

Early Childhood Education and Care in Wales: An introduction

Research Briefing

May 2019



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National Assembly for Wales
Senedd Research

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Paper Overview:

This briefing is the first in a series providing a quick guide to early childhood education and care (ECEC). It introduces the concept of ECEC, sets out evidence for different approaches to ECEC and relates this to current policy in Wales.

It has been produced for the Assembly's Research Service as part of the Academic Fellowship Scheme to support Assembly Members in their scrutiny of the provision of ECEC. The Research Service acknowledges the support of Bangor University that enabled Dr Dallimore to take part in this fellowship.



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Contents

Introduction	1
What is Early Childhood Education and Care?.....	2
Why is ECEC important?.....	2
Research evidence.....	2
ECEC Policy Concepts.....	4
How societies view childhood	4
Family vs State <i>and</i> Education vs Care.....	5
ECEC in Wales	6
Families or Children First?	6
Education or care?	7
Early intervention.....	7
What is the way forward for ECEC in Wales?.....	8

Introduction

In Wales, as in all advanced economies there has been growing interest in providing affordable and flexible high-quality childcare and early education as a foundation for successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employability. Furthermore, availability of adequate childcare can enhance parental and in particular **female labour force participation**, thus contributing to gender equality in paid and unpaid work as well as the reduction of child poverty.

But increasing accessibility, affordability and most importantly raising quality, can be a daunting task when public budgets are tight. As a result, policy makers face difficult decisions in prioritising resources between targeted and universal services, and between policy options that primarily support child development and those designed to enhance parental employability.

In this briefing, we present an overview of the latest research evidence about what works in the early years and discuss this within the context of different international approaches that have been taken in developing early years education and childcare policy.

What is Early Childhood Education and Care?

ECEC is the term most **widely used internationally** referring to any regulated arrangement that provides care and / or education for children from birth to compulsory primary school age - regardless of the setting, funding, opening hours or programme content. It includes centre and home-based day-care; privately and publicly funded provision; full day-care and sessional day-care.

Accordingly, ECEC services in Wales include childcare settings such as day nurseries, registered childminders, pre-school playgroups, cylch meithrin and schools that provide non-compulsory Foundation Phase early education. Informal non-parental care provided by grandparents, other relatives or friends - while a highly important part of early childhood provision - is not usually regulated and therefore not generally considered within ECEC policy.

While ECEC is increasingly recognised as a discrete topic, it also overlaps with a number of other policy areas including education, employment and gender equality.

Why is ECEC important?

Learning and education do not begin with school – they start from birth. The early years from birth to compulsory school age are recognised as the most formative in children’s lives and set the foundations for children’s lifelong development and patterns for adulthood. In this context, high quality ECEC is now **accepted internationally** as an essential foundation for all children’s successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later health and employability. It is valued as a way of securing sustainable, inclusive, economic growth while good quality and accessible ECEC systems are important for empowering individuals to have successful lives. Consequently the availability of ECEC for young children has increased in many advanced economies, and as provision has increased so has the evidence base that can support effective ECEC policy development.

Research evidence

Over the last decade a significant growth in knowledge about brain development in the early years of life offers more sophisticated insights into how disadvantages in the life circumstances of young children can throw their development off course. In particular, we understand much more than we ever did about the effects of income poverty on early childhood development.

Research using the **Millennium Cohort Study** has found that by age five around a third of children living in poverty in Wales are already falling behind across a range of cognitive outcomes and almost half of children who in the lowest performing groups at the beginning of primary school remain behind at ages seven, eleven and fourteen.

The reasons for the attainment gap between children living in poverty and their peers is complex, but we know that key influences include structural factors such as poverty, alongside family background, the home learning environment and parenting styles. Recent research in Wales has also highlighted how a broad range of **adverse early childhood experiences** (such as neglect, substance issues and family breakdown) negatively affect not only child development but have a major impact on life-long health and adult social behaviour, as well as contributing to a lack of intergenerational mobility – in particular, opportunities for children to gain higher social status than their parents.

This increasing body of research points to the early years as a cradle for lifelong inequality, but we also have good evidence showing that in specific circumstances, ECEC provision can help to mitigate some negative impacts and help to redress inequality early in life.

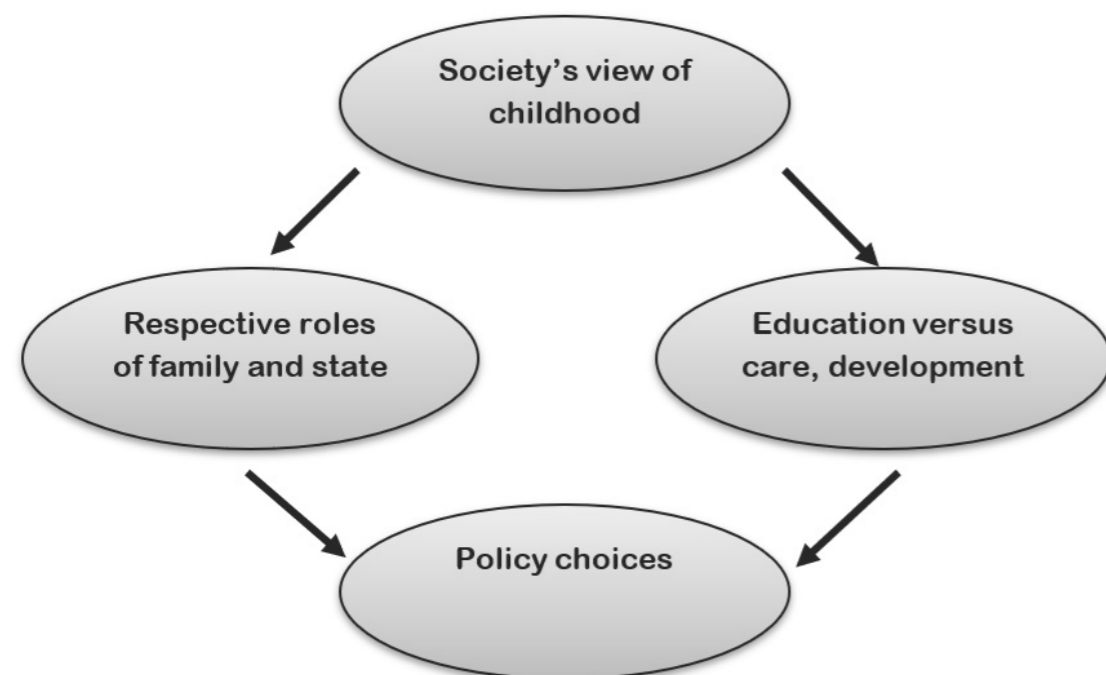
Large longitudinal studies including the **EPPE study** in the UK (and similar studies in Norway, the Netherlands, Italy, Sweden) have found long-lasting effects from ECEC on children’s cognitive development and school achievement. They also confirm that early experiences of socialisation with peers in formal settings promote social behaviour, self-regulation and autonomy. Nonetheless, there is a strong consensus from **international evidence** that these gains can only be made if certain conditions are provided – such as an early start, high quality services, an effective early education curriculum and parent engagement.

In countries where ECEC services have been expanded in recent years – such as Denmark, France, Norway and Germany – **studies** report that high quality ECEC benefits especially the most disadvantaged children, whose gains in all aspects of child development (cognitive, social and emotional) – are higher than for average children. But it appears that vulnerable children benefit most from ECEC when it is provided in a mixed environment where disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children are in the same setting.

ECEC Policy Concepts

Investing in early childhood education has **been described** as one of those rare policies that is both socially fair – as it increases equality of opportunity and social mobility – and economically efficient, as it fosters skills and productivity.

Yet while this is accepted in most countries, approaches to ECEC policy can be markedly different, stemming from a number of underlying determinants as set out below.



UNDERLYING DETERMINANTS OF ECEC POLICY¹

How societies view childhood

It is argued that ECEC policy stems from very basic value judgements that different societies make about children and childhood.

In some societies, children are viewed as being 'empty vessels' at the start of life and are made 'ready to learn' and 'ready for school' during the early years. Their value is generally measured by academic attainment linked to their economic and social contributions as '*future citizens*'.

An alternative view is *holistic*, where childhood is seen as important in itself, where each child is valued as a unique and a competent and active learner whose potential needs to be encouraged and supported. The child is viewed as a curious, capable and intelligent individual, and is a co-creator of knowledge who needs and wants interaction with other children and adults.

Family vs State *and* Education vs Care

It has been shown how these societal views of childhood in turn, shape the views in regard to (i) the division and the nature of the respective roles and responsibilities of the state and the family in regard to ECEC, and (ii) the division between the role of education in relation to the roles of care and development of the child.

In countries where the predominant view is arguably of children as primarily *future citizens* (e.g. the England, US, Australia, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands), state-funded ECEC primarily supports early education, emphasising the skills children should master before entry into primary school. Quality is measured through formal evaluation. Care and developmental arrangements are left mainly to parents and where the state funds childcare, it is primarily to enable parents to work.

Where societies could be seen to have a more *holistic* view of childhood, ECEC policies emphasise a child's development and well-being. In such countries (eg. Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden) traditions of universal, integrated care and education are prevalent. Here, quality is measured in terms of holistic development with aims and objectives for the child constructed individually and locally, involving a range of stakeholders including the child itself. While parents are supported to work by universal provision, employment opportunity is a by-product but not a primary function.

While there is some philosophical disagreement about which approach is better, **research** finds that the quality of ECEC provision as measured by basic factors such as adult-child ratios and staff qualifications is absolutely critical: evidence shows that poor quality ECEC can do more damage to children than an absence of provision. In countries which adhere to the 'empty vessel' philosophy of childhood, **the quality of ECEC is generally lower**, particularly for children under age 3 and for children from poorer families. The separation of education and care contributes to an inconsistent and less effective pedagogy (the methods and practices of teaching), with childcare practitioners in particular having low status, qualifications and training.

¹ Adapted from the international Thematic Review of ECEC Policy conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

ECEC in Wales

Taking these conceptual frames on board allows a fresh examination of ECEC in Wales, starting with how childhood is viewed by the state, and by society at large.

Since devolution, there has been a strong focus on children in Wales. Successive governments have consistently placed the needs of children high on the political agenda. Appointing the first Commissioner for Children in the UK, enshrining in law the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, promoting and supporting children's play, introducing a child-centred early years curriculum are all policies suggesting that childhood is intrinsically valued.

It might therefore be expected that a child-centric model of ECEC would have developed, with children valued in the 'here and now' not just for what they might become in the future. Yet, arguably, Welsh ECEC policy can often be seen to contradict a holistic, child-focused discourse.

Families or Children First?

When looking at the role of parents versus those of the state, the care and development of children in their early years is predominantly seen as the responsibility of parents in Wales. For children aged under 3, early childhood services are first and foremost places to put children so their parents can go out to work. This approach has often been framed as alleviating family and child poverty, but it is increasingly negated by the rise of **in-work poverty** and does not address other childhood disadvantages.

While state funding has increased the availability and affordability of childcare, there has been relatively little investment in quality. The qualifications of ECEC practitioners in Wales are **below the average for developed countries** while pay in the sector fell between 2005 and 2014. Meanwhile, the **Minimum Standards** that most ECEC settings work to are set within a **definition of care** that could be argued to be too narrow to provide a holistic approach of working with children.

It is only when children reach the age of three and receive part-time Foundation Phase early education do the developmental needs of children seemingly become the main priority for Government. Even for this age-group, childcare is presented primarily as a service for working parents rather than a developmental tool for children. This is apparent in the **design** and **evaluation** of the Welsh Government's **Childcare Offer** for three and four year olds and in the **debates** that have taken place around its implementation.

Education or care?

As in the rest of the UK, the Welsh Government assumes greater responsibility for education than care in Wales. Foundation Phase is available to all 3 and 4 year olds predominantly delivered part-time, in state-funded schools by relatively well-paid and qualified educators. Childcare on the other hand, is available from birth, but provided by informal carers, or a mixed economy of providers employing a workforce that has low status, qualifications and pay, and funded by parents (with some state funding support). This split system of ECEC also involves inspection regimes that place different values on care and education and examine different outcomes. While for some ECEC settings this is changing through **new joint inspections it is argued** that the two regulators fundamentally embody different understandings of children and workers, purpose and responsibility.

Early intervention

A more holistic approach to early childhood is enshrined in the principles that underpin the **Flying Start** and **Families First** programmes. In these schemes - targeted at the most deprived areas - intervention happens to redress the effects of earlier or embedded disadvantage. Consequently, the focus is on equipping parents to be better able to provide development support, and a better 'home learning environment' so that children are not disadvantaged when they start school. Traditionally, it was argued that the targeted approach was more effective than universal ECEC provision, which was assumed to widen the gap between the least and most disadvantaged. However, recent **studies** on the effects of similar **targeted programmes** which specifically address disadvantaged children show that ECEC attendance does not have the expected significant impact on children's development. Furthermore, **recent research** on the introduction of universal ECEC in Norway from age one has found that the greatest long-term improvement in outcomes has been for children from low-income families with particular importance given to mixing children from different backgrounds.

What is the way forward for ECEC in Wales?

Analyses of international ECEC policies emphasise the importance of identifying their underlying determinants starting with recognition of the views that society holds about the child. In Wales, the attitude to childhood has not been subject to wide public debate and is not clearly articulated by politicians. Consequently, public policies do not necessarily stem, in a fundamental way, from the basic value judgements society makes about the child and childhood.

The first step in moving the ECEC agenda forward, could therefore be a more explicit consideration of this, so that policy makers have a better understanding of the actions they do or do not undertake and are better aware of the consequences of particular action or inaction. This involves wider debate around the tensions between (i) the role and responsibilities of parents vs. those of government; and (ii) the role of education vs. care and development of children.

Once these positions are clearly articulated, **studies** suggest that a number of questions need to be considered that can helpfully inform the delivery of ECEC investment.

- 1.** What: what types of ECEC services, of what quality, and what content, methods and practices for learning should be provided?
- 2.** For whom: who should benefit from the services?
- 3.** How much: what should be the scale of provision and investment of resources?
- 4.** By whom: who should pay – the government, the private sector, the individual parents – and in what proportions?
- 5.** How: how should the services be structured, organised and delivered?

In subsequent papers in this series these questions will be examined, drawing on existing and new evidence from Wales and internationally.