

Denmark

Auspices

In Denmark, services for children aged 0-6 years have traditionally been considered as an integral part of the social welfare system. A major aim is to support, in collaboration with parents, the development of young children and provide caring and learning environments for them while their parents are at work. The Ministry of Social Affairs has the primary responsibility for national early childhood policy, but many policy and operational matters have for long been decentralised to local authorities. The Ministry of Education has policy responsibility for pre-school classes (5/6-7 years) and SFOs (school-based, leisure-time) facilities. Within the overall aims of the Act on Social Service and the Act on the *Folkeskole* (covering primary and lower secondary education), local authorities determine the objectives and the framework for work carried out in day-care facilities and schools, and are responsible for funding and supervision. Frequently, they establish unified departments, bringing together care and education.

Developments

Despite the high coverage rates achieved by Danish ECEC services, demand continues to rise. The law requires that a place should be provided to parent(s) for each child within three months⁵⁶ of demand, but waiting lists exist in some ten municipalities. New investments by local authorities are meeting the challenge, and it is expected that places for all children will soon be available. Attention is also being focused on providing places and appropriate programmes for children at risk, *i.e.* children with low socio-economic status, immigrant children, children from dysfunctional families. A Danish language stimulation programme is available to bilingual children and families in the years prior to compulsory school.

Qualitative developments are also taking place. The traditional division in Denmark between primary education and the kindergarten is now being questioned, and seen as a challenge to be overcome through discussion and partnership. The debate is focused on the need to develop a common set of values and aims for the later years of kindergarten and the first stages of primary education. ECEC is seen to include structured "learning activities in a caring environment", as well as play, informal learning and social development. The non-compulsory kindergarten class at the start of the *Folkeskole* (the basic school) is to a large extent characterised by this approach. Co-operation and cohesion between the day-care system (*i.e.* the kindergartens) the school system and leisure-time activities are given special attention in the project *Folkeskole 2000*. With the help of their pedagogical advisors, some municipalities are pushing ahead with plans to make of their kindergartens and schools, active *learning centres* which will develop their own learning plans. In addition, the Ministry of Social Affairs, in collaboration with the National Association of Local Authorities in Denmark created a working group in 1996 to improve quality, and develop new methods for educational work in kindergartens. Other initiatives are being considered, which include reforms in staff training and curriculum guidelines.

Context

Expenditure on ISCED Level 0 institutions as a percentage of GDP: 1.1% (the Danish background report provides a figure of 2.37% for all ECEC).

Labour force rates: in 1999, 81.6% of women aged 25-34 years participated in the labour market. 24.4% worked part-time.

Parental leave: universal paid maternity leave of 28 weeks for mothers + 2 weeks paternity leave paid at 100% salary level (public sector employees and increasingly private sector). Possibility of another 26 weeks at 60% of unemployment benefit. In many municipalities, parents returning to work after 26 weeks have the guarantee of an immediate childcare place for their child, but difficulties are often experienced by parents at this stage.

56. After parental leave, within four weeks, provided that parents have requested a place within the time framework set by the municipality.

Attention to children with special educational needs before they enter compulsory school: a) *Children with disabilities:* inclusion of children with disabilities in all early services and schools is customary; b) *Children from low-income families:* the child poverty level is 5.1% after redistribution; c) *Ethnic and bilingual children:* immigrants form 4.1% of the Danish population, and it is estimated that bilingual children will constitute 9% of pupils this year. In February 2000, the government published an overall action plan for the improved integration of these children. It is now mandatory for local authorities to offer language-stimulation activities to bilingual children from 4-5/6 years. Language activities mostly take the form of intensified Danish language coaching in kindergarten and in the first years of primary education. When children are not in the kindergarten system, 15 hours per week of Danish language contact may be offered to families in their own home.

Provision

The system is predominantly a public service, supervised by local authorities and funded from local taxes and central government grants. Fees are capped for parents at 30-33% of running costs, with poorer families using services free of charge or at reduced rates. Major forms of provision are:

i) Day-care facilities (*dagtilbud*) for children from 6 months to 6 years, which are divided into family day-care (*kommunal dagpløje*), centre-based day-care (*crèche*, age-integrated centres and kindergartens) and independent day-care facilities. 70% of day-care facilities are operated by public, community services. They are supplemented by independent facilities and networks (30%) that offer parents further choice. To receive municipal grants independent providers must work in conjunction with the local authority and observe local authority regulations and operating guidelines.

ii) Kindergarten classes (*bornehaveklasse*) for children 5/6-7 years (7 is the compulsory school age). The kindergarten class, led principally by a pedagogue, takes place in the primary school (*Folkeskole*) and is free. Teaching in the kindergarten class must be developmental and play-based. Approximately half of all public schools run a programme called "integrated school start" where pupils from pre-school classes and 1st and 2nd classes may be taught in age integrated groups. In recent years, emergent literacy approaches have been gaining ground in the kindergarten class.

iii) Leisure time centres and school-based, leisure time facilities (*fritidshjem* and SFO facilities). Out-of-school provision is fee paying, but is massively enrolled, with 81% of 6-9 years.

0-1 year: parental care predominates, but from the age of six months or so, just over 22% of parents use the services of a registered family day-care, and 3% of babies are in *crèches*. Informal care outside the family is little used.

1-3 years: 68% of children are enrolled in day-care facilities in this period; family day-care predominates (45%) especially in rural areas, with age-integrated facilities (14%) and *crèche* (12%) having next preference.

3-5 years: on average 88.5% of 4-year-old children are enrolled, 58% of children in kindergartens and 33% in age-integrated centres. Furthermore, there are 15 hour-programmes for bilingual children who are not attending the day care system.

5/6-7 years: 98% enrolment in free pre-school class in *Folkeskole*, with wrap around care provided for them in fee-paying, integrated services or leisure-time facilities.

Child-staff ratios: child-staff ratios in 1999 per full-time adult were as follows: *crèche* (0-3 year olds) 3:1; *kindergarten* (3-7 years) 6 or 7 children to 1 trained adult; *age-integrated facility* (0-7 years) 6:1; *special day-care* 3 children to 2 trained adults; *out-of-school care* 9 or 10 children to 1 trained adult.

Staffing and training

With the exception of family day-care, all facilities have a manager and deputy-manager, both of whom must be qualified pedagogues. Pedagogues (social educators) – who are the lead personnel in all facilities, including kindergarten class – are trained for 3.5 years at tertiary level in Centres of Further Education. *Assistants* are now offered an adult education or vocational training course for 18 months. Much in-service training is available. There is no mandatory training for family day-carers, but all receive at least three weeks training, and have access to intensive supervision and in-service training. Men make up 8% of employees in day-care facilities for children aged 6 months to 6 years, and make up 25% of staff in out-of-school care. Work conditions/salaries of educators are considered satisfactory.

OECD policy issues

Among the issues for policy attention identified by the OECD Review team for Denmark were:

Differences in policy implementation across municipalities: policies and guidelines for children in Denmark are promoted at national level by several ministries. These policies and guidelines are then locally interpreted by the 275 different

municipalities, which establish their own ECEC goals. Independence leads, at times, to some diversity in approach, provision and quality. Guidance may be needed from the ministries as to what are the national objectives for early childhood development and education, and how the achievement of these goals are to be monitored in a systematic way.

The traditional division between kindergarten and primary school, between “development” and “education”: a consequence of the division is the lack of common goals for children, and of a shared learning theory and educational approach. Progress toward a more unified vision has been made in recent years with the new focus on the learning needs of young children. Teachers and pedagogues co-operate closely in the integrated school start programme, to provide “learning experiences in a caring environment”. These efforts need to be reinforced, while respecting the rhythms of children and their fundamental need of companionship, play and self-determination.

Issues related to staffing and training: staff recruitment, initial and in-service training are well developed in Denmark, but concern was expressed about differences in working conditions and the difficulty of movement between the care and education sectors. A shared responsibility for both teaching and leisure hours may be a more effective use of financial resources and the different educational competencies of staff, while providing better continuity and flexibility for children across the different services.

Issues relating to access: two groups of children have limited access to early education and care, viz. infants between 6 and 9 months and the children of the New Danes or immigrants. For infants, an extension of universal parental leave to one year may be a solution to consider, while, in parallel, requiring municipalities to include the 6 to 12 months period among the guaranteed places. The second group with insufficient access are the children of immigrants, who frequently do not access services until the kindergarten class. The response of the public authorities has been to promote language courses, which may leave unanswered other important issues.