INVITATION FOR ALL WHO ARE INTERESTED IN THE WORLD OF OUR
CHILDREN

hosted by

MEP Karin Resetarits, chair person

Working Group on the Quality of Childhood within the European Parliament.

Fifth session: **‘How can we improve in the European Union the Early Childhood Educational Systems?’** with John Bennett, the main author of the monumental OECD Studies ‘Starting Strong I’ and ‘Starting Strong II’.

Time: Thursday, 20 September 2007 from 13.00 until 15.00 hours

Location: European Parliament, Rue Wiertzstraat 60, Entrance Spinelli, Room X (room to be reserved).

This program was developed in cooperation with the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group, whose members are:

The Linkedness Project, Belgium

Gie Deboutte

Kaat Pattyn

Project Experiential Education, Belgium

Ludo Heylen

The Kempler Institute, Denmark

Claes Solberg Pedersen

Legambiente, Italy

Vittoria Cogliati Dezza

Lorenzo Vicario

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Marijke Sluijter

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International Association for Steiner / Waldorf

Early Childhood Education (Sweden)

Geseke Lundren

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European Council for Steiner

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Christopher Clouder

Alliance for Childhood European Network Group,
Brussels

Michiel Matthes

How can we improve early childhood education systems in Europe?

Under the auspices of the OECD Education Committee an in-depth inventory was made of 20 OECD member states during the period 1998 – 2005, examining access to and the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. The rationale for the review of the countries – most of which were European - was to strengthen the foundations of lifelong learning. Two OECD reports, entitled ‘Starting Strong I’ (2001) and ‘Starting Strong II’ (2006), were generated from this work. These reports underline that, despite much progress, urgent work is needed in many European countries to improve conditions for young children, in particular for:

- *Young children 0-3 years.* The Barcelona agreement sets quantitative targets for child care, which provide little guidance concerning the rights of parents, basic gender equality or the quality of services for infants and toddlers;
- *Children 3-6 years placed in traditional pre-primary systems,* e.g. several countries have adopted a ‘readiness for school’ approach, focusing on cognitive development in the early years and the acquisition of a range of knowledge, such as literacy and math, skills and dispositions that children should develop as a result of classroom experiences. As a result, a ‘schoolification’ of early childhood services takes place, and in some systems, children may be tested on the acquisition of skills through a battery of standardised assessment instruments. Children 3 to 6 years may be placed in classes ranging in size from 20 to 30, cared for by one teacher without a child assistant. Teachers are often trained predominantly in primary school methods and may have little or no certification in early childhood pedagogy.
- *Children from at-risk backgrounds:* four simultaneous approaches help greatly these children and their families:
 - strong governmental policies to reduce the level of child and family poverty in our societies;
 - early access to affordable, high quality early childhood services;
 - appropriate pedagogies focussing on socio-emotional development and strong language skills;
 - diversity outreach to parents and families, in particular, to strengthen parental aspirations and encourage them to support their children's learning

Many promising pedagogical approaches are found in Europe: Among the models referred to in the Starting Strong reports are:

- *The Nordic and (to some extent) Central European model of pedagogy* in which a broad concept of pedagogy is used, combining care, upbringing and learning without hierarchy. Rather than ‘schoolifying ECEC services, there is a strong belief that a broad holistic approach to child development should be adopted, and should even permeate the lower classes of primary school.
- *The Reggio Emilia approach to early education.* The Reggio pre-schools are strongly influenced by their social and historical context (the aftermath of fascism in Italy) and are concerned to maintain a vision of children who can think and act for themselves. Reggio opposes, in the name of young children and their freedom, dominant educational discourses, such as seeing ECEC services as places to produce pre-defined outcomes that have not been discussed with staff and parents or that ignore the interests, experience and choices of young children.
- *The Experiential Education approach,* which was outlined in the second session of the Working Group, by its founder, Professor Ferre Laevers. This approach, now widely used in basic education in Flanders, emphasises the well-being, involvement and ‘connectedness’ of young children. This new approach has helped many kindergarten

and schools to change their focus from programme contents to the well-being and involvement of children.

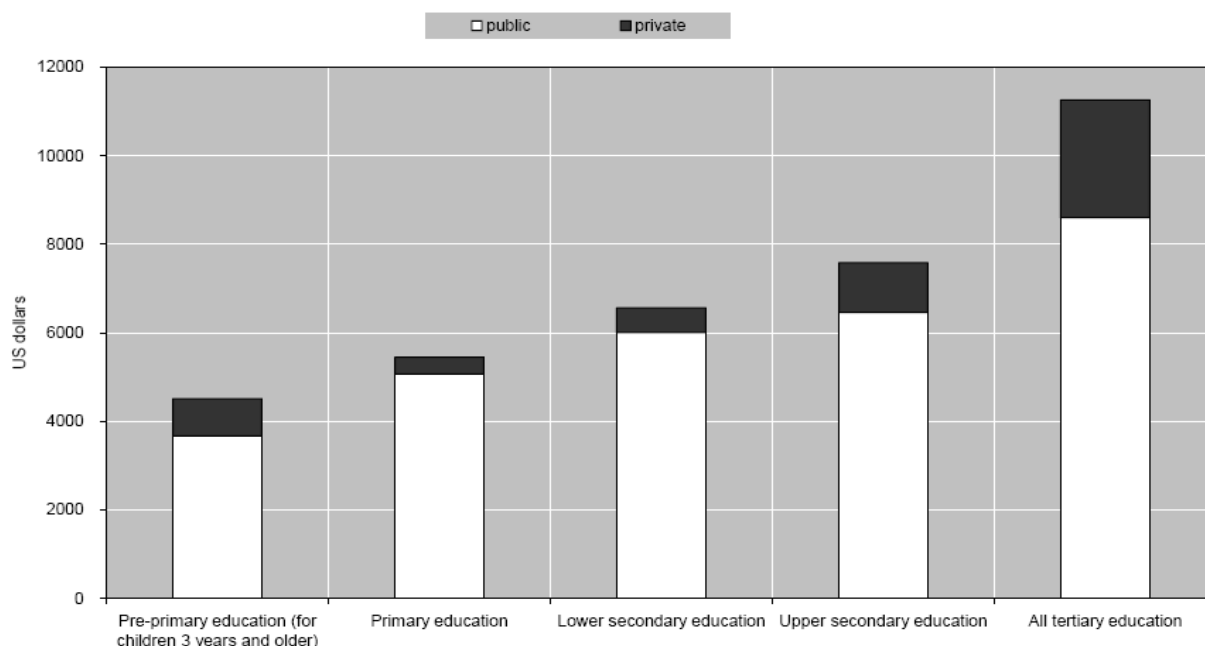
- *The Steiner methodology (not mentioned in the OECD reports).*
The first Steiner Waldorf school / Kindergarten was set in Stuttgart (Germany) just after the First World War. Since then the Steiner approach to early childhood education has spread to 80 countries where in total some 1800 Steiner Waldorf Kindergartens have been set up. The key aims of the Steiner Waldorf kindergartens are to foster:
 - the quality of childhood
 - the quality of play
 - to avoid the start of formal learning at too early an age; formal learning is creeping down step-by-step;
 - more and more children of 0-3 are taken care of outside the home; the International Association for Steiner / Waldorf Early Childhood Education advocates a good quality in this respect;
 - to help parents in their parenting role and help them to continuously get better in this.

What can the European Parliament do in the early childhood area?

The field is vast and needs differ from country to country. Consultation of the OECD reports would suggest the following as important areas for parliaments and governments to consider:

- *To recognise early childhood services as a public good* – on an equal footing with obligatory schooling and as an important part of the educational process. All children should have a right to access quality ECEC services before starting school. In this respect, pre-primary systems – though often lacking an appropriate pedagogy for young children – have often achieved free access for children 3 to 6 years;
- *To examine carefully the leadership model developed by the Nordic countries in the early childhood field.* These countries developed integrated early childhood systems several decades ago, and have greater experience in this field than most other European countries. Their systems do not separate child care from early education but practice *educare* for all young children, a holistic approach to young children in which health, care, social development, upbringing and early education are integrated. The ministry in charge is expected to integrate successfully – through the early childhood services - health, social and educational goals for the good of young children and their families. In these countries, social development, democratic practices and the participation of children are considered primary aims.
- *To base European policy on robust European research.* In this respect, the longitudinal British research – Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (1997-2012) – has made a remarkable contribution, not least its latest findings, which show that only quality in early childhood services has a long-term effect on educational achievement. Another example: the Report Cards of the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.
- *To advocate for adequate funding of early childhood education and care.* Although the early childhood period is one of great cognitive and effective growth, funding of children in these years lags far behind other education sectors. The picture across OECD countries is as follows:

Public and private expenditure per student in OECD countries, in full-time equivalents (estimation)



Remark: expenditure per year per student.

Working Group on the Quality of Childhood

Personally I have been involved for some time in the activities in this area and I am deeply concerned about the quality of childhood in the member states of the European Union. For this reason I have taken the initiative to set up the Working Group on the Quality of Childhood within the European Parliament. Together with the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group we hold a number of sessions, the fifth of which will take place on 20 September 2007.

Objectives of these meetings:

- To gain a better understanding of the Quality of Childhood in the EU member states; this time we will focus on the theme 'How can we improve in the European Union the Early Childhood Educational Systems'.
- To think about the role that the European Parliament could play to improve the situation
- To get to grips with the principles and approaches that could lead to a betterment for children
- To form an effective working group and to get a sense of how to move on.

I take pleasure in inviting you for the fifth session on 20 September. I believe that we as members of the European Parliament working together with likeminded NGOs and committed individuals can and should play an important role in this area.

Yours sincerely,

Karin Resetarits
Member of the European Parliament

Program Outline for 20 September 2007

Time	Subject	Speaker / facilitator
13.00	Opening	Karin Resetarits, Member of the European Parliament and Chairman of the Working Group
13.05	The child indicates itself when it is ready to begin formal learning. How to recognize this moment?	Geseke Lundgren of the International Association for Steiner / Waldorf Early Childhood Education
13.25	How can we improve in the European Union the Early Childhood Educational Systems?	John Bennett, main author of the OECD Study Starting Strong
13.50	The possible role that the European Parliament can play in this area.	John Bennett
14.00-15.00	Discussion	Karin Resetarits