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Provision of ECEC: An International Perspective

CHAPTER OUTLINE

- Exploration of ECEC in New Zealand
- Similarities to/differences from ECEC in Ireland
- Exploration of ECEC in Sweden
- Similarities to/differences from ECEC in Ireland

New Zealand

In New Zealand, there are two main types of ECEC services available: teacher led and parent led.

Parent-led Services

In contrast with Ireland, large numbers of children in New Zealand attend ECEC settings run by parents and whānau (extended family). These types of services recognise the importance of parent training and involvement. Families can learn more about parenting and become more confident and competent. It is also an opportunity to develop social and community networks. Three types of parent-led services exist:

- Kōhanga Reo
- Play centres
- Playgroups.

Kōhanga Reo

Kōhanga reo literally means ‘language nest’. *Kōhanga reo* settings cater for children from birth to school age. The care is administered in the Māori language and tikanga Māori environment (meaning Māori way of doing things). Parents and whānau manage and operate the *kōhanga reo*, with the support and guidance of the Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust.

Play Centres

Play centres are collectively supervised and managed by parents for children from birth to school age. They have a strong focus on parent education as well as children’s learning. Play centres are supported by play centre associations around the country.

Playgroups

Playgroups are most like the parent and toddler groups run here in Ireland. In New Zealand, they are run by parents and they cater for groups of children from birth to school age, along with their parents. Typically, the playgroups meet for up to five sessions per week and the sessions provide play, social and learning opportunities for children. Playgroups can be certified, but may be less formal than other kinds of ECEC services.

Pasifika playgroups focus on developing and maintaining Pasifika languages and cultures. Puna kō hungahunga are playgroups that are run with a Māori language and tikanga Māori focus, although some learning may be in English also.

Teacher-led Services

Three types of teacher-led services exist in New Zealand. In many ways, these services equate closely to our structures in Ireland.

Kindergartens

Kindergartens typically accept children aged 2–5 and they often operate morning and afternoon sessions for different age groups. Some offer all-day or flexible sessions for a wider age range of children. Kindergartens are non-profit, community-based services managed by a Kindergarten Association. The kindergartens work closely with children’s families/whānau. This service is similar to that of the community crèches and pre-schools here in Ireland, except that kindergartens are more widespread in New Zealand and they are not confined to areas designated as disadvantaged. In addition, staff in kindergartens in New Zealand must be qualified teachers. Kindergarten teachers in New Zealand have achieved pay parity with their colleagues in primary and secondary schools in recent years.

Education and Care Services

Education and care services run all-day sessions or flexible-hour programmes for children from birth to school age. Some services cater for specific age ranges, e.g. children aged 0–2. Services may be privately owned, owned and operated by a community group or operated within an organisation on behalf of employees with young children. Some services have a particular language and cultural base; others have a specific set of beliefs about teaching and learning, e.g. Rudolph Steiner and Montessori services. This area of ECEC in New Zealand equates quite closely with private sector ECEC provision in Ireland. In contrast with Ireland, where private sector provision is most common, only 36.3 per cent of provision in New Zealand comes from the private sector (Education International 2010).

Home-based Education and Care

In this type of service, education and care is provided for groups of up to four children. The children are aged 0–5 years and care takes place in the home of either the educator or the children. Each educator must belong to a home-based education and care service and support is provided by a coordinator who is a registered ECEC teacher. This service equates closely with Ireland's childminding service. One difference is that far fewer children are minded in this way in New Zealand. In Ireland, approximately 70 per cent of children in out-of-home settings are cared for in this way.

Ireland and New Zealand: Similarities and Differences

New Zealand has regulations governing its ECEC sector, much like our Pre-School Regulations (2006). New Zealand's regulations are called the Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations (2008). The requirements of these regulations must be fulfilled if a provider is to be licensed by the Department of Education in New Zealand. This is an interesting difference between Ireland and New Zealand: the Department of Education is responsible for all regulation of the ECEC sector in New Zealand, whereas in Ireland this responsibility currently falls to the Department of Health.

New Zealand has a National Early Years Curriculum called Te Whāriki. Unlike Ireland, all services in New Zealand are inspected at least every three years (more if a service is seen to be substandard). Inspections are carried out by a section within the Department of Education, called the Education Review Office (ERO). The ERO inspects the service for compliance with the Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations (2008) and also to assess how well the service is following the Te Whāriki curriculum. Reports on individual, named services are made available to the public via the ERO website. Therefore, parents can view these reports before deciding on a suitable service for their child.

Herein lies a significant difference between Ireland and New Zealand. Both countries have an early years curriculum, but in New Zealand the national inspectorate works closely with early years educators to ensure that they are successfully implementing the curriculum. The types of inspections and reviews carried out in New Zealand do not happen in Ireland in pre-school settings.

In New Zealand, a whole sector of ECEC provision is parent led. However, parents in Ireland are far less involved in the running of most services for their children. This may be as a result of the high cost of ECEC in Ireland and the fact that most ECEC provision is provided by the private sector. In Ireland, parents tend not to avail of childcare unless they are going to work outside of the home; this naturally inhibits involvement. In addition, much parent-led provision in New Zealand (e.g. *kōhanga reo*) is provided with government funding to help support particular minority populations, such as Māori or Pasifika groups. In Ireland, community crèches and pre-schools do exist to serve children in communities designated as disadvantaged. However, these facilities are not usually run by parents themselves.

ECEC provision in New Zealand is currently well on its way to being a graduate-led sector. As noted, kindergarten teachers have now achieved parity with their colleagues in primary and secondary schools. Teacher training in New Zealand has a broader focus, with the concept of a single worker (a teacher) being qualified to work in pre-schools, kindergartens, schools and out-of-school services. This contrasts with the system of teacher training in Ireland, where teachers are qualified for only one sector (e.g. early childhood education).

Sweden

In Sweden, children do not begin formal compulsory schooling until they are seven years of age. There is a strong belief in Swedish society that if formal schooling begins too early, a child's natural curiosity for learning is impeded and the child begins to 'work for the tick', i.e. doing things because they have been told to do them by the teacher, rather than because they want to discover something for themselves. The Swedish curriculum for early years is very much based on learning through play.

In Sweden, over 80 per cent of children aged 1–5 attend pre-school, with almost all children attending kindergarten at age 6. Unlike Ireland, almost all pre-school services in Sweden are run and funded by the Ministry of Education and Science, with individual municipalities (of which there are 289) taking responsibility for services in their own particular geographical area. In this way, Sweden is decades ahead of Ireland. In 1975, a law called the National Pre-School Act introduced a free pre-school year for children aged 6–7 in Sweden. It took over 30 years for a similar initiative to be implemented in

Ireland. The Swedish government or Riksdag sees quality pre-school education and care as a vital part of a modern society. It strives to make it possible for parents to work or study while their children are provided with quality childcare and opportunities for learning and development.

In Sweden there are three main types of ECEC services:

- Pre-schools catering for children aged 1–5
- Kindergartens catering for children aged 6–7
- Government-funded services, often run within schools.

Pre-schools in Sweden

There are four types of pre-schools in Sweden:

- Pre-schools (förskola)
- Family day care homes (familjedaghem)
- Open pre-schools (öppen förskola)
- Non-municipal day care services.

Pre-schools (Förskola)

Pre-schools in Sweden are government-run facilities that offer full-time education and care to children aged 1–5 whose parents work or study. Pre-schools have their own national curriculum, called Lpfö 98. Each municipality has responsibility for ensuring pre-schools in its area are implementing the curriculum. Funding is provided by central government for staff training in this area.

Fees paid by parents are calculated according to income, up to a maximum of approximately €140 per month or a maximum of 3 per cent of monthly income. In the long term, the Swedish government is aiming for universal provision, with free pre-school education and care for all (Skolverket 2000).

Staff in Swedish pre-schools are generally very well qualified. Over 60 per cent of staff are qualified pre-school teachers (förskollärare) who have attended university for a minimum of three years (Skolverket 2000). Teachers are assisted by childcare assistants (barnskötare) who will have at least three years of upper second-level training. In recent years, it has become increasingly difficult for barnskötare to find employment, as many municipalities try to increase quality by employing förskollärare only.

Family Day Care Homes (Familjedaghem)

Family day care homes are facilities run by childminders in their own homes. Staff are employed by their local municipality. Children spend varying amounts of time in family day care homes depending on their parents' working hours and schedules. Some children attend family day care homes at weekends or in the evenings. This form of early

childhood care is becoming less popular in Sweden, with approximately 12 per cent of children in this form of provision (Skolverket 2000). It occurs mainly in the rural, sparsely populated areas of northern Sweden. This is in stark contrast with Ireland, where approximately 70 per cent of children are cared for in childminding settings. Family day care homes in Sweden must follow national operational guidelines, and while they are not obliged to follow the early years curriculum, they are encouraged to do so.

Open Pre-schools (Öppen Förskola)

Open pre-schools are available to children who are not enrolled in förskola and children who are in a family day care home and would like to avail of additional equipment and resources that are unavailable in the home setting. While open pre-schools are staffed by qualified personnel, children attending must be accompanied by their parents or carer. Open pre-schools are free of charge. The function of open pre-schools has changed somewhat over the years. Nowadays, some of them function more as family resource centres where social workers, child healthcare nurses and pre-school educators work towards combating social disadvantage. The number of open pre-schools has steadily declined in Sweden over the years, with more children being catered for in förskola. While open pre-schools must follow national operational guidelines, they are not obliged to follow the national early years curriculum.

Non-municipal Day Care Services

A number of non-municipal pre-school facilities are now operating in Sweden. While these facilities are non-municipal, they are still funded by government – and the number of them is growing all the time. This is a result of parents wanting greater freedom in relation to pre-school choice for their children. Some people in Sweden feel that having a system that is solely municipal run results in too much governmental control over children's education.

The most common non-municipal day care services are parental co-operatives. Here, groups of parents get together and form a co-operative. They employ personnel and sometimes they work on a rota basis themselves in order to keep costs down. Other co-operatives are run by commercial companies for their employees or by churches wishing to care for children with a particular religious ethos. These settings have to meet the standards of public childcare. They are entitled to public tax funds to help cover their running costs. Parental fees are not allowed to deviate from municipal norms. Privately organised facilities can follow their own particular ethos, but they must also follow the basic ideological principles and values of the national early years curriculum.

Kindergartens

In response to calls by some parents in Sweden to lower the compulsory schooling age to 6 years, the Swedish government decided to build kindergartens onto existing primary schools. All children are entitled to attend these kindergartens free of charge. Staff in kindergartens are educated to degree level and there has been a move in recent times towards the concept of a single worker (a teacher) qualified to work in pre-schools, kindergartens, schools and out-of-school services. It is envisaged that under the new system all students will complete 18 months of general teacher training, specialising only in their chosen area for the final two years. It is hoped that in this way teachers will have a better understanding of education right across the lifespan.

Children of Unemployed Parents

One of the reasons why the Swedish government has invested so heavily in pre-school education is because it allows both parents to join the workforce. In some municipalities, children of unemployed parents cannot therefore avail of pre-school care. Other municipalities offer limited hours because they see pre-school as having a dual function: it allows parents to work or study and it also benefits the child greatly in terms of their learning and development. Many people in Sweden believe that children of unemployed parents should be given the same access to pre-school care as those of employed parents. They believe that in the long run this practice will help break the cycle of unemployment that can occur if children are not given these opportunities.

Out-of-school Services

For children of school-going age, the Swedish government offers three different types of services that take place outside of school hours:

- Out-of-school centres (fritidshem)
- Open out-of-school centres (öppen fritidsverksamhet)
- Family day care homes (familjedaghem).

Out-of-school Centres

Out-of-school centres are in place for children before and after school hours and during school holidays. They are intended for children aged 6–12 (and children aged 6–13 during school holidays). Most out-of-school centres are integrated into schools and they have the same management. Out-of-school centres aim to supplement the school system and stimulate the development and learning of pupils, as well as offering meaningful leisure time and recreation. Out-of-school centres are regulated by a Swedish law called

the Education Act 1985. These centres share the same curriculum as compulsory schools and pre-school classes.

Open Out-of-school Centres

Older children can attend open out-of school centres. These centres are less structured than regular out-of-school centres. The open out-of-school centres are aimed more at leisure and the development of social skills.

Family Day Care Homes

Children under the age of 12 can also avail of placements in family day care homes. These facilities are used by children of parents who work unusual hours, where care is needed outside the operating hours of the out-of-school and open out-of-school centres.

Ireland and Sweden: Similarities and Differences

The Swedish system of pre-school and after school education has often been held up as a model for other countries to follow. Aspects of this trend can be seen in Ireland, e.g. Ireland's recent introduction of the free pre-school year, which has been in existence in Sweden since 1975.

One of the key differences between Ireland and Sweden is how pre-school care is funded. In Sweden, local municipalities run their own pre-school facilities under the guidance of central government. Municipalities collect their own taxes (which vary from place to place) and a percentage of these taxes is used to fund pre-school services. This is why pre-school fees can be kept at reasonable rates in Sweden. Some people argue that because of high municipal taxes in Sweden, both parents are effectively forced to work and the option of staying at home to mind one's children does not really exist. They argue that while pre-school fees are low by international standards, taxes are not.

Critics of the Swedish system say that because central government has given over so much power to individual municipalities, variation now exists in the quality of provision (Lindon 2000). Some Swedish people object to the idea of handing over the care and education of their children to the state from such a young age and they feel that they would like more choice. Increasingly, this has led to the opening of non-municipal services.

Sweden, like Ireland, has a national early years curriculum. Unlike New Zealand, assessment of how well individual services actually follow this curriculum is not centrally regulated (Mooney and Blackburn 2003). In Sweden, the Educational Inspectorate of the National Agency for Education inspects at local authority level to ensure that all children have access to a high standard of childcare. Some critics say that

because inspection is organised at local level, standards are not consistent across the country. In Ireland, pre-school settings are currently inspected by the HSE for compliance with the Pre-School Regulations 2006, but the Department of Education and Skills does not inspect settings for compliance with Aistear (the national curriculum) until primary school level.

Like New Zealand, pre-school education and care in Sweden is predominantly graduate-led. This has a knock-on effect with regards to rates of pay, staff turnover and levels of job security. In Sweden, qualified pre-school teachers (like their colleagues at primary and secondary level) are civil servants and thus have similar pay and conditions. While this is something that is currently not the case in Ireland, it is slowly changing. Increasingly, institutes of technology throughout Ireland are offering greater numbers of courses to levels 7 and 8 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).