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Early Years Education: An International Perspective

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) has responsibility in England to monitor and evaluate the early years curriculum and as part of this programme commissioned an international review of the early years curriculum in 20 countries. The review was in two parts: firstly, the production of an interim report which formed the basis for a discussion of key issues across the participating countries at an international seminar; and secondly, the production of a final report, which summarises international perspectives on the early years curriculum and presents an agenda for future action.

Key issues for the future

The seminar papers and discussions highlighted some key areas for further debate and development in all the participating countries. These areas deserve attention as policy and practice looks to the future.

They include:

- the desirability of national curriculum frameworks for children aged birth to three years and from three to six years
- the appropriate content of such curriculum frameworks and its universality
- the extent to which there might be universal early years pedagogy
- the desirability and utility of assessment strategies for young children
- the improvement of transition from Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings to primary schooling
- the improvement of continuity between home and ECEC settings, and within early years settings
- how more effective partnership with parents in children's learning might be achieved
- how the demand for enhanced levels of training, salaries and employment conditions for ECEC practitioners might be met
- the achievement of universal access and equal opportunities in ECEC settings
- the appropriate level and role of inspection and quality assurance systems
- the implications for young children's life experiences of expanding ECEC services.

The interim report and the international seminar highlighted four key areas, which each have issues for further reflection and development:

1.1 Curriculum

- Few countries had national curriculum guidelines for children under the age of three years. Many were considering ECEC guidelines but others had a strong stance against doing so.
- There was general agreement that the curriculum for those under three years of age should focus on the individual child's developing interests and needs with an emphasis on dispositions and social and emotional well-being.
- Virtually all participating countries had defined curriculum guidelines for children over the age of three but they varied in detail and prescription.
- There was some variation in how the ECEC curriculum for children over three was defined: most countries used areas of learning, few used activities, no country used disciplines or subjects.
- Most curriculum guidelines for those over three years of age included: social and emotional; cultural; aesthetic and creative; physical; environmental; language and literacy; and numeracy.
- Many countries emphasised cultural traditions and aimed to enhance social cohesiveness through the ECEC curriculum.
- Only three countries emphasised early literacy and numeracy within the ECEC curriculum.

1.2 Pedagogy, qualifications and staffing

- There was almost universal promotion of an active, play-based pedagogy within the participating countries, where self-management and independence were encouraged.
- Collaborative peer group learning was emphasised by delegates as important at this stage, with whole class 'circle time' used to reinforce this.
- Delegates generally agreed that the role of the adult was to support, scaffold and facilitate rather than to overly direct.
- Some countries, such as Sweden, specifically discouraged a formal approach.
- There was great variation on staff training and qualification levels across and within the participating countries, but most delegates indicated the importance of training to the delivery of a quality curriculum.
- Most of these countries were aiming to increase the qualification levels of their early years staff.
- There was general agreement that investment in professional ECEC staff was a preferable strategy for raising quality than over prescribing a centralised curriculum.

- The ratios of staff to children varied considerably and were often determined by such things as the age of the child, the qualification of the staff, the special needs of the child or parents or where interventionist strategies targeted particular groups.

1.3 Continuity

- Delegates agreed that continuity in a child's early experiences from home to setting and between settings was a key to effective early learning.
- The impossible separation of the educative and care functions was reinforced by structural and administrative divisions in many of the participating countries, but a number were acting to end this distinction and integrate education and care services and the term ECEC was gaining recognition.
- The separation between early years and primary education and between different sectors (private, voluntary and state) caused some level of discontinuity in most participating countries.
- Work with parents was seen as a key factor in supporting continuity of experience for young children, but most delegates believed practitioners needed much more training in this aspect of their work.

1.4 Quality assurance and assessment

- Some countries had assessment on entry to compulsory schooling, primarily a developmental checklist for identifying special needs.
- Most countries used assessment as a diagnostic and formative tool in developing their curriculum programmes.
- There were great variations in the levels of inspection and quality assurance. Some countries were highly regulated and in others there was little regulation.
- Some countries had developed an additional quality assurance scheme which accredited providers of ECEC with an approved official stamp of quality.
- Most countries had a national system of regulation and licensing of ECEC services enforcing minimum standards.
- The education and care sector regulations and inspection regimes were often separated.

FOREWORD

International review of curriculum and assessment frameworks: thematic studies

The International Review of Curriculum and Assessment Frameworks Archive (*INCA*) comprises information on curriculum and assessment *intentions*, as outlined in legislation and regulations. A study of the effect of *context* (historical, cultural, geographical, religious) on intended curricula and their implementation is necessary if we are to understand a system's successes.

Thematic studies, on specific themes identified by QCA, aim to:

- enrich descriptions of practice in the countries concerned
- clarify the context
- contribute to an analysis of fundamental issues, related to the framework in England.

Thematic studies draw on *INCA*, but involve an in-depth study of the literature and/or a seminar which brings together QCA officers, the project team and invited participants from most of the contributing countries. All elements of the International Review identify, respect and seek a deeper understanding of the diversity within and between countries. Through such understanding, it should become easier to predict the ramifications of proposed education reforms.

Although the thematic studies are initiated from an English perspective, the use of non-English sources, and particularly the involvement of educators from other countries in the seminars, broadens the perspective and the usefulness of the reports.

Readers should note that United Kingdom (UK) references in thematic papers intentionally specify the constituency (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) to reflect the differences in legislation and provisions between them.

Rationale

Reactions to international comparisons vary, but generally take one of the following five forms:

1. *Quick fix* searches for the key action or government regulation which may be transplanted from another country and, when implemented, will transform the nation's pupils into high performers. This approach lacks realism because it ignores the different social, economic, cultural, religious and family contexts and influences within which educational systems operate.
2. *Understanding other systems*, through a study of the characteristics which are perceived to contribute to the relative success of high-performing countries, is a more constructive approach. However, whilst this approach makes it possible to learn about the interplay of different goals and other variables, it may merely confirm cultural differences without bringing about improvements.

3. *Exploring the causes* of one's own country's relative position in international tests approaches the issue from a different angle. For example, Wang *et al* (1990) identified classroom/psychological variables as among the most important influences on learning. However, changes in these variables may be difficult to implement, they may have significant ramifications for the curriculum and they may involve choices between different resource priorities.
4. *Informed self-review*, using international indicators, relative success or weakness and contributory causes to evaluate progress from a national perspective, may result in a set of ideas and priorities for action. External evidence of relative performance, based on pupil outcome differences, helps to avoid two weaknesses of self-review: uncritical acceptance of traditional problems and traditional solutions, and undue influence of local and current priorities. Because it looks for solutions to problems within one's own context, it does not pursue the task of understanding other systems as a substitute for action at home.
5. *Linking progress to purpose* is essential. The race to be 'top of the league' may not be in students', nor in a country's, best interest. There is enormous scope for demotivation, given that only one country can 'win'. Moreover, educational purpose is an important determinant of progress. It is therefore necessary to use the comparative information on possible outcomes, in order to address questions such as:
 - what does the nation want its achievements to be?
 - does the nation want to do (equally) well in all subjects?
 - can performance be improved in all subjects, or only in one at the expense of others?
 - what effect would pursuing higher performance in (for example) science, English and mathematics have on the overall breadth of the curriculum?

The later steps in this list provide the most effective rationale for *INCA* and for the thematic studies.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT – THE INTERIM REPORT

In September 2000, the foundation stage was introduced as a distinct, non-statutory stage of education for children in England from the age of three to the end of the reception year. It was supported by QCA's *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage*, published in May 2000.

QCA has responsibility to monitor and evaluate the early years curriculum in England and as part of this programme commissioned an international thematic study of the early years curriculum in 18 countries. This project was coordinated by NFER, but QCA commissioned Dr Tony Bertram and Professor Christine Pascal from the Centre for Research in Early Childhood at Birmingham to produce the thematic study. The thematic study is in two parts: an interim report, which formed the basis for a discussion of key issues across the participating countries at an invitational international seminar; and the final report. This section forms the interim report.

1. The thematic study

1.1 Aims

The QCA intended that the thematic study would:

- build on and extend the *INCA* Archive (O'Donnell et al, 2000)
- inform the QCA early years team's monitoring and evaluation report of the early years curriculum in England
- highlight common issues in implementing an early years curriculum
- provide background information for a rationale for an early years curriculum from birth to three years of age
- enhance the knowledge and understanding of the early years team.

In particular, the interim report:

- covers children from birth to compulsory school age
- covers 20 countries of the *INCA* on-line archive: Australia*, Canada*, England, France, Germany*, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland*, United States of America* and Wales. Hong Kong, whilst not part of the *INCA* Archive, was also included in the seminar. The evidence includes data on:
 - context of early years policy and practice
 - early years curriculum organisation and content
 - assessment frameworks
 - staffing and qualifications
 - regulation and quality assurance
 - access and equality of opportunity
 - key issues.

Notes on the variation in the cohort group

- *In the interests of conciseness, the federal countries asterisked (*) above may be represented by a single province, canton, state or similar, rather than be comprehensively nationally delineated. However, differential data within a country sometimes is worth noting, for example, the still existing differences in early childhood education and care provision between the former **East and West Germany**.*
- *In addition, within the **United Kingdom (UK)**, devolution of power for educational policy to the appropriate authority within **England, Northern Ireland and Wales** makes the study cohort number vary from 18 when describing UK policy, to 20 when dealing separately with its constituent parts. The United Kingdom of Great Britain includes England, Scotland and Wales. In addition, Northern Ireland is also sometimes viewed as a separate country for the purpose of this report.*
- *Not all countries responded to all questions and there are gaps in the quantitative database.*

For these reasons, the study cohort numbers in the tables displayed within the report range between 15 and 21. These variations are noted in the tables.

1.2 Methodological approach

This review follows the approach adopted in the *INCA* project in 18 countries, which is already underway. This project sets out a clear intention to enrich descriptions of practice in the countries concerned, to clarify the context and to contribute to an analysis of fundamental issues related to the framework in England. Its approach and associated methodology complies with a model of comparative research which identifies, respects and seeks a deeper understanding of diversities within and between countries. It also adopts an ethical approach in its interactions with partner countries.

1.3 Review methodology

Producing the interim report was primarily carried out as a piece of desk research, and included the following methodologies:

- analysis of the *INCA* Archive probe by NFER (O'Donnell, 2001)
- identification of key contacts in the countries
- additional collection of data from the *INCA* countries and others through questionnaires
- collation and analysis of existing research and background literature
- analysis of data
- production of an interim report
- identification of key issues for the international seminar.

2. Context of early years policy and practice

This first section in the report aims to set the context for the more detailed, comparative discussion on curriculum and assessment practices and current issues that follows. It begins with a focus on terminology and the age phases used within the review, and then sets out the range of early years provision identified within the partner countries. This initial information serves to set out the complexity of the early childhood field both within and between the partner countries. Clarity of meaning is essential, if difficult, particularly in the field of comparative early childhood, where similar words have different meanings in different countries, and different terms can sometimes have the same meaning.

2.1 Defining the terms

Early years is an imprecise definition. Alternatives such as *pre-school education*, *preparatory education*, *pre-elementary education* or *early childhood education* are similarly difficult to define. Most international research journals on early childhood focus on birth to eight years and speak of *Early Childhood Education And Care (ECEC)* as being interdependent during these years. This, indeed, was the stance of the recent Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development report (OECD, 2001), the largest and most recent comparative review of early childhood practice and policy and ECEC seems to have gained ground as a term to describe the field. Yet, within the evidence presented to this review, this term was rarely used. Most commonly the terms used to define the field did so in relation to what came next within the education system, that is: *pre-school*, *preparatory*, *pre-elementary*. This common terminology conveyed the impression across the review countries that this age phase was primarily viewed as a preparation for the compulsory school system. Few countries embraced the link between education and care in their terminology or used terms that reflected this phase in the child's life as important in its own right. In **Maryland**, in the **United States of America (USA)**, grants had recently been issued for the establishment of ECEC centres which would incorporate a comprehensive set of services for children from birth to age six, and their families. These centres offered full year, full day services designed to foster children's social, emotional, cognitive and linguistic readiness for school. A similar programme of Early Excellence Centres was being developed in **England**. Both initiatives showed that policy makers were beginning to look at care and education as a whole, especially where extended provision made it important that there was an appropriate balance in the full day experience of the child.

2.2 Defining the age range

Defining the chronological period for a review of an early years or pre-school curriculum and its assessment was complicated at the lower age limit by the fact that few governments made any formal educational provision for children under the age of three. Furthermore, at the upper age limit definitions of pre-school were not universal because there was variation in the statutory age of compulsory school admission (see Table 1). In some countries, (for example, **England**, **Republic of Ireland**) there was also variation between the age at which free, full time

education was available, and the age at which children's attendance was compulsory. Many countries (for example, **Netherlands**, **Sweden**) in recent years had allowed the age of admission to full time, free education to fall, whilst not making it compulsory. In these circumstances, the term *pre-school* or *pre-elementary* became too imprecise to be useful in the debate. Several countries admitted pre-school children into elementary school premises whilst still defining their status as pre-school.

Although few governments made any substantial financial subsidy for provision for under-threes, a number (for example, **Spain**, **Sweden**) viewed birth as the appropriate starting point for developing 'human resources' and therefore their educational system. Mostly the focus for the under-threes was on family support and health, and where educational or developmental issues were raised, it was often in this context. For example, the known correlation between birth weight, later long-term health and educational achievement were prime motivators for initiatives for such as *Sure start* for the under-fours in **England**, or *Head start* for the under-sixes in the **USA**.

In most countries, most educational provision for under-threes focused on children who had special needs or who were socially disadvantaged. This review therefore found little comparative documented evidence on national programmes for the under-threes but in a number of countries this was perceived as an emerging issue. The recent OECD report (2001) also highlighted this as an area for consideration. Most educational theorists follow a constructivist model when considering programmes for children from birth to three years of age and suggest that this is a period when predominantly the curriculum and pedagogy should be focusing on the child's developmental interests rather than the child following a structured and delineated curriculum.

2.3 Defining the curriculum

The debate about the chronological start of an early years curriculum, then, is matched by the debate about its upper limits. At what age should young children be admitted to the rigours of formal schooling? What continuity exists between the early years curriculum and what follows in elementary school?

The emphasis on chronological age as an administrative determinant of the curriculum is a contentious issue in itself for many early childhood educators, although all but two of the review countries use age to determine the curriculum programme offered. In **Sweden** and **Germany**, where Steiner's educational ideas still had some resonance, mixed age groups were viewed as the natural and psychologically sound way of educating young children, and their provision reflected this. In **Kentucky, USA**, the state took the philosophical stance that children develop at different rates. As a result, in primary classrooms and in the kindergarten year, children of five to six years of age were grouped, at least for part of the time, by skills and ability rather than solely by age. The early childhood traditions of Northern Europe and North America generally postulate that chronological age is not as important as developmental age in catering to the needs of children. These traditions emphasise that the recognition of an individual child's

uniqueness and developmental difference is central to defining the curriculum. Notions of a chronologically-defined, universal entitlement to a standardised curriculum, which is promoted and devised by most governments in this review, therefore conflicted with these widely held views of developmentally appropriate, and individually responsive, early childhood provision.

In **Hong Kong**, although curriculum models were moving towards the developmental, thematic and constructivist approach, traditionally there had always been an emphasis on the centrality of numeracy and literacy delivered prescriptively by adults to passive and absorbent children, even when they might be very young. Even though more liberal curriculum and pedagogical changes were then happening in Hong Kong ECEC settings, the rhetoric of a developmentally appropriate approach and the reality of traditional approaches and professional conceptions were often in conflict.

There was certainly pedagogical resistance in some European countries to the introduction of more formalised and centralised curriculum, again showing potential for a mismatch between policy rhetoric and practical reality. Such differences are beyond the scope of the desk reviewer, of course, but in any discussion about curriculum it is important to emphasise that what is written is not necessarily what is practised.

Debate about the age limits of an early years curriculum is further complicated by the prior question of ‘What should be the characteristics of this curriculum?’ and whether it is ‘experienced’ by the child or ‘delivered’ by the practitioner (‘Should this curriculum follow the child or should the child follow it?’) Internationally, many early years educators have been strongly influenced by Rousseau’s ‘Romantic’ view of early childhood, as expounded by Pestalozzi, Owen, Froebel and Steiner. This approach to early childhood opposes the philosophical view that the child is born sinful and so requires firm discipline to stop that aspect of its nature growing. Rather, it sees the child as an innocent to be protected and loved. The secure child is encouraged to explore an enriched environment, in which great emphasis is placed on the natural world, on relationships, on character and on dispositions. In this Romantic world, the child is given individuality, agency and autonomy.

The two following statements from Owen, the founder of the nursery school system in the **UK**, who was working with the children of resettled Glaswegians, evicted crofters, orphans and foundlings in a Scottish work place nursery at the end of the eighteenth century and Montessori, working in urban slums of Rome, **Italy**, show this debate about the nature of the early years curriculum is not a modern preoccupation.

Two historical views of the early years curriculum

I have found the children have derived very little benefit from being rapidly instructed in reading and writing, particularly when no attention has been given on the part of the superintendent to form their dispositions and their habits. (Owen, 1927, page 98)

Today we hold the pupils in school, restricted by those instruments so degrading to body and spirit – the desk and material prizes and punishments. Our aim in all this is to reduce them to immobility and silence – to lead them where? Far too often toward no definite end. Often the education of children consists in pouring into their intelligence the intellectual content of school programmes. And often these programmes have been compiled in the official department for education, and their use is imposed by law upon the teacher and the child. Ah! Before such dense and wilful disregard of the life which is growing within these children, we should hide our heads in shame and cover our guilty faces with our hands. (Montessori, 1912, pages 26 to 27)

In **Japan**, a similar view of childhood innocence and closeness to God prevailed with, to Western researchers' eyes, an astonishing lack of adult intervention even when children were seen to be fighting or bullying others. Some societies deliberately limit verbal contact between children and their elders, see boldness, individuality and assertiveness or even direct eye contact as unacceptable behaviour. Such matters reveal that conceptualisation of the universal early years curriculum or the developmentally appropriate curriculum is untenable. Childhood is a social construction deeply embedded within societal norms and values. Different societies and sub-groups within societies, especially in multicultural societies, view what is an 'appropriate' curriculum for young children differently. The conceptualisation of a universal 'curriculum for early years' is thus problematic and contentious. It is in this post-modernist context that this international review of early years curriculum and assessment frameworks is based.

2.4 Age of admission to compulsory schooling

The statutory age of admission to compulsory primary schooling, even in federated countries, tended to have universal norms for age of entry within the country, although within **Australia** and the **USA**, admission might occasionally have been at five years and more often at six years. However, it should be noted that in many countries, responsibility for pre-school provision, where it existed, often devolved to local or non-governmental authorities, and so there was often much greater variation than in compulsory schooling in such matters as cost, length of day, staff qualification and ratios, curriculum and pedagogical methods. Although most countries had a statutory age for compulsory admission, the practical reality was that children were admitted voluntarily before that age. The erosion of the principle of a statutory age of admission meant that local factors tended to determine access. In these circumstances it was often difficult to determine what was typical. In **Australia**, for example, compulsory school age

in all states was six years, but the states had different interpretations of what that meant. In some states, for example, six years was seen as ‘the year in which the child becomes six’, which meant children were admitted at five. In most countries, children did not enter compulsory schools having experienced an equitable pre-school experience. The variations in age of admission to compulsory schooling within the review countries is set out and simplified in Table 1.

The mean compulsory starting age for elementary school in these 21 countries was 6.0 years. World wide, in those countries which provide free compulsory state education, age of admission to formal elementary schooling usually varies between six and seven years of age. In the **UK** and in the **Netherlands** children had to be admitted, statutorily, at five years, but in reality most children in these countries attended primary or basic school at age four. **Northern Ireland** was the only country where admission to primary school at four was statutory but in August 2002, the **Netherlands** will also introduce compulsory schooling at four years. The historic reason for the comparatively early admission to primary education in the **UK** related to the exigencies of a political compromise agreed in the House of Commons in the 1860s and had no rational basis in educational theory. Before this time it was not uncommon to find two-year-olds in formal church and secular schools in the UK, especially in rural areas at harvest times or industrialised areas such as Lancashire where large numbers of women were employed.

Table 1: Age of admission to compulsory schooling

Country	4 years	5 years	6 years	7 years	8 years
Australia		5 (Tasmania)	6 (other states)		
Canada			6	7	
France			6		
Germany			6	sometimes	
Hong Kong			6		
Hungary		kindergarten compulsory	6	occasionally	
Ireland			6		
Italy			6		
Japan			6		
Korea			6		
Netherlands	from 8/02	5			
New Zealand		See note 1	6		
Singapore				7	
Spain			6		
Sweden			occasionally	7	exceptionally
Switzerland			6	7	
UK England		5			
UK N Ireland	4				
UK Wales		5			
USA		occasionally	6		
Total countries:	2	5	15	6	1

Note 1: In New Zealand most children start school on their fifth birthday, which is generally accepted and celebrated as a milestone.

The erosion of the statutory starting age in the **UK** since the 1980s to include four-year-olds was also related to expediency, at local government and central government level, in the face of the recent rapid expansion of women in employment and the inadequacy of a coherent and

universal national system of state pre-school provision compared to most other European Union countries. In the **Netherlands**, the stated intention of the lowering of the age of admission to four years by August 2002 was as an interventionist strategy for disadvantaged children who might need it but who, it was feared, might not attend if it was not compulsory.

Most European Union countries offered full financial support for attendance at centre-based, rather than home-based, early years settings for those parents who wished it (Moss, 2001). Where this funding existed it tended to be focused on provision for children aged from three years to compulsory schooling. Generally, state funding, whether on the demand side or the supply side, for children under three years of age did not match the needs of parents (OECD, 2001), the exception being the Scandinavian countries and **Sweden** in particular. The adequacy of parental, especially maternal, leave and maternity benefit was also a relevant issue, in providing seamless provision for children from birth to the beginning of ECEC and on to the beginning of compulsory schooling.

With the policy changes brought in by **New Zealand's** recent change of government, **Australia** and the **USA** remained the only major industrialised nations not providing any form of paid maternity leave, although in **Australia**, a relatively small number of professional women were entitled to paid leave for up to three months through their employers.

Many countries separated educational provision from care, often putting them under the auspices of different departments. This again can lead to fragmentation and inconsistency in developing curricula for the youngest children. Several governments, including the **Hong Kong** authorities, were looking at rationalisation of this, either by establishing new departments specifically to address the educational needs of children and families, through collaborative 'joined up' thinking or through coordination under a designated lead ministry. In most countries, education provided in early years curricula was seen as complementary to the prime parental care and educational role and the younger the child, the more the parental role was emphasised and the state retreated.

2.5 The provision of publicly-funded pre-school

The extent and type of publicly-funded pre-school varied enormously across the review countries and demonstrated the diversity and influence of different cultural and national traditions on this area of public service policy. These are set out in some detail below because they provide the context within which an early childhood programme was offered and showed for what ages and for what period it covered, each an important factor affecting access. The picture is confusing both in attempting to delineate age ranges and in describing the functions of settings. Similar nomenclature often defines completely different kinds of settings in different countries.

2.5.1 *Types and availability of early years provision*

In **Australia**, most states offered some funded pre-school provision, either for three- to five-year-olds or for four- to five-year-olds. This provision varied between two and a half hours per

week to 30 hours per week. In some states, parents could pay for additional hours. Kindergarten in **New South Wales**, pre-primary in **Western Australia** and reception in **South Australia** might all offer six hours a day for five days. In these states, pre-school was not compulsory but it was universally available and almost every child attended. In **Queensland**, pre-school for three- to four-year-olds was part time, about half of school hours, and kindergarten for three- to four-year-olds was for a shorter period. Most other states in Australia had provision for three- to four-year-olds that was part-time and then four- to five-year-olds in settings attached or incorporated within the state education sector full-time.

In **Canada** most provinces or territories had no publicly-funded pre-school provision but some had publicly-funded kindergartens attached to elementary schools for five-year-olds for about 30 hours per week.

In **France** all three- to six-year-olds in *école maternelle* could receive up to 40 hours of provision per week and this was extended to include two-year-olds in socially deprived areas.

In **Germany**, there was a means tested contribution in kindergartens for three- to six-year-olds, with a legal right to a place which was voluntary, and offered between 20 to 30 hours provision per week during term time. In the former **East Germany**, the more care-orientated *Länder* accepted babies to six-year-olds within a kindergarten system at no charge.

In **Hong Kong**, early childhood provision was organised according to age and provided by either educational kindergartens or more care-oriented crèche and child care centres (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: Structure of pre-school provision in Hong Kong

Age phase	Type of provision
Birth to 2 years	<i>crèches</i>
2 to 3 years	<i>child-care</i> (N1)
2 years 8 months to 4 years	either <i>child-care</i> (N2) or <i>kindergartens</i> (K1 – <i>nursery class</i>)
4 to 5 years	<i>child-care</i> (N3) and <i>kindergartens</i> (K2 – <i>lower kindergarten class</i>)
5 to 6 years	<i>child-care</i> (N4) and <i>kindergartens</i> (K3 – <i>upper kindergarten class</i>)

In kindergartens, children usually attended for a half-day schedule (about three hours), with a few five- to six-year-olds on full-day attendance. In child-care centres, children went to centres for the whole day sessions. Most of the above institutions were in the private sector except one child-care centre which was run by the Social Welfare Department Training Section; however, many pre-schools were run by non-profit-making agencies or organisations. The kindergartens were under the Education Department and the child-care centres and crèches were under the Social Welfare Department (the process of unification of these two departments was under public consultation).

Government schools were totally funded by the government. Aided schools were sponsored by various bodies with financial assistance from the government, most of these sponsoring bodies being religious groups or charitable organisations. Private schools were funded by private

organisations and some of them received a direct subsidy from the government, which could buy places for students. International schools, serving mostly a non-Chinese (but increasingly popular with the Chinese) population, were aided by different nations or private organisations. The pre-schools were all private, with the majority run by non-profit-making organisations (subsidies from government were offered to the non-profit-making pre-schools for building costs and some for children from poor families). Most of the primary schools were offered as morning or afternoon sessions. However, in recent years, some had been changing into whole day schools.

In **Hungary**, kindergartens for three- to six-year-olds were free, for 40 hours a week for 42 weeks of the year. Five-year-olds had to attend but formal teaching could not exceed four hours per day. There were day nurseries for birth- to three-year-olds but they offered no formal educational tasks.

In **Ireland**, more than half of four-year-olds and virtually all five-year-olds had fully-funded, full time, 23 hours per week educational provision in state infant schools following a prescribed curriculum. This included assembly time when the children met in the mornings, roll call, breaks, recreation time and religious observance. There was no nationally-funded pre-school and little private sector provision.

In **Italy** early education provision was offered within *scuola dell'infanzia*, which were fully funded, for children from three to six years for 48 hours per week.

In **Japan** the *yochien* (kindergartens) catered for children from three to six years and *hoikuen* (day care) catered for children from six months to six years. Approximately 10 per cent of the costs were met by parents, with local and national government meeting the greater part of the costs. The *yochien* were open for three terms, 39 weeks of the year for four hours per day, six days per week.

In the **Republic of Korea** kindergartens were available for children from three to six years. They were free for children in rural areas and low income families in urban areas only, and opened for three hours per day for 180 days of the year. Less than 50 per cent of five-year-olds had access to them.

In the **Netherlands** 99 per cent of four-year-olds were in *Basisscholen*, which were free. Playgroups catered for about half of all two and a half- to three-year-olds and received 50 per cent of their costs from government. Day nurseries catered for about 20 per cent of children between the ages of six weeks and three years. The mean take up in day nurseries was about 22 hours a week with many parents of children of this age working part time. The four- to five-year-olds in primary school (*Basisschool*) were given 22 hours per week in term time. Playgroups provided an average of seven hours per week (over two days). There was usually tripartite funding from employers, the government and the parents for pre-school but reception classes for four-year-olds within the education system were free.

In **New Zealand** most five-year-olds were in primary school. Chartered early childhood services meeting regulatory criteria received funding for six hours per day per child up to a maximum of 30 hours a week and could be centre- or home-based. Kindergartens (33 per cent of three- to five-year-olds), playcentres (10 per cent), *te kohanga reo* (the most popular form of provision with Maori families, eight per cent), Pacific Island centres and language groups, community playgroups (eight per cent), family day care schemes (home-based) and childcare centres were generic terms covering sessional, all-day or flexible hours, private for profit, charitable or work place provision. There were also correspondence pre-schools and parents as first teachers provisions.

In **Singapore** kindergartens catered for children from two months to six plus years, and were delivered by the private sector or local community, with fees payable. They offered four ten-week terms. Weekly attendance was from two and a half to four hours a day for five days (twelve and a half to 20 hours a week). Childcare centres catered for children from two months to six plus years for up to 12 hours a day, five and a half days a week, for mothers who worked. Mothers received a government subsidy for each child attending half-day care. There was no compulsory schooling (although this will change in 2003), but there was universal voluntary participation from the age of six years.

In **Spain** the *Escuelas de educación infantil* (infant schools) were conceived as an integral part of the school system but attendance was not compulsory. Pre-school covers two cycles of the educational framework: birth to three years and three to six years. The latter was state-funded, offering 25 hours a week. Support was given to some parents for their children to attend private infant schools. For the birth- to three-year-olds the timetable was flexible to support its mainly social function.

In **Sweden** all municipal authorities had to provide day nurseries or pre-school centres (*daghem*) for children aged 12 months to five or six years and childminders (*familjedaghem*) were available for children below school age. They charged reasonable fees, usually income-related. It was proposed that shortly all four- and five-year-olds were to get an entitlement of a certain number of free hours per day. *Daghem* were open throughout the year and children on average attended seven hours a day, 35 hours per week. *Forskoleklass* were pre-schools attached to compulsory seven-16 schools (*grundskola*). They catered for six- to seven-year-olds and were within the free state school system even though attendance was voluntary. They operated for 15 hours per week. Playgroups (*deltidsgrupp*) were part-time for children aged four to six years of age and opened for three hours of activities per day during term time. There were also parent and toddler groups (*open forskola*) and, increasingly, pre-school mother tongue groups for children whose first language was not Swedish.

In **Switzerland** pre-compulsory schools, kindergarten, *écoles enfantines* and *scuole dell'infanzia*, catered for children up to six years of age and were attached but separate from their primary school. New proposals aimed to require children from four years of age to be included in the first cycle of education, which would be from four to eight years. In Zurich, the

last year of kindergarten was funded and also in Berne, for the last two years. These pre-schools operated between 18 and 22 hours per week. The move was towards more public funding of kindergartens. Younger children were catered for through the private and voluntary sector.

In the **USA**, virtually all states offered some publicly-funded early years pre-kindergarten and/or kindergarten education. Pre-kindergarten children were usually aged four to five, whilst kindergarten catered for five- to six-year-olds, and year 1 of compulsory education commenced at around age six. But this varied between states. Enrolment in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten education was usually voluntary. Kindergartens were often part of local elementary schools. In a few locations, additionally, there were public or private pre-schools or other programmes serving three-year-olds. In addition to publicly-funded provision, there were also often privately-run nursery schools and parent cooperatives, where parents employed and assisted a qualified teacher. Community day care centers, where they existed, offered full time care for the children of working mothers or whose parents were ill, and the modest fees were supplemented with private and government funds. Child development centers might sometimes cater for those disadvantaged areas with state and federal support. The issue of universal access to quality ECEC provision was very contentious.

In **England** and in **Wales**, all children in the term after their fourth birthday had an entitlement to a fully-funded, part-time place, usually sessional (that is, in the morning or the afternoon), for between two and two and a half hours a day. By 2004, this will also apply to all children in the term after their third birthday. The funded place might be in the voluntary, private or state sector but had to be in a setting subject to regulation and inspection, and following the approved curriculum. Most four-year-olds were in primary school three terms a year, five days a week between nine in the morning and three or three-thirty in the afternoon. Most three-year-olds, in centre-based provision, attended playgroups receiving between two and 48 hours provision a week. State nursery schools and classes, which were staffed by graduate teachers and also catered for three-year-olds, were not universally available.

In **Northern Ireland**, children began compulsory schooling in primary schools on 1 September if their fourth birthday fell on or before 1 July that year. The education sector received full government funding, as in the rest of the UK and the private and voluntary sector could apply for funded places under a pre-school expansion programme. By March 2003, parents will have the right to a funded place in some form of pre-school setting if they wish to avail themselves of it for their children in the year before compulsory schooling for twelve and a half hours per week.

2.5.2 Amount of time spent in early years provision

A further complication to the context of provision was the amount of time the pre-schools were open or available for young children within the review countries. The limits of public funding, geographical location, the patchiness of state, voluntary and private providers, created differences in access. Intra-national differences here again could be substantial and accounted

for a wide differential in the amount of pre-schooling taken up by parents. Table 3 attempts to simplify publicly-funded hours available in early childhood settings across the reviewed countries.

The table shows that all seven-year-olds in the reviewed countries were able to be within the school system. All but two (**Sweden** and some cantons in **Switzerland**) of the reviewed countries had their six-year-old children in compulsory education school. **Singapore** whilst not having compulsory schooling had universal school provision and universal voluntary take up for six-year-olds.

At age five, nine of the countries had the children within a school or in a setting ‘attached’ to school. The range of publicly-funded provision was between twelve and a half and 48 hours per week, with a mean of 32 hours.

At four years, five countries (**England, Ireland, Netherlands, Northern Ireland** and **Wales**) used school settings for the majority of their provision. The weekly range was from no publicly-funded provision to 48 hours of provision and the mean was 27.2 hours per week. **Canada** alone, of the reviewed countries, offered no publicly-funded provision at this age but some **Australian** states offered only two and a half hours per week.

At three, none of the countries had children in the state elementary school system. Other settings offered a range of none to 48 hours with a mean of 21.1 hours per week. Only four of the twenty one countries (**Canada, Ireland, Hong Kong, Switzerland**) had no publicly-funded provision at this age.

Early entry to school before compulsory age happened in nine of the reviewed countries (**Australia, Canada, Ireland, Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, England, Wales** and the **USA**) but at different ages: four years (**England, Ireland, Netherlands** and **Wales**); five years (**Australia, Canada** and **New Zealand**) and early school admission at six years in **Sweden**. Only **Northern Ireland**, in this study had compulsory schooling during the child’s fourth year of age but within the European Union, **Luxembourg** had compulsory schooling at four and so too soon would the **Netherlands**.

Table 3: Hours per week of publicly-funded provision for mainstream children from age 3-7 years

	3-4 years	4-5 years	5-6 years	6-7 years	7-8 years
Australia	2.5-12.5	2.5-30	S	CS	CS
Canada	0	0	30	CS	CS
England	10-12.5	10-12.5 or S	CS	CS	CS
France	40	40	40	CS	CS
Germany (MT) <i>Former FRG states</i>	20-30	20-30	20-30	CS	CS
Germany <i>Former DDR states</i>	48	48	48	CS	CS
Hungary	40	40	40 (max teaching 20)	CS	CS
Hong Kong	0	0	0	CS	CS
Ireland	0	23	23	CS	CS
Italy	48	48	48	CS	CS
Japan	48	48	48	CS	CS
Korea (MT)	15	15	15	CS	CS
Netherlands	6	22/S	CS	CS	CS
New Zealand	30	30	S	CS	CS
Singapore (MT)	12.5-20 Childcare 66	12.5-20 Childcare 66	12.5-20 Childcare 66	S	S
Spain (MT)	25	25	25	CS	CS
Sweden (MT)	35	35	35	S15	CS
Switzerland	0	18-22.5	18-22.5	CS	CS
USA (MT)	0	0	0-35	CS	CS
Northern Ireland	12.5	CS	CS	CS	CS
Wales	10-12.5	10-12.5 or S	CS	CS	CS

Key: S: children admitted to elementary school but not compulsory
 CS: compulsory admission to elementary school
 MT: means tested ie the parental financial contribution is adjusted according to income

3. Early years curriculum organisation and content

In this section the coverage and content of national early years curriculum guidelines within the countries are described. These are presented in summary form with countries being grouped according to typology and exemplars being offered to illustrate different approaches to early years curriculum. Again, it was hard to find many countries that had a national early years curriculum for the under-threes, with most seeing this as an informal and locally-developed responsibility. In most cases therefore, the early years curriculum described covers the two or three years before compulsory schooling, unless otherwise stated.

3.1 Existence of national early years curriculum guidelines

Of the 19 countries for which evidence was available, 13 had national early years curriculum guidelines, while six countries did not. Those countries which did not have these guidelines were generally those with a state, regional or federal system (**Australia, Canada, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, USA**) where responsibility for early years education and care was devolved to this second tier of government. In these countries, there were state-level curriculum guidelines available, which early years settings across the public, private and voluntary sectors were expected to use in the development of their individualised programmes. The national early years curriculum guidelines generally covered the two or three years before compulsory school age, that is, from three or four years to six years, and did not extend their coverage to the under-threes. Exceptions to this were **Spain** and **Sweden**, which both had national curriculum frameworks for the under-threes in place, and **England** and **Ireland**, where these were under development. In most countries the national curriculum covered the public, voluntary and private sectors, except in **France, Ireland** and the **Netherlands**, which excluded them from its remit. Ireland is to change this and introduce a framework from birth through to six years. In the **USA**, education was not written into the national constitution, so remained the domain of the individual states but the federal authorities had adopted some nationwide, targeted, interventionist programmes such as the three- to five-year-olds' *Head start* programme and the more recent *Early reading first* for five- to six-year-olds.

3.2 Content of early years curriculum

There was a remarkable consistency in the content of these national curriculum programmes across the review countries. More details of the early years curriculum frameworks are provided in Appendix 1. Analysis of these curriculum frameworks revealed that most covered five or six main *areas of learning* or *activity* and that no country framed its early years curriculum using *subjects*. There were however some states in the **USA**, for example, **Massachusetts**, which did use disciplines as the structure for their curriculum. In this case, the advantage was continuity, the same discipline areas being used as the basis for the curriculum throughout the Massachusetts' education system, pre-kindergarten to grade 12. In 17 of the review countries there was a mix of social and academic learning within the curriculum, with a stated intention to provide children with a balanced diet of experiences. For example, in **France** there had been a

national curriculum for early years (pre-elementary) education since 1995, determined nationally by the Ministry of Education, with six main areas of activity rather than subjects:

- living together
- speaking and building up the language
- learning about the written word
- taking action/acting in the world
- discovering the world
- imagining, feeling and creating.

For each of the above there was a series of activities contributing to the child's overall development and preparing him/her for compulsory primary education. These activities included:

- physical activities
- scientific and technical activities
- communication, writing and, in particular, oral/spoken language exercises
- artistic and aesthetic activities.

Similarly, in **England** the *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage* set out six *areas of learning*:

- personal, social and emotional development
- communication, language and literacy
- mathematical development
- knowledge and understanding of the world
- physical development
- creative development.

It also included a set of *early learning goals* for each area which established expectations for most children to reach by the end of the *foundation stage*.

These were recent developments, and a unifying feature of ECEC curricula was that many were undergoing development.

In **Ireland**, for example, there was a national curriculum for four- to six-year-olds in the primary school system. Outside this, no national guidance existed as yet although many organisations had produced guidance materials. Through the work of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, a curriculum framework for all early childhood settings (birth through to six years) was to be developed. A new Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education in Ireland had been established. Its role was to coordinate, develop and enhance early education provision for all children from birth to six years of age and to focus specifically on special needs, the disadvantaged and socially excluded groups.

In **Hong Kong, Japan, Korea** and **Singapore** there had been a recent change in emphasis from an academically-focused curriculum for young children to one which provided a much broader base of learning experience. **Singapore** intended to give particular prominence to social learning. In **Japan**, kindergartens had traditionally provided an academic curriculum which included the first stages of reading and arithmetic. Children were expected to be able to read and do simple sums involving addition and subtraction by the time they left the kindergarten at six years of age. In addition to the first stages of reading, writing and arithmetic, many kindergartens also attempted to develop the more general intellectual skills of thinking, observation, learning and general intelligence. Recently a new, less academically-focused and more broadly-based kindergarten curriculum framework has been introduced, with five inter-related aspects: health, human relationships, the environment, language and expression.

In **Korea**, the intention behind the newly revised Seventh National Curriculum was stated as being *to loosen the rigid and centralised curriculum framework. Specifically, teachers are encouraged to be directly and actively involved in the decision and planning process for the curriculum.* Their new early years curriculum covered five areas:

- physical
- social
- expressive
- language/linguistic
- enquiry.

In **Tasmania, USA** and in **England** there appeared to be some conflict in the stated early years curriculum, which had a broad base, and other national or state curriculum initiatives, which focused attention primarily on literacy and numeracy learning. For example, in **Tasmania** a programme entitled *Flying start* was introduced in 1997 aimed at all children from four to seven years, including those who had not made significant progress, and those who were deemed capable of higher achievements. This programme focused entirely on literacy, numeracy and social skills.

Similarly, in **England**, the *National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies*, which embraced children in school-based early years provision, appeared to conflict with the broader based *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage*.

In the **USA**, there were also inherent conflicts between the philosophies set out in some state ECEC curricula and more targeted formal structured programmes like *Early reading first*. This had led some commentators to express concerns about differentiated curricula which offer rich and varied liberal arts curricula to the children of some socio-economic or ethnic groups and more rigid and narrow curricula to others.

In four countries, **New Zealand, Spain, Sweden** and **Switzerland**, there was a stated intention not to focus on academic learning in these early years but to place emphasis primarily on children's social and emotional learning. For example, in **Sweden** there had been a statutory national curriculum covering birth to five years since 1998, which extended the existing national curriculum for children from six to 16 years. This curriculum was based upon the idea that welfare and education were linked. The significance of play was also highlighted. In the pre-school curriculum there were five educational goals to strive towards:

- norms and values
- development and learning
- children's influence
- cooperation with the home
- cooperation with the school.

Guidelines for the curriculum were expressed in general terms. The curricula for pre-school, compulsory school and recreation centres had common goals focusing on norms and values. In pre-schools, pre-school classes and recreation centres, knowledge goals were to be striven towards but are not required to be obtained.

In **New Zealand** the national early childhood curriculum, *Te Whariki*, had been developed by the Ministry of Education. All chartered early childhood services had been required to follow it since 1998. The framework was expressed in terms of principles, strands, goals within those strands, and outcomes. Principles, strands and goals were intended to make up the early childhood curriculum as if woven together like the strands of a woven mat, or *whariki*. The principles included:

- empowerment
- family and community
- holistic development
- relationships.

The strands, which were interwoven with the principles, identified the major areas of the curriculum and included:

- well-being
- belonging
- contribution
- communication
- exploration.

In all the curriculum frameworks reviewed for this study, there was a statement that the curriculum, although described in terms of individual aspects or areas of learning, should generally be offered to the children in an integrated and holistic way.

3.3 Curriculum principles

Most curriculum frameworks also identified a set of early years principles which provided a theoretical and philosophical underpinning for the curriculum. Again, there was a high level of consistency across the review countries in these principles, reflecting a consensus in the understanding of effective early childhood practice. The most commonly found principles focused on:

- a child-centred, flexible and individually responsive curriculum
- the importance of working in partnership with parents
- the need to offer broad and relevant learning experiences in an integrated manner
- the importance of play and active, exploratory learning
- an emphasis on social and emotional development
- the need to empower the child to be an autonomous, independent learner.

Less commonly found principles focused on:

- the importance of environmental awareness (**Germany, Ireland, Japan, Singapore, Sweden**)
- the importance of equality of opportunity, and respect for diversity (**England**)
- the need to encourage citizenship (**Sweden, New Zealand, Hungary, Italy**)
- the centrality of creativity in children's learning and thinking (**Italy, Japan, Korea, Sweden**)
- the importance of physical health and well-being (**Japan, Korea**).

3.4 Alternative curriculum models

No country promoted one particular curriculum model, and most encouraged practitioners to develop their own curriculum within the nationally-prescribed framework. However, there were a number of curriculum models identified within the review countries as being particularly popular. These included:

- *Developmental appropriate practice*
- *Froebel*
- *High scope*
- *Montessori*
- *Reggio Emilia*
- *Steiner*
- *Te Whariki*
- *Thematic approach.*

3.5 Organisational grouping strategies

The review countries predominantly grouped their young children for curriculum purposes by single year age groups. Only four countries, (**Germany, Sweden** and sometimes **Hungary** and some states within the **USA**, where developmental rather than chronological age was the organisational criterion) encouraged mixed age grouping as a preferable organisational

strategy. In the **UK** and **Ireland** many reception classes in primary schools were mixed age classes but not by choice. Some countries adopted a range of other grouping strategies within the year groups, for example, ability, friendship, interest. Progression from one year group to the next was generally automatic by age, except where a particular issue had been identified, for example, special needs or giftedness.

3.6 Recommended pedagogical approaches

There was overwhelming consistency within the review countries as to the recommended pedagogical approach in the early years. This emphasised an *interactional pedagogy*, where the children and adults operated in reciprocity with one another. There was an encouragement of play-based, first hand, exploratory experiences which provided children with opportunities to talk and interact. The provision of opportunities for children to self-manage and self-direct their learning were also encouraged. Collaborative, peer group learning was the preferred model, with whole class teaching or circle time being used selectively to support this. The role of the adult was generally viewed as being to facilitate and support learning through skilful and guided interaction, adopting a flexible range of teaching and learning strategies according to the needs of the children. Some countries specifically discouraged the use of early disciplinary and prescriptive methods of instruction, for example, **Italy, Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, Sweden.**

4. Assessment frameworks

This section of the report focuses on the use of assessment frameworks and strategies in early years provision within the review countries. It highlights the approach to assessment taken, the types of assessment in use and their applications, and also where responsibility for assessment lies.

4.1 Use of assessment frameworks

Less than a quarter of the 21 countries had a national system of assessment used across all forms of funded early educational provision. These countries included **England, Netherlands** and **Switzerland** and about one third of the states within the **USA**. In addition five other countries did have some form of final assessment on transfer to compulsory schooling (**France, Germany, Hungary, Spain** and **Northern Ireland**). This usually took the form of a developmental checklist, which was generally used to identify children with special needs who might need additional support or to stay back in early years provision. Only in **England** was this assessment also used as an evaluative baseline measure for subsequent school performance, although this was an intended development in **Hong Kong**. In most cases the assessment was achieved through the use of systematic teacher observation and scrutiny of the child's portfolio of activity. Other than in the **USA**, there was only one case where a standardised test was used as an assessment instrument (**Tasmania**). In **Sweden** and **France** the use of credits or formal assessments of pre-school children were positively discouraged as being premature and potentially harmful.

In the **USA**, some states used standardised multiple-choice tests, produced by private test-setting companies. The most frequent testing was teacher-developed 'examinations'. Many states were beginning to align their early childhood goals/assessment with state standards in order to *give kindergarten children the mental tools and knowledge they need for state-wide assessment during compulsory education*. In most states, such compulsory assessment began in third grade at the age of eight to nine years. In **Maryland**, *the Maryland Model for School Readiness – kindergarten to grade 1 (MSSR)* had been used since 1997 in an effort to *enhance school readiness*. Another element of MSSR, the *Work Sampling System (WSS)* introduced in 2000, focused on the assessment of skills of children entering kindergarten in order to *improve services from birth to five years old*. This baseline assessment comprised 28 selected performance indicators across seven domains. The **Wisconsin** test at kindergarten entrance was not intended to create a barrier to compulsory entry to school or to sort homogeneous groups.

However, the use of ongoing assessment of children by class teachers and carers throughout the early years as a formative strategy for curriculum planning was almost universal. In most cases this was actively encouraged at national level as a signal of good practice. This continuous, formative assessment was generally achieved through the use of a range of informal strategies, including observation, developmental checklists, videotapes, portfolios of

children's activity, discussion with parents and the children themselves. Mostly, they were implemented and used at setting level, and formed the basis for curriculum planning and feedback reporting to parents.

4.2 Responsibility for assessment frameworks

In those countries with national assessment frameworks in early years provision, responsibility for their development and monitoring their implementation generally lay with the relevant government department (usually education). Of the 18 review countries for which we had data, only the **UK** countries had non-departmental public bodies with this specialist responsibility, separate from the national education department.

Where no national assessment framework existed, the development and implementation of assessment strategies were universally carried out at individual school/setting level by heads and trained practitioners, and sometimes monitored at commune, municipality or local authority level.

5. Staffing and qualifications

In this section the staffing levels, ratios and qualification levels of practitioners with responsibility for early years educational provision are described and compared within the review countries. We have focused on provision which caters for children from three to six years as the complexity of staffing and training for the care sector (birth to three years) where it exists is even more complex and idiosyncratic, with wide variations both within and between countries.

5.1 Staff ratios

Table 4 highlights the variation of staff ratios within the review countries for children from three to six years of age. These ratios may vary according to a number of criteria, for example, the number of children with special needs, the age of the children, the qualification level of the adult in charge, the socio-economic background or home location of the child, the degree of poverty, ethnic minorities or the access to additional funding from interventionist programmes. They should therefore be viewed as approximations and simplifications.

In **Ireland**, for example, children between four and six years of age were in primary schools governed by a maximum ratio of 1:30. In reality, while there were Irish infant classes with up to 30 children, these classes averaged at approximately 1:24 to 1: 26. In Irish schools that were designated as especially disadvantaged, this ratio was reduced to 1:20. *Breaking the cycle* and *Early start* were interventionist programmes targeting the socially and economically disadvantaged, and where these programmes operated ratios could be 1:15.

Where children were in the pre-education system, settings ratios were usually lower. Again, using **Ireland** as an illustration, the Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations (1996) applied to all pre-school services (playgroups, crèches, day nurseries, *naonrai* and some childminders). They required all providers to maintain a 'sufficient number' of 'competent adults' to meet the needs of the children. Ratios were related to age range of the children. Three- to four-year-olds, therefore, enjoyed significantly better ratios than primary-aged children.

Table 4: Adult/child ratios for 3- to 6-year-olds

Country	adult/child ratio	additional assistant
Australia	1:25	✓ in some states
Canada	1:20	
France	public provision: <1:26 private settings: 1:8	✓ in some areas
Germany	1:15 to 1:30	✓
Hungary	1:12	✓
Ireland	1:30 max in infant classes <i>wide differences across settings and substantially lower in pre-school</i>	
Italy	1:12	
Hong Kong	Kindergartens: 1:30 for 5- to 6-year-olds 1:20 for 4- to 5-year-olds 1:15 for 3- to 4-year-olds <i>recommended 1:15 for all classes from 2003</i> Childcare Centres: 1:14 for 2- to 6-year-olds Crèches: 1:8 for 0- to 2-year-olds Primary (over 6 years): 1:34	
Japan	1:19	
Republic of Korea	1:27	
Netherlands	Primary school: 1:8 to 1:23 for 4- to 7-year-olds Playgroups: 1:4 to 1:15	✓
New Zealand	<i>no data</i>	
Singapore	1:15 to 1:25	✓
Spain	1:25 <i>soon to be 1:20</i>	
Sweden	1:5 to 1:18	
Switzerland	1:17	
UK England	1:8 to 1:30 <i>depends on sector, age of children and qualification of staff</i>	
UK N Ireland	1.8 to 1:30	
UK Wales	1:8 to 1:30	
USA	1:10 to 1:25	

Analysis of these data revealed that nine out of 21 countries had ratios between 1:5 and 1:15, and 17 out of 21 countries had ratios of between 1:15 and 1:30. Ten countries had ratios that differed with age of the child, the sector in which the setting was located or the qualification of the staff. To broadly capture these differences, the mean of the lowest ratio in each country (n=21) was calculated at 1:15 and the mean of the highest ratio in each country (n=21) was 1:21.

5.2 Staff qualifications

Table 5 summarises the range of early years qualifications in the participating countries.

In all the review countries staff with responsibility for children from 3 to 6 years had some training. Where there were assistants most had some post-16 training also. At younger age levels, recent changes to qualification requirements suggested a move towards professionalisation of early childhood work. Four countries reported recruitment difficulties for staff within this sector.

In the reviewed countries, most practitioners dealing with 4 year-olds and over were graduates. Graduate teachers were in place in 17 out of 19 of the review countries for this age and had similar qualifications as elementary school teachers, usually university-trained for a minimum of three years. Several countries offered courses to adults working with the younger children but

predominantly these courses were less academically rigorous than those for practitioners with older children.

Table 5: Early years staff qualifications

Country	Qualification
Australia	Teachers working in facilities administered by education departments have a post-18, 4-year BEd degree in generalist ECEC, either 0-5 years or 0-8 years. Those working in services managed by Family/Community Service departments in long day care settings have 3-year degrees, diplomas and associate diplomas
Canada	Only graduate teachers in elementary schools
France	After first degree, competitive examination followed by 1 year's teacher training. Teachers are civil servants in same category as primary teachers. In private settings, ratios increase to 1:8 and staff likely to be less qualified
Germany	A state recognised 16+ qualification
Hungary	3-year training for college diploma
Ireland	BEd, 3- or 4-year course for primary school graduates. In the pre-school sector, a wide range of courses and qualifications exists, some lasting a few weeks and some 3-year degrees. There is little regulation of these qualifications. A training and qualification framework for the ECEC sector is being developed by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
Italy	In future, early years teachers will be 4-year university graduate
Hong Kong	For kindergarten teachers: Qualified Kindergarten Teacher (QKT) with some on CE levels and graduate levels. For kindergarten principals: QKT before 2002 (more with Certificate of Kindergarten Teachers). From 2003 onwards, principals should be on CE levels and some on graduate level. Child-Care certificate for child-care workers. High Certificate for centre supervisors. From 2003 onwards, they should be CE graduates (or equivalent)
Japan	Elementary school 3-year certificated teachers or 2-year, post-18 training
Korea	<i>No Data</i>
Netherlands	Graduate teachers in primary school; MBO 3-year post-18 for childcare/playgroups
New Zealand	From Jan 2002 all new coordinators in early childhood centres must have Diploma of Teaching. From 2005, all post holders must have D of T. Schools have graduate teachers
Singapore	New changes: entry requirements age 16 school certification (ie 5 'O' levels) leads to Certificate in Pre-school Teaching (470 hours), Diploma in Pre-school Education Teaching (700 hours), Diploma in Pre-school Leadership (500 hours). All pre-school supervisors must have DPE-L by 2006
Spain	As primary teachers, 3 years' training
Sweden	3-year university graduate teachers. Assistants receive some training
Switzerland	<i>No Data</i>
UK	In England, Wales and Northern Ireland teachers may be education graduates specialising in the age range, or primary or secondary teachers. Except in Northern Ireland, teachers may have 2- or 3-year teaching 'certificates', 2-, 3- or 4-year university degrees, or a generalist 3- or 4-year degree followed by a 1-year post-graduate teaching qualification. Outside of Northern Ireland, some teachers can now become qualified whilst working as teachers. Nursery nurses and their equivalents obtain a 2-year diploma post-16. Parents in pre-schools may be unqualified, as may those in the private sector, although in-service training across all sectors is now receiving funds from the Government and quotas have been established to ensure the largely unqualified practitioners involved with 0- to 4-year-old children receive some level of training and that every setting has access to a graduate specialist. All who work with children must pass a police check
USA	<p><i>Kentucky</i> ECEC teachers are generalists. From 2002 require an early childhood teaching certificate or similar</p> <p><i>Maryland</i> EEEP programmes for children aged 4+ include early childhood teacher and qualified assistant</p> <p><i>Massachusetts</i> kindergarten teachers must be qualified teachers</p> <p><i>Wisconsin</i> kindergarten and pre-kindergarten staff require a 'licence', preferably as a kindergarten-grade 8 teacher</p>

6. Regulation and quality assurance

In this section the existence and types of systems for quality assurance and regulation within early years provision are explored. In all the review countries there was an acknowledgement of the importance of establishing quality early years services. However, some countries had clearly adopted a more rigorous approach to quality evaluation, assurance, inspection and regulation, than others. There was a difference between countries which had a largely unregulated sector, and others where there was a much tighter system of quality control and regulation. In most of the review countries there was a movement towards greater accountability and the desirability of improving and assuring the quality of its early years services.

6.1 Regulatory frameworks

All but the **USA** had a national system of regulation or licensing of their early childhood provision. In some cases the responsibility for regulation was split according to the type and age focus of the provision, with under-threes often coming under health or welfare departments, and over-threes coming under education departments. Countries with split responsibility included **Australia, Ireland, Netherlands** and **Singapore**. An increasing number of countries had brought the regulation of education and care together under one umbrella department, usually education. These countries included **England, New Zealand, Spain** and **Sweden** and many of the states within the **USA**. **Hong Kong** had expressed an intention to do likewise.

The regulations generally provided for a basic minimum of standards with regard to such issues as premises, staffing, qualifications, programme, health and safety. They generally did not cover in detail the quality of the curriculum offered in these establishments, although in **England** the recently developed national standards for the regulation of early years services did attempt to address this issue. The setting generally was subject to an inspection process prior to licensing and then at regular intervals throughout its life cycle (from one to four years).

6.2 Quality assurance systems

There was a growing international concern to put in place high quality education and care services for young children. To this end, most countries in this review were developing universal quality assurance and inspection systems in order to improve both the quality and the accountability of the sector. Quality assurance systems were also sometimes divided across different agencies. For example, in the **Netherlands** the inspection of childcare settings was within the health system, primary schools were inspected by the education authorities and playgroups were not subject to an inspection process.

Most of the review countries had a national system of inspection for their early education provision. This tended to go beyond basic licensing regulations to highlight areas of good practice and areas of improvement, and in all cases, public funding could be withdrawn if the

setting consistently failed to meet the inspection standards. The inspection was generally the responsibility of the department/ministry of education, and carried out by officials from a special inspection or review team, for example, the *Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted)* in **England**, the *Education Review Office (ERO)* in **New Zealand**, the *Educational Inspectorate (EI)* in primary schools in the **Netherlands**. In most cases the results of the inspection process were made public and used as a monitor of overall quality within the various sectors.

In addition to inspection systems, many countries had a national system of quality assurance. These systems were usually based upon an agreed framework of quality indicators, against which settings were accredited or chartered by an external validator. The indicators usually covered contextual factors, processes and outcomes. The systems were often designed to go across sectors and provide parents with a quality assurance marker and settings with a quality improvement strategy. They were sometimes administered by national or state government departments, for example, in **New Zealand**, and sometimes administered by professional organisations, for example, in **England**. In most cases, individual settings could choose the accreditation system that they adopted, as long as it met nationally approved criteria, for example, the *Investors in Children Scheme* in **England**. From the review evidence the most highly developed and comprehensive quality assurance and inspection systems were to be found in **England**, and the least regulated were to be found in **Germany**, a federalised state where ECEC was a state responsibility.

7. Access and equal opportunities

In this section, the legal and professional strategies that are employed to ensure equality of opportunity and the level of access to early childhood services within the review countries are considered. Approaches to the inclusion of children with special needs in early years services are also reviewed.

7.1 Legislation for equality of opportunity

Although the review evidence revealed a growing international awareness of the importance of ensuring equality of opportunity within increasingly diverse and multi-cultural societies, **England, Northern Ireland, Wales** and the **USA** were the only review countries which had specific legislation to address issues of direct and indirect discrimination with regard to sex, race, religion, culture, sexuality and disability in all areas of public life, including early childhood services. In **England** there was also an explicit acknowledgement that certain groups of children within the population were severely underachieving in education and remained without access to early childhood services. Government money and action were being targeted to combat social exclusion and increase access for these groups. This was also true of some **USA** states. In **Hungary** the *1993 Public Education Act* provided the right for children of the 13 recognised ethnic minority communities to receive their education in their mother tongue. The other review countries, whilst not having a legislative framework, did have a stated intention to celebrate diversity and foster open and informed attitudes towards minority groups.

7.2 Access to early education

In all the review countries, except **Hungary**, early childhood education was viewed as optional, although in some countries, for example **Sweden**, there was a legal right to it. Most review countries were close to achieving universal access to some level (usually part-time) of publicly-funded early education for children from four years of age, and a number (for example **New Zealand, Singapore, Spain, Switzerland, England** (stated intention)) had universal access for three-year-olds. **Germany** had relatively low levels of access for three-year-olds (50 per cent) and **Korea** had relatively low levels of access for three- to six-year-olds (45 to 50 per cent). Only **Sweden** had universal access for children from 12 months of age, with parental leave covering the period from birth. In all other review countries there was nowhere near universal access to publicly-funded services for under-threes, other than for children identified as *at risk* or *in need*.

Most countries had limited strategies in place to promote equality of access for all groups in their society, particularly those from ethnic minorities and socially and economically disadvantaged communities. Some countries used financial aid, for example, **England, Ireland, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Sweden**. Others offered early education in the mother tongue to those within the hard to reach community, for example **New Zealand, Hungary** and **Sweden**. Others targeted additional provision on a geographical basis to areas which might be

viewed as disadvantaged or as having limited access to good quality services, for example, **England** (*Sure start*), **USA** (*Head start*), **Ireland**, **Tasmania**.

7.3 Strategies to promote inclusion

In all the review countries there was a policy of full inclusion of children with special needs within mainstream early years provision wherever possible. Strategies which promoted this approach commonly included:

- offering early access to early years provision, for example **Italy**, **Ireland**, **Sweden**, **England**, **USA**
- keeping children within early years provision until the child was able to operate in inclusive primary settings, for example **Australia**, **France**, **Germany**, **Hungary**, **Sweden**, **Switzerland**
- providing additional support or differential teaching within a mainstream setting, for example **England**, **Netherlands** (only in primary schools), **New Zealand**, **Spain**, **Sweden**.

All countries had some level of special education provision but this generally was only offered once children had reached compulsory school age.

ANALYSIS AND SUMMARY OF PERSPECTIVES

8. Introduction

Cross-national studies can be a useful means of seeing how others have made different choices when addressing contemporary issues. They can also serve to make domestic practices visible to those who are outside the uncritical eye of tradition and make the familiar questionable. But cross-national studies have their limitations too. Policy and practice in ECEC is deeply located in national understandings of the place of family and childhood in society. Such social constructions underpin the choices that are made and these cultural norms differ, even within the relatively economically-homogenous group of nations of this study. In a cross-national study, therefore, attempts to formulate notions of examples of 'best practice', which might erroneously arise from this form of international policy sharing, need to be placed carefully within the national context. Given societal norms, what is appropriate for one nation may be totally unsuitable for another. This proviso is an important one to bear in mind whilst reading this document.

Internationally, ECEC is experiencing a period of great change. In all the countries reviewed new policy initiatives were being planned or had already begun. Some countries had a history of comprehensive state-funded ECEC services. In many countries, particularly those in the English-speaking world, policy in this area had traditionally developed, if at all, in an *ad hoc* fashion, often giving rise to confusing and complicated systems mixing state, private and voluntary sectors. Provision for these countries had been characterised by split responsibilities, duplication, patchiness, poor quality and inconsistencies. The new ECEC policy dynamic is thus exciting and, in many countries, revolutionary and unprecedented. These initiatives are contributing to raising the profile of a crucial yet often neglected area of educational policy.

Trying to measure such a moving stream is difficult and undoubtedly the rapidity of current change will quickly date much of the detail in this review. But the underpinning principles and values explored in the debate will remain. As the world of work increasingly impacts on the world of the family, and as our youngest children are increasingly to be found in communal centre-based settings and for longer periods of time, we shall have to address the issue of what kinds of experiences these children need if they are to flourish in these settings. Our understanding of the impact of these early experiences on life-long achievement and success has increased. We know that young children's dispositions and attitudes to learning are acquired early and it is important to ensure that these foundations are positive.

Early childhood services have many competing agendas. Some identified in the last few years by the World Bank and by the OECD include equality of opportunity through early intervention strategies, improved school-readiness, reduction in remediation by early diagnosis, the increase in social cohesion and the reduction of social exclusion, welfare-to-work for single

parents and, more grandly, the foundations for the development of human resources so that nation states can compete in the market place. In all this, it is important to say that early childhood services are not a women's issue but a societal one and that the education and care of young children should concern us all. But more important than this is the focus on the child, and the child's right to a happy, fulfilling childhood, not as a preparation for something that follows but simply as childhood. This perception was a concern for most delegates.

THE INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR AND FINAL REPORT

9. The framework for discussion

The international seminar followed the compilation of an interim report found in the preceding section. A full list of participants can also be found in the appendices. The interim report was based on two main sources:

- the questionnaires completed by participating countries
- a probe for information on early childhood education (O'Donnell, 2001) gleaned from a database created by NFER.

This electronic database, freely available on the web, is called the *INCA* Archive (www.inca.org.uk) and has been established with funds made available by QCA, a non-departmental public body which operates in England.

In the subsequent international seminar, held in Oxford in February 2002, five key areas of early childhood education and care were identified as central to the debate:

- 1 The early years curriculum, viewed in its widest sense.
- 2 The issue of pedagogy, which co-constructs that curriculum, the appropriateness of staffing levels in early years settings, and the nature and degree of qualification of staff.
- 3 The coherence and continuity of a child's experiences including the connectivity of the child's experiences within the setting, experiences before arriving at the setting and experiences after leaving the setting. The extent to which a child's experience of a setting is nested in wider experiences outside the setting and especially the extent to which the educational role of the significant adult with whom the child bonds is recognised.
- 4 What is quality in early childhood settings? What are its characteristics? How is it to be measured and assessed? How is it recognised, assured and developed?
- 5 What are the questions and key issues in the future development of early childhood education?

These five foci form the framework for the discussion in the remainder of this report. The issues for future development are set out in the executive summary. The remaining four areas of interest (from which the issues for future development have emerged) are elaborated below.

9.1 The early years curriculum

Most of the curricula in the countries of the delegates were based on a core of established principles which included:

- child-centredness
- work with parents
- integration of learning into a holistic view of the child
- the importance of play
- social and emotional development
- empowerment of the child to be an autonomous learner
- inclusiveness and equal opportunities.

Discussions on the curriculum in the early years tended to divide those younger than three from those over three years of age.

9.1.1 The curriculum from birth to three years of age

The desirability of national curriculum frameworks for children aged birth to three years was questioned by some in the group. All delegates acknowledged that learning began before birth but most discussants felt that prescriptively structuring a centralised curriculum for children under the age of three was neither feasible nor beneficial. Some saw a ‘curriculum’ for under-threes as totally outside the cultural norms of their country. Others suggested that if the ‘curriculum’ was viewed as the totality of learning incidences a child experienced, intentional or not, then even very young children have a ‘curriculum’. It was generally agreed that the degree by which the environment of such a curriculum is prescribed, structured and controlled is what needs to be considered. Early life experiences of children are so variable and individual it was felt that any assumptions of a common starting point for all children would be questionable, especially in multicultural societies.

There was a wide agreement that a child at this age should not be following a curriculum or a prescriptive agenda; rather, the curriculum should follow the child. Extending what was known by individual children had to be the starting point.

Notions of a common entitlement and shared access to a society’s culture were viewed as significantly more difficult with the very young, especially when moving from the individualistic subculture of the home. Learning takes place in a social context and the social context has to be able to sustain learning. It was generally agreed that learning experiences for children at this age should focus on their dispositions to learn, encouraging their exploratory drive and their perceptions of themselves as learners. Emotional and social well-being were viewed as the key to learning. Secure children are more open, more curious and more exploratory. The social context in which learning takes place, therefore, and the children’s enjoyment in perceiving themselves as learners were both viewed as paramount in any definition of a curriculum for children from birth to three years.

9.1.2 The curriculum from three to six years of age

The discussion on a curriculum for the children from three to six years focused on its appropriateness and its universality. Most countries agreed that the socialisation of children into

the dominant culture became a stronger objective during this period of a child's life but most also saw the importance of allowing the child to develop individual expression.

In **Japan**, the curriculum was based on the celebration of special days in the Japanese calendar, allowing children to develop learning habits whilst exploring the culture directly. It was pointed out that cultural homogeneity makes this easier than perhaps in more multicultural societies, such as in **New Zealand** where some groups, for example Pacific Islanders, feel their culture is not reflected and so they are rarely able to participate in constructing the curriculum.

In **Hong Kong, Korea** and **Singapore** greater emphasis is now being placed on social learning and cohesiveness. Interactive and exploratory play which enables the children to construct hypotheses about the world in which they live would in future be given precedence over the traditional practices based on passive reception of adult-delivered information.

In contrast, some western European countries, notably **England, Ireland** and the **Netherlands**, were introducing a more prescribed curriculum for over-threes, focusing especially on numeracy and literacy. This structure was felt to be of particular importance for groups in these countries seen to be at risk of later academic failure, for example, the socially excluded, economically dependent groups, those whose families were not indigenous language speakers, particular ethnic groups and boys.

In **Northern Ireland**, by contrast, longitudinal evidence is emerging of an interventionist programme aimed at young children in areas of conflict in inner city Belfast. Interestingly, this interventionist programme has liberated teachers from the nationally-prescribed curriculum and pedagogy, and early results from a longitudinal study suggest it is a successful strategy.

In **Italy**, the importance of the local community as the context for developing a curriculum was viewed as fundamental. For Italians there could not be a universal curriculum but only a curriculum that allowed for development of the individual child. Such a curriculum must start within the community in which the child was raised. Delegates expressed a view that 'top-down' curriculum models were generally unhelpful. Rather, delegates believed that a focus on 'bottom-up' curriculum models which allowed for individual differences, and in which local communities played an active part, were preferable.

Discussion suggested that early years should not be viewed as simply a preparation for something else, but as an experience in its own right. Many delegates expressed the view that there were dangers in trying to speed up and intensify the early experiences of young children. Linear progression of knowledge and its division into disciplines were seen to be unhelpful. The debate also highlighted the proposition that what is in the curriculum may be of less importance than the way in which it is experienced.

9.1.3 Key issues: curriculum

- *Few countries have national curriculum guidelines for the children under the age of three years. Many are considering it but others have a strong stance against doing so.*

- *There was general agreement that the curriculum for those under three years of age should focus on the individual child's developing interests and needs, with an emphasis on dispositions and social and emotional well-being.*
- *Virtually all participating countries have defined curriculum guidelines for children over the age of three but they vary in detail and prescription.*
- *There is some variation in how the ECEC curriculum for children over three was defined. Most countries used areas of learning, few used activities, no country used disciplines or subjects.*
- *Most curriculum guidelines for those over three years of age included: social and emotional; cultural; aesthetic and creative; physical; environmental; language and literacy; and numeracy.*
- *Many countries emphasised cultural traditions and aimed to enhance social cohesiveness through the curriculum.*
- *Only three countries emphasised early literacy and numeracy within the early years curriculum.*

9.2 Pedagogy, qualifications and staffing

Delegates agreed that the effectiveness of the early years curriculum was dependent on the characteristics of the staff delivering it. Pedagogy was identified as a key factor in effective early learning. Staff qualifications, training and professional development were seen as the means by which practitioners could develop a rationale for their practice and locate the evidence and conceptualisations which underpin it. These were important in convincing staff of the appropriateness of their interactions with children. Some debate focused on the dangers of de-skilling parents by making the care and education of young children 'over-professionalised'. Most delegates agreed that part of the professional growth of the ECEC pedagogue should include an emphasis on the ability to listen and interact with parents.

It was pointed out that the professional education of pedagogues was only one influence on their practice. The personal values of staff, and their social construction of a particularised view of childhood, would also influence their interaction with children. Evidence-based practice was seen as the best way of moving forward, encouraging informed and reflective staff to learn about their effectiveness from the children by systematic observation. The pedagogical models of northern **Italy** were examples of this.

The empowerment of children, parents and practitioners was also seen as fundamental to growth of an educative community of learners and co-constructors of knowledge. Dialogue and negotiation were at the heart of the curriculum structuring, but also were central to democratising knowledge.

The status of early years educators was generally seen by most participants as lower than for teachers of older children, and salaries and conditions of employment generally reflected this in

the participating countries. In most countries, primary teachers did not have similar terms and conditions or salary levels to those teaching older children. Similar differences were also apparent between primary teachers and those who were educating pre-primary children. Younger children were clearly viewed as less demanding.

Yet, delegates agreed that to have an understanding of developmental psychology, to be able to respond to the astonishing range of the exploratory young mind and to make those responses accessible whilst structuring and extending the next stage of development takes extraordinary talent. There was strong agreement that the perception that 'managing' young children's learning was easier than with older children was clearly uninformed. This perception in turn was related to gender issues where work in the field was often seen as the domain of women and therefore somehow of less consequence. Recruitment varied across the participating countries, but there was a shortage of appropriately trained staff in many countries. In some countries, teachers paid for their initial training. In others, the government met the full cost of salaries whilst training was undertaken.

There was some discussion about the relative merits of academic degrees to those with training based more in the realities of practice. Some countries separated teacher education, especially early childhood workers, from the university sector. Psychologists and other 'scientists' were the formulators of concepts and research which were then passed to early childhood practitioners to deliver. This model tended to make staff into technicians rather than reflective practitioners and a similar parallel could be drawn with overly prescriptive curricula.

There was general agreement with the Italian viewpoint that developing staff may be more effective than developing curricula. There were clearly questions to be asked about how curriculum frameworks and documentation, per se, could deliver quality. In some countries it seemed that the lighter the documentation the greater the emphasis placed on developing highly skilled practitioners. This was true of **Sweden**, for example, and was a characteristic noted in the recent OECD report.

The pressures of market globalisation had brought centralised and standardised systems to the secondary and primary school curricula in many of the countries in this review. Delegates were predominantly from the richest countries in the world and these countries wanted a curriculum that allowed their children to compete in the market place. This pressure gave rise to curricula that were centralised, standardised and tended not to be individualised.

ECEC services operated in a very different social context. Children came to these first educative experiences with very different familial experiences. They needed individuality. The ECEC curriculum should resist the technical conformity of later schooling because it needed to be close to the needs of individual children, parents and communities. It was generally agreed that instead of a focus on an overly-detailed, prescriptive curriculum, what was needed was reflective, observant, well-trained staff. In seeking to provide an appropriate ECEC curriculum, emphasis should be placed on the development of competent and highly skilled practitioners

responding appropriately to particular local circumstances and particular children. Such practitioners would need only a light touch curriculum framework.

9.2.1 *Effective pedagogical approaches in ECEC*

There was less diversity of view amongst the discussants when considering the nature of the early years pedagogy than when discussing the curriculum. Most delegates supported the view that pedagogues should have *sensitivity*, in that they could empathise with their children, see the world through their eyes, be congruent and enjoy their company. They should have the ability to *stimulate*, in that they could structure the environment so that children were involved with learning experiences which were relevant, purposeful and appropriate to their developmental age. *Stimulation* also related to the ability of the pedagogue to know when to intervene, when not to intervene, how to observe, record and plan and offer activities, which metaphysically, sometimes were at the extent of the child's outreached arm. Finally, the early years pedagogue should be able to empower children, to encourage them to make decisions and choices about themselves and their learning, to self manage and to encourage internalisation of locus of control and agency. It was agreed by delegates that practitioners who could engage with children sensitively, stimulating them whilst giving them agency, were effective early educators.

There was almost universal promotion by participants of an active, play-based pedagogy, where self-management and independent learning by children were encouraged. Collaborative, peer group learning was emphasised, supported by whole class, circle time. It was agreed that the role of the adult is to guide, support, scaffold and facilitate the co-construction of learning, rather than to actively direct.

9.2.2 *The qualifications of ECEC staff*

There was some concern that as working with young children is necessarily labour intensive, highly qualified staff would prove to be prohibitively expensive to policy makers as early childhood services expanded. There were some who felt that not all staff needed to be similarly qualified but that all children should have access to at least one well-trained pedagogue who would also act as a developmental support to her colleagues. A degree, per se, may not be sufficient. The appropriateness of the training was the issue.

All participating countries offered training to staff working with children between the ages of three and six years and mostly this was at graduate level but there was less training available to those working with younger children. Where it was available, it tended to be at sub-graduate level.

Most countries are moving towards raising the qualification levels of early year staff, realising the importance of this to ensuring high quality educational experiences for young children.

9.2.3 *The staffing ratios*

The quality of interaction in early years settings was seen as dependent on the number of children with which staff had to deal. Presentations illustrated that staffing ratios impact directly on the kind of curriculum and pedagogy which can be adopted. Where ratios were less favourable there would be a greater tendency to use didactic approaches and control management.

Many countries recognised the causal link between ratios and effectiveness, by varying ratios against certain criteria, for example, the age of child, degree of need, socio-economic class and the number of non-indigenous language speakers. Some countries where private, for-profit provision was common, used the link between ratio and qualification as a profit incentive to providers to raise the qualification level of their staff. Thus the more highly qualified could cope with larger numbers at a saving to their employees. Regulations required the less qualified to cope with fewer numbers.

9.2.4 *Key issues: pedagogy, qualifications and staff*

- *There was almost universal promotion of an active, play-based pedagogy within the participating countries, where self-management and independence are encouraged.*
- *Collaborative peer group learning was emphasised by delegates as important at this stage, with whole class 'circle time' used to reinforce this.*
- *Delegates generally agreed that the role of the adult is to support, scaffold and facilitate rather than to overly direct.*
- *Some countries, such as **Sweden**, specifically discouraged a formal approach.*
- *There was great variation on staff training and qualification levels across and within the participating countries, but most delegates indicated the importance of training to the delivery of a quality curriculum.*
- *Most of these countries were aiming to increase the qualification levels of their early years staff.*
- *There was general agreement that investment in professional ECEC staff was a preferable strategy for raising quality than over-prescribing a centralised curriculum.*
- *The ratios of staff to children varied considerably and were often determined by such things as the age of the child, the qualification of the staff, the special needs of the child or parents or where interventionist strategies targeted particular groups.*

9.3 **Continuity**

The learning experiences of young children must be attached to their previous knowledge. 'Yet', as the Australian delegate said, 'learning also comes with discontinuity and challenge of what is taken for granted'. So some discontinuities could be seen as opportunities for learning and reconstructing what was previously believed to be true. The changing context of children's

lives within changing patterns of family life in **Australia** was illustrative of the need for children to manage transitions and continuities and discontinuities. There is a social cultural context to children's learning which derives from the values and expectations of the family. Tensions arise when these are in conflict with those of the setting. Continuity in children's learning suggests that parents and practitioners work together to support children's learning, negotiating and interpreting the curriculum for the child from their respective perspectives but working closely and consistently. Contact and collaboration with a child's parents is crucial. But, as a number of delegates pointed out, parents can be seen as both consumers (especially when they are required to pay) and as participants in the curriculum process. For some these roles give rise to potential conflict.

Continuity between types of settings (private, voluntary or state) and different sector providers (health, care, education) implies that children should be experiencing a broadly similar curriculum in whatever sector or setting they are located. The importance of continuity, consistency and links between settings needs to be emphasised. There should also be links across sectors, with parents, at points of transition from home to ECEC setting and from ECEC setting to primary schooling. Young children thrive when continuity between the elementary school and their earlier centre-based education is established. The Australian delegate provided evidence which suggested that young children who transfer into the school system easily are more likely to succeed in the long term.

Many differences in ECEC practice revolved around the dubious division between care and education. The division between education and care, often at the age of three years, tended to exaggerate differences, and was reinforced by institutionalised, structural and administrative divisions. Different authorities, regulations, staffing, qualifications created barriers to continuity of experience for the child. A child who is not secure cannot learn and a child who is not cognitively stimulated is not being given appropriate care. In reality, education and care are inseparable.

It was felt by delegates that many forms of ECEC training had not always prepared practitioners to ensure continuity. In particular it was suggested that issues around parental involvement should be given more prominence. Links in training to other professionals working with young children and families would be an important development in establishing continuity.

9.3.1 Key issues: continuity

- *Delegates agreed that continuity in a child's early experiences from home to setting and between settings was a key to effective early learning.*
- *Delegates acknowledged that changing demographics were currently raising challenges for early years staff, particularly where the values of the home and the setting were in conflict.*
- *The separation between education and care was reinforced by structural and administrative divisions in many of the participating countries, but a number were acting to end this distinction and integrate education and care services.*

- *The separation between early years and primary education and between different sectors (private, voluntary and state) caused some level of discontinuity in most participating countries.*
- *Work with parents was seen as a key factor in supporting continuity of experience for young children, but most delegates believed practitioners needed much more training in this aspect of their work.*

9.4 Quality assurance and assessment

9.4.1 Quality assurance

Most participating countries had a national system of inspection for their education services. This generally went beyond minimal licensing and registration requirements. Care services, where these services were discrete and operated by a different national or local government department, as for example in the **Netherlands**, tended not to have a system of inspection in place. In the countries which these delegates represented, it was more common for the education and care sector regulations and inspection to be separated than for them to be joined.

The level and role of inspection and quality assurance procedures were related to the issue of accountability. Accountability, it was generally felt, was often too narrowly interpreted as the quantitative measuring of achievement. This presented a difficulty with young children as observational and psychometric testing was viewed as often flawed and culturally biased. There were also strong reservations expressed about using the children's performance to measure the performance of adults. Some delegates felt there were similar difficulties with use of rating scales to assess settings.

9.4.2 Assessment

The desirability and usefulness of assessment strategies was considered. There was much debate about who should decide what quality is. Many delegates felt that the academic and the cognitive often become the sole focus of assessment strategies, but effective learning is much more complex than this. It was argued strongly by one delegate that there were epistemological paradoxes in trying to measure parts of a system when talking holistically about children's development. A useful analogy was made with assessing the quality of a photograph. It was pointed out that it is possible to make an overall judgement of the quality of a photograph, whilst also being able to make specific judgements about its discrete elements - composition, lighting and so forth. It was agreed that the focus of quality might include the children, the environment, the leadership or perhaps the less visible underpinning values and attitudes, but that focusing on one aspect alone was of limited value. It was widely expressed that a greater clarity of focus and purpose in quality assessment would be beneficial in most countries.

Delegates argued that the most positive model for improvement and quality enhancement was one which emphasised the external validation of systematic and rigorous self-evaluation by

practitioners. This offered a formative approach to quality assessment, building on a setting's 'previous best'. It was agreed that summative judgements were necessary but that these could be placed in the hands of well-trained professionals, who should involve parents and children in their assessments of children's work.

In **Hong Kong**, both formative and summative judgements were made by teachers who kept records and portfolios of children's work, and delegates supported this model. The model was 'assess and assist', with the view that assessment should assist in moving forward both the child and the setting. This discussion raised the more fundamental issues of what assessment is for and for whom it is done.

In countries where the market place dominated there was no evidence that quality of a child's experience went beyond that set out in the regulatory minimum standards relating to such matters as staffing ratios and the number of toilets. Nor could the quality of the child's experience be assured by parental choice alone; indeed, there was some evidence to suggest that parents were not always best judges of educative quality in early childhood settings.

Delegates felt that it was important, however, to have parental voices in any assessment of their children. Children often appeared to have skills in the home which were not valued in the school, and vice versa. It was pointed out that some assessments of very young children might simply appear to be making judgements about parenting skills, and that this would hardly be a positive and constructive approach to development and improvement. One delegate also suggested that too much assessment would interfere in the development of the adult/child relationship.

Parents could not be the sole judges of quality. There were other stakeholders to whom ECEC settings should be accountable. In **New Zealand**, local self-governance had become popular but had not always assured quality in settings, especially where whole communities were described as 'dysfunctional'. The state was therefore now insisting on some degree of accountability. In the **Netherlands**, where employers legally must make a contribution to costs, there were frequent complaints from them that the quality agenda was getting too costly. There was also debate about how government and policy makers themselves are made accountable for ECEC provision. The recent OECD (2001) report, at one level, assessed governments. There were difficulties in obtaining accurate figures at this level, especially on costs. Governments often deliberately obscured such data for political gain. It was generally felt that more research was needed in the area of costing and quality assessment and improvement in early years settings.

9.4.3 *Key issues: quality assurance and assessment*

- *Most correspondents had no national system of assessment for pre-compulsory ECEC.*
- *Some correspondents had assessment on entry to compulsory schooling, primarily a developmental checklist for identifying special need.*

- *Most countries used assessment as a diagnostic and formative tool in developing their curriculum programmes.*
- *Some countries had developed an additional quality assurance scheme which accredited providers of ECEC with an approved official stamp of quality.*
- *There was a focus in assessment on practitioners' observations, children's portfolios, discussions with parents and child, records which built up a profile of the child.*
- *There was a great variation in level of inspection and quality assurance. Some countries were highly regulated and in others there was little regulation.*
- *Most countries had a national system of regulation and licensing of ECEC services enforcing minimum standards.*
- *Most countries had a national system of inspection which went beyond minimal licensing for education services but not for care services where these services were discrete.*
- *The education and care sector regulations and inspection were often separated.*

CURRICULUM FRAMEWORKS IN THE INCA COUNTRIES

Australia

In Australia the development and implementation of curriculum frameworks are a state responsibility, and therefore vary. For example, in **Queensland**, there are pre-school curriculum guidelines, which are based on five foundation learning areas, which aim to provide a framework for exploring and reflecting on the content and process of the pre-school curriculum. The five foundation learning areas are:

- sense of self and others
- health and physical understanding
- social living and learning
- cultural understanding
- understanding environments.

Each foundation learning area is described in terms of:

- understandings and dispositions (habits of mind)
- learning processes
- teaching strategies
- learning outcomes.

In **Tasmania** a programme entitled *Flying start* was introduced in 1997 aimed at all children from four to seven years, including those who have not made significant progress and those who are deemed capable of higher achievements. This focuses on:

- literacy
- numeracy
- social skills.

Canada

Most individual states/provinces in Canada have a curriculum framework for all phases of education, including kindergarten (four to six years). Under Western Canadian Protocol, in 1993-4 the four western Canadian provinces and three northern territories established a common curriculum framework for kindergarten to grade 12 (18- to 19-year-olds), with the aim of providing continuity of educational provision across the territories.

Other states have curriculum statements and frameworks for the kindergarten which describe the learning achievement which helps prepare children both for entrance to compulsory school and as life- long learners. They also provide a guide to effective practice. For example, in British Columbia there are five areas of development identified for kindergarten and early primary education:

- aesthetic and artistic
- emotional and social

- intellectual
- physical development and well-being
- social responsibility.

In Alberta, there are six learning areas identified:

- language arts
- mathematics
- community and environmental awareness
- personal and social responsibility
- physical skills and well-being
- creative and cultural expression.

Most pre-school curriculum frameworks in Canada also contain statements about the development of positive attitudes to learning and the promotion of creative thinking and problem solving skills.

England

Until 1999 in England there was no national curriculum for pre-school children (birth to five years), but most local authorities provided guidelines for their educational nursery schools and nursery classes, where these existed, and for their reception classes, located in primary schools as the first class receiving children. The voluntary and private sector implemented their own educational programmes. None of these curriculum guidelines were statutory. This absence of a national early years curriculum had resulted in a top-down pressure on many early years classes to introduce a formal curriculum, which, in many respects followed the national curriculum for compulsory primary schools (five to 11 years).

In September 2000, the government introduced the *foundation stage* to encompass publicly-funded educational provision for children from three to five plus years (end of reception year). The published *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage* included a curriculum based upon six areas of learning:

- personal, social and emotional development
- communication, language and literacy
- mathematical development
- knowledge and understanding of the world
- physical development
- creative development.

It also included a set of *early learning goals* (previously called *desirable learning outcomes*) for each area which established expectations for most children to reach by the end of the foundation stage.

In addition to the *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage*, since 1999 school-based early years settings have also been subject to the *National literacy* and *numeracy strategies*, which form a major part of the government agenda for raising standards in schools. In both these programmes there is an intensive and detailed literacy and numeracy curriculum provided for teachers, who are expected to

deliver a daily hour of each programme for all children. For pre-compulsory children, the National literacy and numeracy strategies may be delivered more flexibly.

For children under the age of three years, and pre-school children in non-publicly-funded education or care provision, there continues to be no nationally-prescribed curriculum framework. However, the government, through *Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships*, is developing and disseminating good practice guidelines for all early education and care provision catering for children from birth. These focus primarily on children's social and emotional development and the development of language and literacy. There is also a government-funded project which is exploring the development of a national set of curriculum guidelines for under-threes.

France

In France there has been a national curriculum for early years (pre-elementary) education since 1995. This curriculum is determined nationally by the Ministry of Education and has six main areas of activity, rather than subjects:

- living together
- speaking and building up the language
- learning about the written word
- taking action/acting in the world
- discovering the world
- imagining, feeling and creating.

For each of the above there is a series of activities contributing to the child's overall development and preparing him/her for compulsory primary education. These activities include:

- physical activities
- scientific and technical activities
- communication, writing and, in particular, oral/spoken language exercises
- artistic and aesthetic activities.

Germany

In Germany there is no fixed, nationally-defined early years curriculum, but within the various *Länder* kindergarten curricula do exist. Generally, these aim to *achieve a readiness for school by channelling the child's natural urge to play* but do not attempt to anticipate the subject matter taught in school. Kindertartens individually develop their curriculum on the basis of a set of elementary aims for kindertartens in Germany and the ideological, denominational, religious or educational approach of the institution. Most early years settings have programmes which stimulate children's general development, with an emphasis on the following areas

- development of a child's physical, mental, emotional and social abilities
- development of a sense of responsibility
- awareness of daily routines and basic hygiene
- awareness of environmental responsibility.

Hong Kong

There exists only a guideline on the curriculum for early childhood (three to six years). The curriculum guide sets out:

- principles of child development
- objectives for children's learning and development
- the areas of curriculum content with samples of themes
- ways of planning and evaluation.

The principles underpinning this curriculum are:

- a balanced curriculum for the holistic development of a child
- the different aspects of individual development, such as physical, language, emotional and social as well as intellectual development, and learning are to be reinforced by exploration and discovery
- that children should be allowed to learn through play.

In the curriculum guide, it is emphasised that the child should be provided with opportunities to develop in different areas. However, in reality, more emphasis is on academic areas such as the three 'Rs' of reading, writing and arithmetic. The recommended pedagogical approach uses a thematic or project approach especially the *High scope* model. Previously, pedagogical approaches were rather didactic and instructional and teacher-centred but they have become more child-centred and interactive recently. Children are encouraged to explore and discover in order to learn through meaningful experiences.

Hungary

Until 1996, the early years curriculum was determined by the state, through compulsory common objectives for all kindergartens. In 1996 the Hungarian government introduced a *Core programme for kindergarten education*. This stated that by 1999, all kindergartens should produce their own curriculum based on this core programme, which is approved by the teaching staff and the maintaining body (usually the local authority). No compulsory subjects are specified but the key objective is to ensure well balanced, all-round personal development which will prepare children for life in the community and for school. The recommended core programme focuses on:

- the healthy physical development of the child
- emotional and social education
- intellectual development, including language skills, perception, observation, memory, attention, imagination and creativity.

Republic of Ireland

In Ireland the revised *Primary School Curriculum* (1999) caters for the learning experiences of all four- to six-year-olds within the primary school system, and is being phased in over a four to five year period. This curriculum has seven curriculum areas which are further sub-divided into subjects, with a detailed statement of content for each subject. The seven curriculum areas are:

- language, sub-divided into Irish and English
- mathematics
- social, environmental and scientific education, sub-divided into history, geography and science
- arts education, sub-divided into visual arts, music and drama
- physical education
- social, personal and health education
- religious education.

Each statement provides for, and encourages, a rich and varied learning experience through the employment of a range of teaching and learning strategies. Religious education is the responsibility of the different church authorities. This curriculum provides a detailed framework within which schools are given the flexibility to plan according to individual school's circumstances and needs. In developing this curriculum, the Irish government aimed to ensure it was appropriate to the developmental and learning needs of young children. It is usually delivered in an integrated manner.

In pre-school settings outside the primary school sector, there is currently no nationally agreed early years curriculum, with the exception of the *Early start* curriculum which is specifically designed to address social disadvantage. Various voluntary and private bodies have produced their own materials and information packs to guide and inform the planning and presenting of learning experiences for these young children. The materials are generally available to all practitioners affiliated to these umbrella organisations. However, little communication and cooperation exists between these bodies in terms of sharing experiences and good practice.

In 1999, a white paper on early childhood education, *Ready to learn*, proposed the development of curriculum guidelines for children from birth to six years, and drew particular attention to the birth to three years and three to four years age groups in the light of the relative absence of documentation guiding the planning of learning experiences. The white paper has proposed the development of a *specimen curriculum* for pre-school children, which will provide detail on content and methodology. The white paper also called for the development of a less formal curriculum for children from birth to three years.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has an advisory role with the Ministry for Education and Science. It is also liaising with the new Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education in Ireland over the intended curriculum framework, which will guide the planning, development and delivery of early learning programmes to children, birth through six years of age. The curriculum will give guidance and not outline specific objectives or experiences. One of the key principles is that the diversity of need in children of this age should be recognised. Diversity of philosophies, organisational structures and settings is one way of ensuring this. The proposed framework will embrace and promote this diversity. The common framework is intended to raise the overall quality of learning experiences received by Irish children in their pre-school years. The framework acknowledges that learning begins before birth and is the foundation of life-long learning. Continuity across the age phase and into primary school is therefore essential.

Italy

In Italy there is no prescribed national curriculum for early years education or prescribed time allocations, but guidelines are issued by the Ministry of Public Education. The Ministry intends that these guidelines should be adapted by individual schools, in consultation with parents, to meet local needs. The guidelines indicate that activities should include six fields of educational experience:

- body and movement
- speech and words
- space, order and measure
- objects, time and nature
- messages, forms and media
- self and others.

In the absence of a national curriculum in Italy, several municipal early childhood programmes have been recognised internationally as outstanding, but they are predominantly regional and local. An example of this is the *Reggio Emilia Programme*. This programme has a strong emphasis on art, creativity and individual expression (*The 100 Languages of Children*), and aims to create open and self-directing learning situations which are community-based and provide a civic forum for children and families to engage with. A concerted effort has not yet been made to bring successful programmes across Italy.

Japan

In Japan since 1990 there has been a national early years curriculum, a Ministry-defined *Course of study*. Each school is expected to organise its own curriculum in accordance with the course of study, taking into account local circumstances and children's needs. The course of study is regularly reviewed and revised, with the most recent version being introduced in 2000. The course of study instructs teachers on what and how to teach. In the course of study there is a focus on constructive play and learning social behaviour and how to cooperate in a group.

However, Japanese kindergartens provide an academic curriculum which includes the first stages of reading and arithmetic. Children are expected to be able to read and do simple sums involving addition and subtraction by the time they leave at six years of age. However, the Japanese school system does not require children to have academic abilities such as reading, writing and arithmetic before they enter compulsory schooling. In fact, the first year of primary education is designed for children who have no academic experience. In addition to the first stages of reading, writing and arithmetic, many kindergartens also attempt to develop the more general intellectual skills of thinking, observation, learning and general intelligence. To this end the new kindergarten curriculum framework has five inter-related aspects:

- health
- human relationships
- the environment
- language

- expression.

The overall aim is, through play, to promote intellectual development and qualities of self-reliance and awareness of others.

Korea

Korea has a national curriculum which is mandatory for all schools from the kindergarten (three to six years) to upper secondary schools, including private schools. This curriculum is reviewed on a five to 10 year cycle, with the *Seventh national curriculum* being gradually introduced since March 2000. The centrally-defined curriculum sets strict regulations for the number of school days, the subjects to be taught, and the time allocation for each subject. It therefore prescribes not only the range of subjects offered but also the content and time allocation for each. It also provides criteria for the development of text books. The national curriculum also provides guidelines for teaching/learning activities and methods of assessment. However, there is increasing room for flexibility by local education authorities and individual schools. The early years curriculum covers five areas:

- physical
- social
- expressive
- language/linguistic
- enquiry.

The intention behind the seventh national curriculum is stated as being *to loosen the rigid and centralised curriculum framework. Specifically, teachers are encouraged to be directly and actively involved in the decision and planning process for the curriculum.*

Netherlands

Since 1993, the Netherlands has a statutory national curriculum for children in primary schools from the age of four years. This curriculum is revised every five years and the current set of objectives are in place for the period 1998 – 2003. The primary school curriculum includes six areas which must be taught, if possible, in a multi-disciplinary way:

- Dutch
- arithmetic and mathematics
- English (not required for four- to six-year-olds)
- orientation on man and the world, including geography, history, society, technology, environment, promotion of self-reliance and healthy behaviour, nature study
- physical education
- art orientation, including drawing, arts and crafts, music, drama and the use of language, movement.

There are also cross-curricular subjects:

- attitude to work
- working according to a plan

- use of a diversity of learning strategies
- self-image
- social behaviour
- new media.

There is no nationally-prescribed curriculum for children under four years who attend playgroups and other childcare provision. However, the principal aim is to stimulate children's cognitive, social and emotional development.

New Zealand

In New Zealand there is a national early childhood curriculum, *Te Whariki*, which was developed by the Ministry of Education. It has been a requirement for all chartered early childhood services from 1998. The framework is not subject-based but expressed in terms of principles, strands, goals within those strands, and outcomes. Principles, strands and goals are intended to make up the early childhood curriculum as if woven together like the strands of a woven mat, or *whariki*. No time allocations are mentioned. The principles include:

- empowerment
- family and community
- holistic development
- relationships.

The strands, which are interwoven with the principles, identify the major areas of the curriculum and include:

- well-being
- belonging
- contribution
- communication
- exploration.

Goals are also specified which provide clear direction for learning programmes and describe:

- learning outcomes for developing children's knowledge, skills and attitudes
- questions to help children think about how a programme is working
- examples of the kind of experiences that can help children learn.

Singapore

In Singapore the Ministry of Education publishes pre-school curriculum guidelines and desired outcomes for pre-school education. Kindergartens and child care centres are expected to plan their curriculum based on these guidelines. Traditionally the Singaporean early childhood curriculum has emphasised academic and rote learning, but the new pilot guidelines make no specific mention of competencies in reading, writing and arithmetic, but focus on values, attitudes and skills and social learning. This is deliberate, with the intention of preparing children for life long learning rather than

simply for primary school. Currently about 20 per cent of children start primary school in Singapore unable to read or write.

The new pilot guidelines encourage pre-school programmes to include:

- environmental awareness
- exposure to English and mother tongue
- pre-number concepts
- simple science concepts
- art
- indoor free choice activities
- outdoor play
- story/rhyme time
- music and movement
- social skills activities.

The desired outcomes are:

- to know what is right and wrong
- to be willing to share and take turns with others
- to be able to relate to others
- to be curious and able to explore
- to be able to listen and speak with understanding
- to be comfortable and happy with themselves
- to have developed physical coordination and healthy habits
- to love their family, friends, teachers and kindergarten.

The Ministry is currently reviewing its curriculum based on these outcomes. There is an emphasis on all round, holistic development of the child and the goal is to capitalise on the child's curiosity and activity level, ensuring that she/he learns in fun ways and her/his motivation and interest in learning are stimulated through exploration and discovery.

Spain

In Spain there are national curriculum guidelines for early years education. These determine general minimum goals for children to attain at a given stage, defined as a series of abilities and broad curriculum areas. Schools use these guidelines to develop their own curricular plan. The curriculum is seen as consisting of areas of experience which are offered in an integrated way, with actual curriculum subjects not being introduced until compulsory school age. The three main areas of experience are:

- personal identity and independence
- physical and social environment
- communication and expression.

Sweden

In Sweden there has been a statutory national curriculum covering the ages birth to five years since 1998, which extended the existing national curriculum for children from six to 16 years. This curriculum is based upon the idea that welfare and education are linked. The significance of play is also highlighted. In the pre-school curriculum there are five educational goals to strive towards:

- norms and values
- development and learning
- children's influence
- cooperation with the home
- cooperation with the school.

Guidelines for the curriculum are expressed in general terms. The curricula for pre-school, compulsory school and recreation centres have common goals focusing on norms and values. In pre-schools, pre-school classes and recreation centres, knowledge goals are to be striven towards but are not required to be obtained.

Switzerland

In Switzerland there is no national early years curriculum; provision is the responsibility of the individual cantons. In the French-speaking cantons a general early years curriculum was introduced in 1995. In the German-speaking cantons, kindergarten teachers follow a curriculum devised by their professional association. Both of these curriculum frameworks include general aims which refer to the development of the child's personality, the acquisition of elementary skills and social behaviour. There is a general belief that children in early years settings should not learn to read and write but develop their social capabilities and get used to listening and concentrating.

United States of America

There is no national curriculum in the USA. Some federal interventionist programmes, for example, *Head start*, existing for more than 35 years, have begun under the present Bush administration to put more emphasis in kindergarten on cognitive development directed especially towards children from low income families, specifically for reading skills. A new *Early reading first* programme awaits formal approval by Congress. In most states, the curriculum for the kindergarten year (five- to six-year-olds) is subsumed within the individual state's overall (five to 17 or 18) framework but there are some states which provide curriculum guidelines for the pre-kindergarten phase. Examples from Kentucky and Massachusetts are illustrative of curriculum guidelines for kindergarten.

Kentucky Curriculum decisions are made by the individual school council, and activities for pre-school children, aged three to five, should align with the curriculum for primary level students (kindergarten to grade 3, aged five to eight or nine). The curriculum is not specified but local districts are encouraged to design a curriculum from multiple sources of guidance. The pre-school programme in Kentucky (offered to disadvantaged children and children with learning difficulties aged three and over) is expected to offer children *developmentally appropriate experiences*, and to assist young children in developing their interpersonal skills and in maximising self-management and

independence. The educational component is expected to promote development of skills in the following ways.

Cognition and communication:

- encouraging children to explore and learn by doing (concrete experiential learning)
- encouraging language understanding and use among children as well as between children and adults (language experience approach)
- integrating skills across content areas into activities targeted towards the interests of children (integrated curriculum)
- providing a balance of activities (indoor/outdoor, child-/staff-initiated, structured/spontaneous, large/small group, group/individual, quiet/active).

Social and emotional development:

- providing an environment of acceptance to help develop a positive self- concept
- providing positive guidance for self-regulation of behaviour
- providing positive adult and peer role models
- having a curriculum which is relevant to and reflective of the population being served.

Physical development

- providing developmentally-appropriate information on nutrition
- involving children in snack and meal preparation where feasible
- working with children during meals to develop language and problem solving
- providing appropriate indoor and outdoor space with materials and equipment designed to increase physical skills
- providing developmentally appropriate instruction in health and safety procedures.

Massachusetts Since 1993, state-wide curriculum frameworks across seven subject areas have been developed for pre-kindergarten to grade 12 (around four years to 17 or 18 years of age). These are:

- mathematics
- science and technology
- social sciences/social studies including USA and world history, geography, economics, civics and government
- English language arts
- world languages
- the arts including dance, music, theatre and the visual arts
- health including health education, physical education and family and consumer science education.

These define learning outcomes for each subject or strand. For example, there are learning standards for the *number sense and operations* strand of the mathematics curriculum framework for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children.

The curriculum frameworks are intended to provide:

- guidelines for creating a detailed curriculum
- guides for classroom assessment
- guides for selecting instructional materials
- guides for planning professional development
- guides for restructuring schools to support learning
- a presentation of critical issues that underlie learning, teaching and assessment
- support for teachers to try innovations and investigations that lead to high quality learning experiences for all students.

These curriculum frameworks are *not* intended to provide:

- detailed lesson plans or curricula
- items on which all students must be tested
- directives for uniform programmes or texts
- mandates for specific methodologies or programmes.

The Massachusetts curriculum frameworks for pre-kindergarten to grade 12 education establish three broad goals that are critical to life long learning and that frame the learning, teaching and assessment process. These are:

- **thinking and communicating:** ways of making sense or meaning of the world and our experiences to ourselves and to others. Thinking includes being able to internalise new ideas and connect them to familiar ideas and prior knowledge. Communicating means putting into the language of speech or writing and requires reflection in such forms as examination, clarification, analysis and synthesis.
- **gaining and applying knowledge:** involves pursuing ideas and experiences and applying new knowledge in real life contexts. This pursuit is interactive by nature. The more experiential it is, the more powerful the learning.
- **working and contributing:** implies that student work is meaningful and purposeful and that the process and products of student work are valued contributions to the school and community. Embedded in powerful learning experiences are notions of persistence, self-discipline, hard work and effort and pride in producing quality work.

United Kingdom: additional countries

In **Northern Ireland**, there is nationally agreed curricular guidance for all funded settings that have children in their pre-school year. This guidance follows the principles and approaches outlined in the NI Nursery Guidelines (1988). In pre-school settings, the curricular guidance implies that children should be given choice and autonomy to explore, investigate and observe, and so on. Guided activities are not considered to be appropriate for children of this age, although they may be invited to take part in group activities such as stories, rhymes and songs. There is a statutory curriculum for

children in compulsory education (which is currently under review and substantial changes are being proposed). The proposed curriculum for year 1 should be much less formal, building on the approaches advocated for pre-school settings and introducing some guided activities. The revised curriculum for year 1 proposes a greater emphasis on personal development (with strands of personal understanding, personal health and safety, and living in the local and wider world), on developing skills and on developing dispositions to learn. There will be a greater focus on learning through well-planned play, oral language, developing the dispositions to read and write, practical mathematical activities and the language of mathematics and creativity.

The curriculum for children aged birth to five years is currently under review in **Wales**.

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Representatives of countries involved in the INCA project, delegates who attended the seminar and others interested in this area of work.

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