

# 1. Introduction

## **Katja Repo, Maarit Alasuutari, Kirsti Karila and Johanna Lammi-Taskula**

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In his discussion on Nordic early childhood education and care (ECEC), Jan Kampman (2004) differentiated between two periods of the institutionalization of childhood; that is, he differentiated between two historical stages in which the approach to childcare services and early education has differed considerably and constituted differently institutionalized childhood generations. The first period can be dated to the 1960s and 1970s when public childcare was enforced in Nordic countries. The period was characterized by a focus on a quantitative increase of childcare provision in order to meet the growing needs of services due to women entering the labour market. The second period, from the late 1980s and early 1990s onwards, has turned the interest towards quality issues, particularly that of pedagogy. Thus, the ‘quantitatively institutionalized generation’ has been followed by the ‘qualitatively institutionalized childhood generation’ (Kampmann 2004, p. 311). Along with the changing approach to childcare, the name of the services has been switched from *day care* to *early childhood education and care* or *preschool*.

The same change in approaches to childcare services is more broadly recognizable internationally (Urban 2015). While the provision of childcare and early childhood education in terms of services for young children and their parents have been at the heart of many political and academic debates for several decades, worldwide their quality is acknowledged as significant for the agendas of gender, family and childhood policies. Therefore, childcare in general and early childhood education more particularly have gained a growing political and cultural significance and currently relate to a variety of agendas, discussions and discourses, such as those on gender equality, reducing child poverty and marginalization and social investment (Rostgaard 2018).

Thus, childcare services and early childhood education are considered, on the one hand, a social policy instrument for increasing parental employment and thus reducing child poverty. They are particularly seen as a key means to increase female labour-market participation. Consequently, early childhood education policies are intertwined with the promotion of gender equality in paid and unpaid work (Ellingsæter and Gullbrandsen 2007; Eydal and Rostgaard

2011; Rostgaard 2018). In this view, access to services is approached from parental and labour-market perspectives. In practice, it may entail that access to ECEC is conditioned by parental employment status. On the other hand, the emphasis on quality issues and pedagogy has entailed access to services being increasingly discussed from children's viewpoint. In other words, children's equal access to services is highlighted (OECD 2006). Early childhood education is seen as the 'greatest of equalizers' (Bokova 2010) since it both provides children with pedagogical stimulation and smooths out inequalities among children in later life – for example, in education and work life (Morabito et al. 2013). In particular, it is argued that ECEC provides children from low-income families and second-language groups with 'a good start in life' (OECD 2006).

All in all, contemporary discourses connect childcare, and early childhood education in particular, to the overall equality of societies (e.g. Morabito et al. 2013; Urban 2015). Since the 1990s, international organizations, such as the European Union and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), have promoted ECEC as a social investment, stating that learning in early years boosts the economic growth of societies (see Esping-Andersen 2002; Mahon 2010; Morel et al. 2012; Rostgaard 2018). They have also highlighted early childhood education's comprehensive role in increasing socio-economic equality in societies. Therefore, it is not surprising that there are tendencies throughout the OECD countries toward universal educational systems that include education at an early age for children (Anttonen and Sointu 2006; OECD 2006).

This book presents a collection of articles that study how childcare and early childhood education policies are linked with issues of equality and access to services in seven countries with different systems of childcare and early childhood education. The concept of equal access has become an essential symbol for the discussion on equality in the fields of early learning. The research detailed in this volume shows that the national policies of childcare and ECEC condition parents' opportunities to combine work and care responsibilities, children's care arrangements and children's entry to early years learning. While some welfare states favour universal preschool arrangements (e.g. Nordic countries, Germany and Italy), many others rely on fragmented/localized service production (e.g. Canada). In addition, states may generate incentives for prolonged home care (e.g. Japan and Finland) and for market-based early childhood education arrangements (e.g. Australia and Belgium).

The case studies of this book include European examples, as well as non-European examples, and represent liberal, conservative and universal approaches to welfare production (see Esping-Andersen 1990). The studies show that the ways in which childcare cultures/benefits and the institutions for ECEC are structured have an influence on childcare arrangements and fami-

lies' abilities to combine work and care responsibilities, as well as influencing the children's equal opportunities for development and learning.

The book reveals the complexity and diversity of how policies influence children's lives and the daily life of families with children. As such, it situates childcare issues and children's access to ECEC within broader institutional, ideological and cultural settings. All in all, this book offers a novel picture of the question of (in)equality and looks at the discriminatory elements of policies, institutional designs or care cultures. For example, do childcare policies or the provision of ECEC create societal divisions or differentiations?

The concept of childcare and the concept of ECEC are used in the book. In recent years, there has been a conceptual shift from using the term *childcare* to stressing the importance of ECEC. *Childcare* refers to a social political instrument that enables parents to reconcile paid work and unpaid care responsibilities, thus promoting gender equality and reducing the risk of poverty. However, during the past two decades the aim of childcare provisions has been increasingly linked to social equality in children's upbringing. This has had an impact on the concept used. Nowadays, the concept of ECEC has in many ways replaced the broad concept of childcare. As such, the emphasis has moved from gender and labour-market issues to acknowledging children as learning subjects who should have equal access to education regardless of their familial background. Having said this, it is still essential to make a distinction between childcare and ECEC. The book refers to childcare when assessing work and care reconciliations, as well as parental care, and ECEC when evaluating the institutions of early learning.

In this book, the issues of childcare and early childhood education are discussed from multiple perspectives and considered in multiple contexts. In Chapter 2, Rianne Mahon reviews arrangements governing childcare in Canada in light of the criteria for good governance and argues that, in the absence of a national commitment, it is not possible to ensure quality or equality in ECEC provision. This is followed by Jorma Sipilä's chapter on the possibility of free early childhood education. The chapter asks why it has been taken for granted that primary school should be obligatory and free of charge but not ECEC.

In Chapter 4, Zsuzsa Millei and Jannelle Gallagher concentrate on universal access in Australian ECEC provision and ask if it helps to alleviate inequity. In Chapter 5, Takayuki Sasaki discusses Japanese full-time day-care facilities that are based on the philosophy of pronatalism and a family-friendly society and studies the effects of childcare attendance on Japanese family lives.

Chapter 6 focuses on a German case. Helga Kelle and Johanna Mierendorff first explore the historical development of Germany's system of ECEC. Second, they reconstruct the transformation of early childhood policies since 2000, focusing on three main aspects: the changes in the provision of public

day care, the recent emphasis on early education and professionalization policies and the new developments in the field of child protection, and early prevention and intervention. In Chapter 7, Michel Vandebroek and Katrien Van Laere give voice to parents in a context with a split Flemish (the Flemish community of Belgium) ECEC system with universal preschool for children from 2.5 years old to compulsory school age. In the following chapter, Arianna Lazzari and Lucia Balduzzi explore the issue of equal access to educational opportunities in the context of current reform trends affecting the governance, regulation and funding of ECEC provision in Italy.

In Chapter 9, Johanna Närvi, Minna Salmi and Johanna Lammi-Taskula discuss the double character of childcare policies in Finland and analyse the impact of the policies from the point of view of socio-economic and gender equality. In Chapter 10, Petteri Eerola, Maarit Alasuutari, Kirsti Karila, Anu Kuukka and Anna Siippainen focus on local policy discourses and study the rationalities given for ECEC in ten Finnish municipalities by municipal authorities.

In the concluding chapter, Chapter 11, Maarit Alasuutari, Kirsti Karila, Johanna Lammi-Taskula and Katja Repo compile the key arguments of the chapters concerning the translation of the discourse of *equal access* into policies and practices nationally and locally.

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