



Concealed Spots and Contemporary Supranational ECEC Policy

Branislav Pupala ✉

DOI 10.15294/ijeces.v6i2.20186

Trnava University in Trnava and Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava Slovak Republic

Article Info

Received September 2017

Accepted October 2017

Published November 2017

Keywords:

ECEC; supranational policy;
transition countries; J.A.

Comenius

Abstract

This article returns to the historical roots of ECEC and considers them within the context of contemporary international preschool education policy. Present-day policy is characterised by the high level of support directed at this education level. The reasons for this are largely economic and ECEC is becoming part of economic development strategy. Frequently research such as the HighScope Perry Preschool Program can be found in the background. In many ways contemporary ECEC is reminiscent of education policy under communism in Europe. This area represents a concealed spot in the international research on preschool education. The extensive expansion of nursery schools in these countries took place from the middle of the last century onwards. They were the first countries to create preschool curricula at the national level. They also often relied on the first attempt at an early years curriculum, contained in John Amos Comenius's *The School of Infancy (Informatorium of Maternal School)*.

How to cite

Pupala, B. (2017). Concealed spots and contemporary supranational ECEC policy. *Indonesian Journal of Early Childhood Education Studies*, 6(2), 59-64. doi: 10.15294/ijeces.v6i2.20186

INTRODUCTION

Historical and international education research now forms an important part of our knowledge on education and is not only a powerful database of knowledge but is part of our decision-making on the future development of our school and education systems and part of everyday teaching practice. Information acquired through international comparisons is no longer simply the exclusive domain of academics, as was possible until education became a national affair. Although the national dimension remains in state policies and its presence must continue to be felt, it is not entirely autonomous. Whether we are talking about developed European countries or developing countries on the African continent or in Asia, it is always the case that education policy is strongly influenced by international education policy and the demands of supranational players.

As an aside, I will just note that national education reforms are pursued under pressure exerted by players such as the OECD, and in Slovakia's case the European Commission, while in developing countries it is World Bank projects and UNESCO strategies that shape decision-making. It is entirely understandable that the post-colonial era of education policy in developing countries has brought with it a new wave of inspiration and influence from the West and new combinations of national needs and experiences or examples from abroad, particularly the West. Research on the national education policy documents of various countries also indicate that their similarities are greater than their national differences and that a seemingly international ideational (perhaps even ideological) convergence is in evidence and that international knowledge on education is manifested in the globalization of the education sphere with both strong and weak consequences (Dale, 1999; Lawn & Lingard; 2002, Ali, 2005; Lauder et al., 2006; Spring, 2008).

ECEC roots

Although these days the international and comparative research or knowledge on ECEC forms part of the education knowledge database and we already legitimately consider ECEC to be the earliest stage of children's education, the historical, political and social contexts of ECEC (when seen as the entry stage into primary education) are not as analytically based as the comparative view of primary education. This is because, as we all know, developments in ECEC have different roots and sources and have followed a gradual developmental path, unlike the expansion of primary or compulsory schooling and, at the very least, it is spread out across the social, economic, health and education sectors.

When looking only at ECEC policy as it has evolved in Europe since the second half of the nineteenth century, we see that its development is both rooted in and determined by at least four factors: 1. the need to protect neglected children and the children of poor working mothers, 2. preschool education was aimed at supporting education for middle-class children, 3. the post-second world war response to demands for the greater employment of women who sought quality care for their children, and 4. the demand that children should be prepared before beginning primary school became established in ECEC.

It is this last factor that led to the care of very young children being widely and generally perceived as an educational matter, to ECEC being the responsibility of the education ministry in an increasing number of countries and to early years care being accompanied nationally by efforts to create the best national early years education programmes. Of course in the non-European context, in developing countries for instance, the roots described above may vary historically and in the present era, as may the priorities presenting challenges to ECEC in various countries. However, none of this alters the fact that in the last decade the influence of global ECEC policy has been felt in all corners of the world, which lends it universal support on the one hand but on the other perhaps seeks to give it a more uniform shape and mission.

ECEC as an economic strategy

We should note that at the supranational level ECEC now attracts greater support than ever before. ECEC is being flagged up as an education policy priority, and countries are encouraged to support and develop it *rozvoj* (Early Childhood Education, 2011; Starting Strong, 2017; Starting Strong V, 2017). This is echoed at the national level as well, although such declarations are not always accompanied by the requisite public funding, and ECEC development is not as dynamic and comprehensive as the political declarations would suggest.

We should also note that of all the reasons for current support of ECEC the ones that resonate the most are economic: these are all the initiatives that rank ECEC amongst the factors that foster human capital and competitiveness as well as encourage the training of a quality work force to promote economic growth. Alongside the preschool education that is supposed to lay down the foundations of human capital in children (in Indonesia this mission is probably best reflected in the metaphor of training the golden generation), the economic priority in ECEC is also linked to family policies and efforts to ensure women are economically active and contributing to

economic production. (Critical analysis of the situation in Indonesia can be found in the text Adriany & Saefullah, 2015.)

The case for ECEC itself is built on economic principles or viewed through an economic prism, since childcare is seen and researched as an economic development strategy. It is, in principle, a whole new line of argument for preschool education that began with, and is still associated with, the longitudinal research by the HighScope/ Perry Preschool Program (Ypsilanti, Michigan) and leading economic professors ((Rolnick & Grunevald, 2003; Heckman & Masterov, 2004)), and that demonstrates the effectiveness of ECEC using the language of finance, that is, in terms of investments and returns on investment (Schweinhart, 2003; Schweinhart et al., 2005). Here we find the origins of the popular and much used argument justifying the attention paid to ECEC that states that a single US dollar invested in preschool education is returned to the public purse at least eightfold (exceeding savings made in public resources or taxation).

The economic view and economic argument became popular partly because of the sanctity of the economy in the neoliberal culture of the globalised world as a “world religion”, but also because human rationality is now more likely than ever before to believe in the language of figures and quantifiable evidence (as indicated by the current emphasis on evidence-based research and practice, and so on).

The economic evidence on which this argument is based usually refers to the short- and long-term effects of ECEC and relies, for example, on figures showing public expenditure savings, higher tax receipts from the better salaries of those who attended ECEC, the number of staff working in ECEC and the purchasing power of ECEC staff. In the economic sense then ECEC is looked on as a specific branch of “industry”. An industry in which it pays to invest, not only for the individuals seeking out its services, but also for the state which holds and distributes public resources (Calman & Tarr-Welan, 2005).

In European countries supranational ECEC policies are being explicitly formulated in regard to economic (and social) aims. Despite the deeply rooted and well-anchored tradition of ECEC, access to early childhood care is considered unsatisfactory, and European education policies are aimed at encouraging European Union countries to expand their networks of ECEC centres and provide an even higher level of mass access.

In Barcelona in 2002 the European Council formulated requirements obliging EU mem-

ber states to ensure by 2010 that 90 percent of children aged 3 and over were attending ECEC prior to beginning compulsory schooling and that at least 33 percent of children aged under 3 had places in preschool education centres. Many European countries, including Slovakia, have thus far been unable to achieve these ambitious figures and the intended development of ECEC. It not simply that they have been unable to fulfil their policy obligations towards the European Council; they cannot even meet actual demand for ECEC (Barcelona Objectives, 2013).

However, most of all we should note that the policy of extending ECEC is not so much about education policy, but about economic and social policies relating to the employment of women, the reproductive behaviour of the family, gender politics and care for children from socially disadvantaged families. Of course, on the education level it is accompanied by greater interest in the quality and regulative function of national curriculums, teacher qualifications and efforts, with various countries about to experience the introduction of compulsory preschool education at least one year before compulsory primary schooling begins (in Slovakia’s neighbouring countries, Czechia, Hungary and Poland, for example).

I assume this ECEC trend currently evident in European countries is the model which ECEC will approximate across the world; although in many countries it is more of a desire than the beginnings of reality. It is a model that is based on supranational political notions about the role of ECEC in society, particularly its economic reality as perceived by today’s neoliberal culture and its pro-economic values and the training of the workforce for a market economy.

Lost area on the ECEC map

It is now time we returned to the history of ECEC. On the historical and geographical ECEC map of continents that gives some basic information if not the complete picture of the evolution and current state of ECEC, there is one grey area – a little known and discussed place that somewhat paradoxically has a very strong institutional tradition and deep-rooted existence of ECEC that is amplified by the specific political conditions it found itself in during the second half of the last century. It is the area I myself come from and part of the geographical political bloc referred to today as the transition countries.

The transition countries are states found mainly in central and eastern Europe which formed the hard post-second world war border with

Table 1.

year	1950	1953	1960	1970	1975	1980	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990
no. of places	5924	8224	10596	23499	27947	41355	49103	49572	50112	50515	51309	49191	37376

Source: Hanzelová & Kešelová, 2014

western Europe and comprised the socialist bloc that found itself under the political influence of the Soviet Union. I will not name every single country in the bloc that is culturally close to former Czechoslovakia – where I was born and grew up – but just mention Hungary, Poland and Eastern Germany. As I said earlier, not even Slovakia has managed to fulfil the Barcelona objectives, but it is important to point out that thirty years have now passed since these countries fulfilled or exceeded the requirement to extensively expand preschool education.

The history of ECEC in these countries did not begin with the formation of the socialist bloc. It is part of the tangled history of early childhood care on the European continent and traditional thinking on the foundations of preschool education as developed by Pestalozzi or Froebel and the ideas of the founder of modern civilised teaching, John Amos Comenius. The history of ECEC peculiar to these countries was, however, largely shaped by the post-war Communist ideology. It, unsurprisingly and logically, led to the unprecedented expansion of ECEC, a sharp rise in the number of children in ECEC, highly qualified ECEC staff, and the mass construction of buildings required for the implementation of the expansion of early childhood care. It applied to children in both age categories: to children aged from 3 to 6 years as well as care for very young children aged 0 to 3 years. I mention these age categories because a (relatively) distinct dual institutional base was introduced consisting of crèches for the youngest children and what are literally called “maternal schools” in Slovak for the older category.

Let us turn now just to the situation in Czechoslovakia. Immediately after the country became a member of the Communist bloc, early childcare institutions for children aged 3 to 6 (nursery schools), were built in accordance with the new education law and as part of the school system. In line with central state planning and the abolition of private ownership, all schools were built as state institutions and funded by the state out of the public purse. Substantial support was also given to crèches, which were the responsibility of the health ministry but considered part of the education system – its lowest rung. They were operated by the healthcare system with substantial input from the education ministry, parti-

cularly on curricular matters, and from the 1970s onwards crèches and nursery schools were set up and run as joint institutions under the responsibility of the education ministry.

To illustrate this we can look at the extent to which ECEC was emphasised during this period (Hanzelová & Kešelová, 2014). These figures show crèche attendance, that is, the number of children aged 1 to 3 receiving state childcare. Over four decades the number of crèche places increased eightfold and did not decline until the 1980s, caused by a fall in the birth rate and the extension of maternity leave.

Table 1. A similar trend can be seen in nursery schools. From the 1960s to the 1990s the number of nursery schools doubled, with almost 100 percent of children attending them for at least the final year of preschool. Almost all nursery school teachers were qualified and, as I have already mentioned, the nurseries were all state funded.

Strong state intervention can therefore lead to an extremely dynamic ECEC. However, we also have to look at why the state was so generously supporting this particular education level. One of the basic reasons was the desire to achieve full employment and therefore encourage women into work. I should add that this goal was often artificially achieved in the centrally planned economy, to the detriment of ensuring that jobs were meaningful and appropriate. The growth in preschool capacity was caused by pro-population measures that led to a rise in the birth rate in the 1970s. However, a no less significant factor behind the support for early years education was the state’s interest in controlling the upbringing of the new generation from the earliest age and moulding it to reflect the atheistic values of the socialist regime and the “class struggle” directed at the capitalist enemies.

The oldest preschool education programme

The extensive institutional basis of socialist ECEC and the state’s clear interest in ensuring citizens were brought up in a uniform fashion from early childhood led socialist countries to devote a great deal of attention to the preschool curriculum. Whenever I hear that the first preschool national curriculum was developed in New Zealand (in 1996) I laugh. The transition countries have a far longer tradition of state curricula, stretching back to the 1950s, precisely because the national curriculum was considered to be the main instrument of

central government and the ideational regulation of early education.

When discussing central Europe in this context, one has to go much further back in history. One cannot overlook the fact that the first detailed and systematic early years curriculum in Slovakia – known all over the world – was published in 1632. It was the work of the Czech philosopher and theologian referred to earlier, John Amos Comenius (1592-1670), known for his book, *The School of Infancy*. Translated into many languages in existing in many different versions and editions, this work was the first handbook devoted to upbringing and care in early childhood, covering all the basics, including care of the mother prior to the child's birth (Comenius, 1901; Komenský, 1858).

Apart from the all-embracing justification of good quality childcare, the main point of *The School of Infancy* was that it set out of the content of preschool education in such a way that it focused on the educational areas still familiar to us today. You could even say that it stipulated a specific set of requirements (or if we like – standards) of what a very young child should know and be able to do, and these were laid out for each age group hierarchically from the very early years up to the age of 6, the age at which Comenius thought compulsory schooling should begin.

What should be emphasised here is that *The School of Infancy* was a universal early years curriculum. Universal in the sense that it was not designed for institutions or for preschools. It was aimed at parents. For Comenius based his idea of ECEC on the belief that ECEC should take place within the family, that it should be in the hands of the parents and not an institution. This is probably why he referred to the family role as the “maternal school”. It was a school in which the teacher and childrearer was primarily the mother. Perhaps this is the reason preschools are known as “maternal schools” in Slovakia (since 1948) (and in France): to remind us a little of the fact that the childcare provided within them should be undertaken in the spirit of a family atmosphere and family relationships.

The education programmes that emerged and evolved in central and eastern Europe were located at the juncture between the Comenius tradition and the socialist idea of preschool education. Looking just at the Czechoslovak socialist era, the first curricular framework was for nursery schools only and it was prescribed in the early 1950s for children aged 3 to 6. However, by the mid-1960s the main curricular document had been adopted: the Education Programme for

Crèches and Nursery Schools. In the 1970s, during extensive reform of Czechoslovak education, a new version of the national curriculum was developed, again called the Education Programme for Crèches and Nursery Schools, which set out detailed objectives and content requirements for the various age groups attending the two ECEC establishments and divided into learning themes reminiscent of the Comenius system. Naturally it excluded any kind of religious angle and was purely atheistic. As we noted it was highly detailed and extremely centralised and preschools followed it rigorously.

It is in the spirit of this curricular tradition that early years education continued after the fall of the communist regime. The centralised curriculum remained in place for many years, retaining the same structure, with a few passages that had been ideologically embellished being omitted or rewritten. However, with the transition from communism the rigid crèche and nursery school structure began to crumble, and in subsequent years the crèches disappeared and nursery school capacity shrank. One of the fundamental changes to the centralised curriculum was the removal of the parts referring to the crèches. The centralised education programme, now aimed at 3 to 6 year olds, only continued in the form it had first been introduced (in the 1970s) up until 2008.

A purely coincidental format?

The transition countries are now attempting, in line with European ECEC policies, to return to where they once were. For the current global and supranational ECEC policies are highly reminiscent of the preschool education pathway adopted in socialist countries. This is occurring and being justified under a different discursive regime and for different objectives. It appears that two very different discourses or lines of argument are leading to a vision of ECEC that resembles the version that part of the world has already experienced.

What had been designed to prepare citizens for life in a developing socialist society is now intended to prepare people for the labour market and to build human capital. What was once a centralised national curriculum could well become tomorrow's international standards for preschool education. All I can say is that it won't be hard to put into practice. Many Slovak preschool teachers still long to return to the detailed guides and explicit directions on what young children should learn.

REFERENCES

- Adriany, V., & Saefullah, K. (2015). Deconstructing Human Capital Discourse in Early Childhood Education in Indonesia. In T. Lightfoot-Rueda & R.L. Peach (Eds.), *Global Perspectives on Human Capital in Early Childhood Education. Critical Cultural Studies of Childhood*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- Ali, S. (2005). The influence of globalization on the national education policies of developing countries. *Journal of Educational Research*, 8(1), 14-21.
- Barcelona Objectives. The development of childcare facilities for young children in Europe with a view to sustainable and inclusive growth*. (2013). Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union.
- Calman, L.J., & Tarr-Whelan, L. (2005). *Early Childhood Education for All. A Wise Investment*. New York, Legal Momentum.
- Comenius, J.A. (1901). *Comenius' School of Infancy* (edited by W.S. Monroe). Boston D.C.: Heat & Co.
- Dale, R. (1999). Specifying Globalization Effects on National Education Policy: focus on mechanisms. *Journal of Education Policy*, 14(1), 1-17.
- Early Childhood Education and Care: providing our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow*. (2011). Brussels: European Commission.
- Hanzelová, E., & Kešelová, D. (2014). *Zdroje a prekážky rastu zamestnanosti žien s dôrazom na stratégiu zosúladenia rodinného, pracovného a osobného života*. Bratislava: Inštitút pre výskum rodiny a práce.
- Heckman, J.J., & Masterov, D.V. (2004). The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children. Working Paper 5, Invest in Kids Working Group Committee for Economic Development. Retrieved from http://jenni.uchicago.edu/Invest/FILES/dugger_2004-12-02_dvm.pdf
- Kamerman, S.B. (2006). *A global history of early childhood education and care. Paper commissioned for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007, Strong foundations. Early childhood care and education*. Retrieved from http://www.ecdgroup.com/docs/lib_003972023.pdf
- Komenský, J.A. (1858). *Informatorium školy mateřské*. Praha: Museum království českého.
- Lauder, H., Brown, P., Dillabough, J.A. & Halsey, A.H. (Eds.) (2006). *Education, Globalization and Social Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lawn, M. & Lingard, B. (2002). Constructing a European Policy Space in Educational Governance: the role of transnational policy actors, *European Educational Research Journal*, 1(2), 290-307.
- Rolnick, A.J., & Grunevald, R. (2003). Early Childhood Development: Economic Development with a High Public Return. *Fedgazette. Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis*. Retrieved from <https://www.minneapolisfed.org/publications/fedgazette/early-childhood-development-economic-development-with-a-high-public-return>
- Schweinhart, L.J. (2003). *Significant Benefits: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 27*. Ypsilanti, Michigan: High/Scope Press.
- Schweinhart, L. J., J. Montie, Z. Xiang, W. S. Barnett, C. R. Belfield, & Nores, M. (2005). *Lifetime Effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study through Age 40*. Ypsilanti, Michigan: High/Scope Press.
- Starting Strong 2017. Key OECD Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care*. (2017). Paris: OECD.
- Starting Strong V. Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education*. (2017). Paris: OECD.
- Spring, J. (2008). Research on Globalization in Education. *Review of Educational Research*, 78(2), 330-363.