European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

Employment developments in childcare services for school-age children

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This summary is available in electronic format only

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Introduction

Due to the general population decline across Europe, childcare is a topic of much debate. It is increasingly being considered in discussions on how to best support families to raise healthy children and encourage women to enter the labour market. The need to support the care of young children under the age of five years is continuing to gain recognition throughout Europe due to initiatives such as the Barcelona targets which were set during a European summit in March 2002. These targets aimed to address the needs of parents with children of pre-school age, rather than the needs of parents with children of mandatory school age (aged five to 12 years). However, the before and after-school care of school-age children is still under researched and under recognised by public policy.

Against this background, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions initiated a research study on *Employment developments in childcare services for school-age children* in 2005. The study examines developments in employment in childcare services for school-age children in the 25 EU Member States. The study aims to support the debate on the modernisation of care systems in Europe, to review existing information on childcare services, to pinpoint gaps in the level of service in the enlarged EU, and to identify measures at national, regional and local levels which are assisting the development of employment opportunities within this target group.

This summary provides an overview of the study, highlights key issues raised and summarises the study's conclusions. The full report is available on the Foundation website at **http://www.eurofound.eu.int/publications/htmlfiles/ef0632.htm**.

Aims and objectives

The aim of the study was twofold: to support the current policy debate by documenting policy developments in the provision of out-of-school care for children of mandatory school age across the EU, and to provide examples of implementation in a variety of delivery contexts in both the EU15 (the 15 EU Member States prior to enlargement in 2004) and NMS10 (the 10 new Member States which joined the EU in May 2004). It was considered important to carry out research into the care possibilities for children aged five to 12 years, as it is an area of childcare provision which has not been widely researched to date. The report considers the extent to which these developments represent high-quality and sustainable childcare provision.

The research aims to explore employment initiatives in the childcare sector designed to support the development of a qualified, high-quality childcare workforce, and to consider the affordability and sustainability of this provision.

The study methodology comprised a desk review of the childcare sector in the EU25, in-depth case study analysis in six EU Member States – Austria, Cyprus, Hungary, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom – and good practice case studies selected from the six case study countries.

Main themes

The study focuses particularly on childcare provision for children of mandatory school age. It looks at the quality of services currently available and employment opportunities in the childcare sector.

In addition, the study explores key themes in the ongoing dialogue regarding out-of-school childcare and outlines examples of current policy priorities to create a picture of the existing state of childcare development. The childcare workforce demonstrates significant variations in employment standards across Europe.

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The report explores:

- the skills and experience required in childcare jobs and the status of childcare careers in different Member States;
- the provision of childcare services by sector, comparing and contrasting the employment conditions and rights of those employed as paid childcare workers to those in the voluntary sector;
- how societal and cultural expectations and traditions influence whether childcare costs are met by the state or parents;
- how employment conditions affect many organisations and people, including governments, employers, the voluntary sector, parents and teachers;
- variations in training and qualification structures implemented by various Member States to provide different standards of care;
- employment growth and service developments in the childcare sector in relation to current gaps and shortages in service provision;
- the direction of childcare services for school-age children and future needs for the childcare sector.

Key findings

Out-of-school childcare across the EU25

Childcare provision continues to vary significantly across the EU, and Member States are at varying stages of addressing the need for better childcare services for children aged five to 12 years. The current situation for children in the EU has been set by a focus on child welfare and an understanding that combating poverty and promoting social inclusion are still significant issues which the EU must address. Increasing women's labour market participation has been recognised as an important part of counteracting the current declining birth rates and ageing population in Europe. Childcare is a key component in increasing women's labour market participation rates, as the lack of childcare options can be a significant barrier to women entering and remaining in the workforce. Key problems with childcare services across Europe include a lack of availability, high cost, inaccessibility, poor quality and inadequacy in the timing of provision. Families across Europe are finding it increasingly difficult to combine work with busy family schedules. Therefore, a key challenge for policymakers is to support families in achieving a better work–life balance.

Policy developments in the case study Member States

Childcare policy does not currently focus enough on school-age children and in many Member States the emphasis continues to be on protecting, rather than caring for, children. The research did not uncover any EU-wide family, employment or social policies that directly targeted the care of school-age children. However, there are positive developments that impact on younger children, such as the Barcelona targets. Even though the policy deficiencies were highlighted, it is important to note the existence of a plethora of good practice childcare provision for school-age children across Europe. The existence of such good practice provision is well placed to support the trend in policy towards an increasing recognition of the need to support childcare services in general.

Working conditions and employment issues

Prevailing working conditions in the childcare sector reveal a variance in employment practices, opening hours of childcare services, and the level of childcare provision across the EU. These working conditions give rise to a number of employment issues concerning salaries, quality of and access to jobs, opportunities for career progression and the often negative image of working in the childcare sector. Overall, in many Member States where teachers do not provide out-of-school care, the employment conditions are not favourable to enhance the development of a high-quality childcare sector.

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Training and qualifications

The current training and qualification base in the childcare sector varies across Europe in terms of quality and quantity of available courses. In some Member States, non-teaching qualifications support a pool of trained staff in childcare services for school-age children. However, in many Member States, academic teaching qualifications are the main types of training available. The system does not support the training of non-teaching staff in the same way. As the childcare sector is growing, in many Member States the demand for childcare employment is increasing. Therefore, there is a need to provide appropriate quality training and qualifications to match this demand. The research revealed difficulties in defining quality and standards of training and this was a factor in the variety of qualifications found across Europe. This may indicate a need to consider the establishment of a European framework to regulate childcare training and provide benchmarks to ensure good-quality provision in the EU.

Gaps and future needs

It proved difficult to determine current gaps in childcare provision as the research was more lateral than vertical. Key gaps include the insufficiency of opening hours of available childcare services, and the lack of rural and wider urban provision of services in certain Member States. Cost, sustainability, quality, and access to services were also highlighted as potential problems, as were the lack of both people from ethnic minority groups and men working in the sector. As mentioned previously, the quality and lack of training and qualifications are also problematic.

In the future, provision of childcare services will need to be accommodating in order to meet the needs of parents in an increasingly flexible workplace. The rapid expansion of the sector has also highlighted the significance of wider quality issues within the sector. Recognition of social protection and equal opportunities are also integral components in ensuring the future quality of childcare provision.

Conclusions

Role of public policy in childcare services

During this research, no specific childcare policy for school-age children was uncovered. It was revealed that such a childcare policy is either in the developing stages, or more commonly not yet developed across much of the EU. It appears that many EU Member States are not yet ready to focus resources on policies for childcare services for school-age children, although many Member States are moving in the right direction to do so in the future.

The current context for out-of-school childcare provision in Europe has been set nationally mainly by family, employment, equality, education and social protection policies. European employment initiatives such as the Barcelona targets aim to increase childcare services for younger children. The quality of life issues surrounding childcare can be easily neglected because of the significance of childcare economics. It is important, however, that public policy addresses the needs of children, parents, families and communities, and does not just view childcare from an economic perspective. Mapping legislative develops in this area is beyond the scope of this research, but is recommended as an area for future research to chart the holistic development of public policy for school-age children.

Quality of childcare services for school-age children

As many Member States are still struggling to provide childcare services, the quality of services is often secondary to the provision. Defining the issue of quality across the EU is extremely difficult because of varying cultures and each country's ability to provide childcare services. While determining the quality of childcare services was not a focus of the research, it is still recognised that quality is a central component of any consideration of working conditions in the childcare sector. Setting a quality standard across Europe could potentially help regulate and promote quality standards within the childcare sector, but it would be a difficult task. It would also place the child as the central focus of the care to be provided.

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Employment opportunities in the childcare sector

As a whole, the childcare sector in the EU is expanding, although the majority of jobs are not well paid, and are often below the recommended pay levels. In Member States where teachers provide most of the out-of-school childcare, the pay and image of childcare workers are higher. In other contexts, pay for childcare workers does not provide a sustainable wage and the sector does not have an image of offering good quality employment.

The variance in employment standards in childcare services across the EU makes it difficult to assess if employment in the sector supports a work–life balance for families. However, in many Member States, it does not appear to be very supportive of a good quality of life. Low pay, the poor image of working in the sector, and poor working conditions are key areas to be addressed in the promotion of the childcare sector throughout Europe.

Training and qualifications

Apart from the Scandinavian countries, the childcare workforce does not represent a highly-trained sector; therefore, it struggles to pay a subsistence wage to many of its employees. In order for the sector to provide a better wage and support a quality workforce, it is important to provide accredited training and relevant qualifications for workers in all European countries. Standardising training and qualifications across the EU could substantially increase the quality of employment and provision of services in the childcare sector. A European framework could be considered as a way to support the development of a quality, integrated, trained and more mobile workforce. Networking activities across the EU15 and NMS10 could be initiated to share good practice on the development of training and qualification structures in different contexts. These networking activities could also provide an important opportunity to explore demographic imbalances in relation to labour supply and demand in different Member States, and explore the development of flexible training structures and mechanisms that can be adapted according to fluctuation in demand. Benchmarking standards in training and qualifications in the sector would also help address growing concerns about the quality of childcare services.

Lobbying activities are encouraged to promote the findings of this research in the European agenda, to explore the potential development of a European framework to help regulate and promote quality in training and qualifications developments in the EU, and to assist the mobility of workers across the EU. A European framework would empower individuals to develop their own career paths, and to realise their potential in diverse childcare labour markets in Europe, helping to redress the demographic imbalance in the workforces of some Member States.

Quality in training may be a key starting point to providing a wider overall quality in the EU childcare sector. The next step may be to carry out further research into the unique methods of providing services across the EU and further examination of a quality standard in the provision of childcare services.

Social inclusion and equal opportunities

It is important that childcare services accommodate a diverse workforce and promote the successful integration of work and family life. Poverty is still a significant issue across the EU and employment growth in the childcare sector could be a component of increasing labour market participation of women as well as men. Current EU equality policy sets a good climate in which to view childcare services. It is important that equality issues are addressed not only in employment but also in the provision of childcare services. It is crucial that the sector supports a diverse workforce that reflects the diversity of the children attending childcare facilities. Identifying incentives to recruit men to work in the childcare sector and to identify role models to promote the value of childcare as a career option are possible measures to improve the gender balance of the childcare workforce.

Social protection

The focus on child protection in childcare services was the impetus for promoting policy to regulate services in some Member States. The safety of children attending childcare facilities is clearly the main priority of provision. However,

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another important aspect of provision is providing a stimulating and engaging environment for children of all abilities and backgrounds. It is important that any exploration of the types of childcare provision take into account the context of child poverty and the importance of the family in the EU.

Gaps and shortages in supply

In some Member States, gaps in employment and services are apparent, and in other countries it is difficult to determine. In Member States where policy is supportive of increasing childcare provision there tends to be greater growth in services. Current provision varies across the EU, but is often insufficient to meet the demands of parents. Services can vary regionally and rural areas are more likely to suffer from gaps in employment and in the provision of services. Some Member States are starting to provide more flexible services with extended hours and weekend and holiday care to meet the needs of parents and children, but other countries offer inadequate provision to support parent's needs for extended services.

Creating affordable and sustainable childcare

Sustainability of childcare services can be a significant problem in under-resourced Member States and regions. In childcare services for school-age children, the key factors that impact on sustainability include:

- *Affordability* – in many cases, parents cannot afford the services available, so underpinning cost is a factor, as is the way the provision is constituted. This is particularly relevant to socially excluded groups and those trying to re-enter the activity market.
- *Supply and demand* – this is not well matched in many Member States. In many EU countries the supply cannot meet the demand for childcare services, while in other countries there are too many workers and not enough employment. There is scant evidence of relevant research into supply and demand issues and correlating the two. This may be a first step in ensuring optimum use of scarce resources. A recent longitudinal **study of local childcare markets** in the UK funded by the government Department for Education and Skills (DfES) demonstrates a successful approach to increasing knowledge in this area, to help inform future policy development.
- *Quality* – resources are often inadequate to provide quality services that meet the needs and demands of children and parents.
- *Work–life balance* – employment and childcare services often do not meet parents' needs for flexible services to help balance busy working lives with family life; a proviso here is that the life balance of the child also needs to be considered.
- *Training & qualifications* – the variety and scope of training plus the divergence of academic and non-academic credentials makes it difficult to asses the quality of the childcare sector; there is scope for a core skills framework that can be added to, in order to reflect culture and diversity in the EU. An information source that catalogues the types of training and support available would be a bonus for less advanced Member States.
- *Low pay* – this is an issue in most Member States and is an issue across the childcare sector as it is in the broader care sector. Wage rates are a factor in sustainability, as these are often the prime fixed cost. Ways have to be found to ensure that workers are paid appropriately in line with sustainability of service provision. Again, pay is linked to the perception of the tasks and research needs to seek out ways of upgrading the image of childcare jobs in practical ways.
- *Providers' business skills* – the extent to which childcare providers are able to adapt to market conditions, both in terms of filling childcare vacancies and developing flexible staffing strategies to meet childcare demands (DfES study).

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There is limited evidence of sustainability in the childcare sector outside of private sector and community/cooperative ventures. If businesses are to be sustainable, it is important that they have access to revenue and capital grants. The future of the childcare sector is dependent on the factors mentioned above, in addition to broader social and fiscal trends such as the economic climate, unemployment rates and demographic changes including a fluctuating birth rate. Therefore, there are a number of outstanding needs in employment development in childcare services for school-age children:

- identifying resources or minimum investment per child;
- longer-term planning such as 10-year strategies;
- exploration of different methods of providing provision and mainstreaming services;
- more creative thinking and innovation in respect of care provision;
- development of a European framework to provide a structure to regulate quality and standards in private sector childcare provision.

In conclusion, there are a number of inter-related policy areas in need of further research. Moves towards childcare policy development from the supply side perspective are welcomed and should be enhanced to ensure that out-of-school childcare for school-age children is an enriching experience, and that it supports a child's personal, emotional and cognitive development. This focus will, in turn, support the implementation of demand-side-led policy developments concerned with strengthening the economy through increased labour market participation and by reassuring parents that their children are well cared for while they are at work. Childcare policy development should therefore be pursued as a policy in its own right, rather than as an aspect of policies primarily concerned with promoting equal opportunities in the labour market or the reconciliation of work and family life. The social protection policy agenda can ensure that childcare policy development continues to be further developed as part of a child-centred approach.

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