

## **Ideology and Early Childhood Education: a Comparative Analysis of Recent Government Policy in Taiwan and Scotland**

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**Abstract:** Using a qualitative methodology based on interviews with a Government Ministers, kindergarten principals and professors of early childhood education in Taiwan and scrutiny of official documentation in Scotland, this paper compares recent policy developments in Early Childhood Education in both countries. Such policy developments are traced to their ideological roots. The paper then identifies the tensions facing both countries in the continuing development of early childhood education in terms of expansion, integration and quality enhancement.

**Keywords:** Early Childhood Education, Ideology, Policy Analysis

### **Introduction**

In recent years governments in many developed countries have given priority to the development of early childhood services – particularly early childhood education (ECE). In a number of Western countries (for example, Britain and Sweden) such developments have been largely driven by the social democratic ideology referred to as the Third Way (Giddens, 1998). A number of Asian countries such as Taiwan have also now recognised the need to prioritise the development of such services in Government policy. In many countries, including Scotland and Taiwan, the relationship between the State, the family and the child is going through a period of flux.

Scotland, a small country with a population of 5.3 million and with a long tradition of political democracy, has given top priority to early childhood education and care since 1997. The Scottish Executive's Childcare Strategy (SO, 1998) has brought universal services in the form of two years free 'nursery' education and has taken significant steps in the integration of education and care services into a single educational framework.

The Scottish system of early childhood education is based on a 'mixed-economy' model. The model consists of three types of providers – local authority, private and voluntary. Of all registered childcare and pre-school education centres in 2006, 41.8 per cent were in the public sector, 22.3 per cent in the private sector and 34.0 per cent were in the voluntary sector (SE, 2006). The Scottish Executive meets the cost of part-time places (3 hours each day either morning or afternoon) for two years based on school terms prior to the start of primary (elementary) school at the age of 5. The Executive also meets most of the cost of extended services, particularly for very young children aged 0-3, mostly in the private sector, on a sliding scale of family income via the childcare Tax Credit system. In 2006 96 per cent of 3 year olds and 99 per cent of 4 year olds attended a pre-school education centre (SO, 2006). From 2006 the Scottish Executive is piloting a scheme for free education for 2 years old children in vulnerable circumstances. It also provides free daycare for such children under the Sure Start programme (SE, 1999).

The justification for such a high priority for early childhood education in the UK, and Scotland, in particular lies in the ideology of the Third Way. One of the central features of this ideology is the concept of the **Social Investment State**:

*Governments need to emphasise life long education developing education programmes that start from an individual's early years and continue on in life.*

(Giddens, 1999)

In other words, it is the responsibility of the State to invest in its social institutions in order to improve the way society functions both economically and socially. In contrast to the 'First' Way (neo-liberalism) and the 'Second' Way (socialism), the main features of the Third Way are as follows:

- Reconciliation of equality with pluralism and life-style
- diversity
- An effective role for public institutions and active government in promoting social justice. The 'managed' State to promote social inclusion
- Equality of opportunity as a mechanism of redistribution
- A positive attitude to globalisation

Furthermore, as in many countries, those trained to work with children on a day-to-day basis belong to one of two professional groups – nursery teachers and childcare workers (formerly nursery nurses). The Conditions of Service of these two professional groups differ very considerably even though the actual tasks undertaken in the kindergarten are not radically different. Despite recommendations for a single childcare/education profession as operates in Sweden (Cohen *et al*, 2004). The Scottish Executive has pulled back from taking such a recommendation forward, possibly on cost grounds. Furthermore, the proposed extensions to the Childcare Strategy in the form of a proposed Integrated Strategy for the Early Years (SE, 2003) were shelved, though it has been argued that the Strategy was over-ambitious and partly mis-directed (Wilkinson, 2004).

In the context of ECE, the Third Way clearly prescribes that there should be *public institutions and active government* in providing and facilitating high quality educational contexts for all children prior to the start of formal schooling. In other words, it is the responsibility of government to ensure that all children have access to appropriate services, irrespective of race, creed, disability or family circumstances.

In Scotland, this has been achieved over the past eight years due to the establishment of a level-playing field for the three different types of service providers. For all the three types of service providers there is a central Registration and Inspection process (Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act, 2001) and a central Curriculum Framework (SO, 1999) for children aged 3-5 based on the European child-centred/play-based traditions from Dewey, Rousseau, Pestalozzi and others. All providers are required by law to be registered and inspected and have readily adopted the national Curriculum Framework. Furthermore, in a given local geographic area, the three types of service providers jointly sit on a Childcare Partnership group which manages appropriate provision for every child under the age of 5. There is little tension or competition between the providers.

However, the ECE system in Scotland is not without its problems. Most of the educational provision in the local authority sector is limited to five half days per week for 33 weeks per year on the basis of three hours per day. Such limited access (albeit free) does not fit easily with those family circumstances where the parent(s) goes out to work. Serious problems arise not only during holiday periods but more acutely in the half days where no provision is available. Furthermore, in terms of childcare for very young children, the State only makes provision where the child is in vulnerable circumstances. Cohen *et al* (2004) therefore regard the position of the UK more in terms of Liberal Welfare than one of Social Democracy.

In contrast, Taiwan, with a population over four times that of Scotland, is a relatively new political democracy. It has a chequered history with cultural and political influences from Portugal, the Netherlands, Japan and China, though the Chinese influence is now dominant. The education system is highly competitive with many educational services being located in the private sector – from kindergartens to schools, colleges and universities. Young people are put under considerable pressure to get access to the ‘best’ Senior High School and the ‘best’ University. However, the Taiwan Government has recently recognised the need to pay attention to the reform of early childhood education. A major new childcare law is being prepared though it may take many years to implement successfully.

As far as early childhood services are concerned the ‘education’ component of these services is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, whilst ‘childcare’ is the responsibility of the Children’s Bureau in a separate Ministry. Early childhood education provision in kindergartens is available (though not universally) for three years prior to the start of elementary school at the age of six, though the majority of children only have access for one year prior to school. Where provision is available it is available for the whole day.

In Taiwan, there are two types of providers of ECE – public (local authority) and private. Unlike Scotland, the majority of children (in excess of two-thirds) are located in the private sector where competition is particularly strong as indeed is the case in many Asian countries. Of particular concern to the Taiwan Government is the acutely declining birth rate. It has fallen by one-third since 1999. Such a rapid decline has major consequences for ECE.

In terms of the ideological context of Taiwan, the legacy of Martial Law (only abandoned in 1987) and subsequent dominance of the right wing party (the KMT) has given the current centre-left government a major problem. Historically, right-wing governments have not seen it appropriate that the State should make extensive provision either for childcare or ECE. Such provision is the responsibility of the family, in conjunction with private enterprise and the market place. Hence the dominance of the private sector in ECE in Taiwan, which is further supported through the voucher system whereby the Government channels finance to the private sector in return for ECE places. In the very early years (0-3) many families choose to bring up their children at home with extensive use of grandparents, who often regard it as a privilege to help the family out in this way.

A critical question therefore facing the centre-left Taiwan Government, given that it has accepted that ECE reform is now essential, is what priority should be given either to expansion, that is, providing universal ‘free’ ECE (and for a longer period of time) or integrating the childcare system with ECE as has happened in many western countries such as Sweden (Cohen *et al*, 2004). It is therefore a crucial time for Taiwan. How will a centre-

left democratic government use its resources and authority to improve Taiwan society in the longer term by reforming the current system of early childhood education?

### **Reforming Early Childhood Education in Taiwan**

To understand the current direction of the Taiwan Government in Early Childhood Education the researchers undertook interviews with two Ministers in the Spring/Summer of 2006 – the Deputy Minister of Education and the Minister with responsibility for the new Childcare law. The interview with the Deputy Minister, which lasted one hour, consisted of four sections:

- current policy
- State definition of ECE curriculum
- registration/inspection
- future plans

The interview with the second Minister focussed on the purposes underlying the proposed new law and also lasted one hour.

In terms of current policy, the main drivers identified by the Deputy Minister were:

- raising levels of attainment in schools
- helping vulnerable and disadvantaged children to get social justice
- to reduce delinquency

In other words, there is an emphasis in current policy on the ameliorisation of social ills in Taiwan society, what therefore might be regarded as an emergent Liberal Welfare ideology.

Applying these drivers to practical policy, the Government is tackling three issues:

- expansion of provision
- integration of childcare and education
- improving quality

In 2006, a significant number of local authority districts do not have public kindergartens. Such districts are mainly located on the outlying, remote islands, the rural aboriginal areas and a number of mainland urban areas. It is the Government's intention to provide resources to achieve one-year free universal ECE by 2007, though it seems this may be compromised by the integration agenda which is of particular concern to the Taiwan Government is the pursuit of 'integration' (Chiu, 2006), hence the current preoccupation with the proposed new child care law.

On the quality issue, the Minister saw it as the purpose of inspection to raise the quality of provision in kindergartens. Each inspection is undertaken at the school district level by a group of three – a government officer, a university professor and a kindergarten director. Unfortunately, not all reports are publicly available (as they are in Scotland) –only good reports are published. Kindergartens with a poor inspection report in the public sector are offered help by central government resources. In the private sector which regards itself as being more responsive to parental demands from Government guidelines, parental choice has become the mechanism of quality control.

Turning to reforms to the ECE curriculum, general guidelines have been in place for the past 20 years though they are often ignored by the private sector. The Government has now put in place a process for reforming the guidelines based on six areas of competence. However, there are no plans to ensure they are implemented.

The legacy of successive right-wing governments has been to encourage the private sector to respond to parental demand. Such demands are culturally entrenched in the competitive ethic, that is, competition for each child to **be** the best, not just to **do** his/her best. Many parents want their child to learn English from a very early age. So many private kindergartens provide a kindergarten class almost entirely conducted in English where the emphasis is on teaching children and demonstrating to parents that their child is learning – hence the importance given to the ‘text-book’. Many children also get homework based on these text-books.

On the issue of integration, both Ministers were particularly keen to dilute the current emphasis in ECE in Taiwan on the acquisition of knowledge and the pursuit of competition, largely out of sympathy for those who do not succeed. They propose to achieve this by putting in place a single childcare/education system with greater priority than the achievement of universal access to free services. As an initial step, it is intended that responsibility for childcare and education for all children from the age of 2 be incorporated into the Ministry of Education. Secondly, it is intended to publish one set of standards that are more play-based, that will apply to both the public and private sectors, and thirdly, it is proposed to improve the training of childcare workers. The first of these reforms is relatively straightforward. However, generating a level playing field between the public and private sector is very difficult. At present the tactics being proposed depend largely on persuasion (particularly the persuasion of parents) rather than on compulsion. Largely due to historic reasons, the Taiwan Government feels that parental choice of ECE is educationally appropriate even if that choice is not obviously made in the interests of childhood *per se*.

A key area of contest in ECE in Taiwan is between the traditionalists (largely in the private sector) who regard ECE as a form of schooling with its associated academic-orientated curriculum and those who regard ECE as child-centred with learning based on play.

Given that one of the major aims of early childhood education is to prepare young children to be ready for their future learning experiences, specifically for later schooling. This education aim is embedded in the fact that early childhood is the golden period for children to develop their capacities. It is rooted in the streams of thoughts expanding across the ages. However, the concept of school readiness is subject to interpretation by a given community in addressing the functions of early education in relations to the future education. The sources of interpreting school readiness is constituted from various concepts regarding the nature of child development and learning, as Eisenhart and Graue (1990) states it, “readiness covers a tangle of related, but not necessarily consistent or stable, ideas that are constructed by individuals in a given community”. From this perspective, the concepts of readiness should be viewed from the shared values, histories, folk pedagogy and culture of a given community, instead of treating it as a fixed entity proposed by a particular developmental theory or a set of theories.

A concept of readiness conceptualizes the kind of early experiences we should provide children during their early childhood in order to help them fully develop their immature but developing capacities so that they will be able to succeed in elementary school. Therefore, it further determines the contents of curriculum for young children. Historically, early childhood education has been undergoing the struggle of two rival competing concepts of curriculum. One is called as the whole child approach (Hendrick, 1986), or developmentally appropriate practice proposed by NAEYC (Bredenkamp and Copple, 1997), and the other is academic-oriented curriculum. Despite the numerous variations in curriculum planning among the camp of the whole child approach, they share an essential educational belief which regards direct teaching as an inappropriate practice and adopts play-oriented curriculum for young children to engage their activities by their own interests. They assert that through the self-engaged activities children construct their knowledge. This belief is the core element that distinguishes the major difference between the two rival concepts of curriculum. Basically, people in the academic-oriented camp hold the belief that direct teaching, if utilizing appropriately, can help young children to build up their abilities and learn. Therefore, it is the way of helping children to be ready for schooling. Although scholars in early childhood education support the play-oriented curriculum as one of important criteria in defining high quality curriculum for young children but not direct teaching, they are still struggling to convince people and parents to accept play-oriented curriculum. Each has its theoretical grounds from the knowledge base of child development.

### Conclusion

Governments in both Scotland and Taiwan accept that social progress for their own countries in an era of globalisation requires strong State participation in the upbringing and early education of children. It is no longer sufficient to leave such important matters to be the entire responsibility of the family. Furthermore, both governments accept that expansion of provision, the enhancement of quality and the integration of childcare and education are vital. Scotland has made impressive progress since 1997 in each of these fields but has stopped short of robust pursuit of integration, particularly the promotion of a single childcare profession. It seems that integration of care and education is achievable at both the political and bureaucratic levels but inordinately difficult at the professional level.

Taiwan, on the other hand, recognises that social reform to help those who are less fortunate is a priority. If Cohen *et al* regard Scotland as representing a typical Liberal Welfare ideology, then Taiwan is struggling with an emergent Liberal ideology.

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