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## Children's services in Denmark : A contextual analysis and critique

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**CHILDREN'S SERVICES IN DENMARK:  
A CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE**

By

Teresa Attracta Harms

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Award of

Master of Education  
in the Department of Early Childhood Studies  
Edith Cowan University

Date of Submission: 18 April 1997

## ABSTRACT

The late 1990s in Australia have seen major stresses in State and Federal systems of early years provision and have highlighted the need to develop an integrated approach to early years policy and provision to meet better the changing needs of Australian families. As an experienced Australian practitioner in the early years, the researcher decided to explore another country's approach to early childhood provision and to contextualise her Australian experience from a fresh perspective. In Kandel's (1933, 1955) terms, this is a classic area study rather than one which seeks merely to compare and contrast.

This study, conducted in Denmark over a period of 12 months, describes and analyses the Danish approach to early years provision - a country internationally renowned for its advanced social and family policy and integrated, comprehensive and high quality children's services. The ecological approach developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) coupled with comparative education theory (Bereday, 1964; Kandel, 1933, 1955) underpin the study, which registers and reflects on the power of cultural identity, history and philosophy. These factors clearly affect the prevailing attitudes about children and the role of society in their care and are identified as integral to understanding a particular nation's approach to children's services. Observations are made and warnings sounded regarding visitor's perspectives of systems of provision in foreign countries or in attempting simplistically to import the practices of one country to another.

Critical issues for the discourse appear to be: Whose interests are served by early childhood services and who are the real beneficiaries? The researcher proposes that all people involved and interested in the welfare of young children re-analyse the role of government in society and establish consensus on the respective responsibilities of family and state in regard to children.

## DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- (i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
- (ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or
- (iii) contain any defamatory material.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date 18 April 1997

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Young children, to whom this study is dedicated.

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## APPENDIX A

## INTRODUCTION

Serendipity can be described as “the faculty of making happy and unexpected discoveries by accident” (Oxford Dictionary, 1964). Although the researcher’s opportunity to live and study in a foreign country was no accident, the experience paved the way for an unexpectedly satisfying and interesting in-depth, “on-site” exploration of the care and education system in Denmark, a country internationally renowned for its advanced social and family policy and comprehensive early childhood services.

### Background

Early childhood carers and educators in Australia are experiencing the impact of profound social and cultural change. Family structures and work patterns are changing, with a dramatic increase in the number of women in paid employment and a national imperative to build a highly skilled and adaptable workforce to meet the social and economic challenges of the 21st century.

A great deal of attention has been focused on secondary and post-secondary education and vocational training. The Finn Review (Australian Education Council (AEC), 1991) and Mayer Report (AEC, 1992) both acknowledge that functional literacy and numeracy, problem-solving, self-confidence and commitment to the workplace are crucial for the Australian economy to remain competitive. Because the foundations of these skills and competencies are laid in the early childhood years and are strengthened through participation in quality early childhood programs and consolidated in the early years of schooling, early childhood education has also come under scrutiny for reform (National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET), 1992a, 1992b; Gifford, 1993; Jackson, 1993; Flear & Waniganayake, 1994; Royal Society for the Encouragement of the Arts (RSA), Manufactures and Commerce, 1994).

The care sector has not escaped the winds of change. These agendas and the rapid growth in child care services prompted federal legislation to assure the quality of child care services in Australia (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 1993).

Transformations in Australian society have signalled an urgent need for increased quality and provision in child care services (Australian Early Childhood Association, 1992; Commonwealth Department of Health, Housing and Community Services, 1992; Greenblat & Ochilree, 1993). Historically, children's services have been driven by welfare objectives, but in recent years, new agendas have emerged. Pettit and Wangmann (1996) believe that there are four factors that have led to increased demand for and growth of children's services in Australia; (a) the steadily increasing workforce participation of women, (b) economic and professional support for families in their parenting and personal pursuits, (c) a recognition that children need stimulation to support their development, and (d) economic agendas. During the 1990s practitioners, researchers and policy-makers, with increasing conviction, are viewing child care as a service for children, their families and society in general (Wangmann, 1995).

Further attention to issues of early childhood service provision resulted in an inquiry into early childhood education. The Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee (SEETRC) report *Childhood Matters* notes that the care and education sectors have arrived at a "professional crossroads" and that the carefully preserved distinctions between these sectors are diminishing as more integrated services are delivering "educative care" to young children and their families (SEETRC, 1996, p. 1). Two factors underpin this trend. The first is the rapid growth of child care and the attendant calls for quality improvement regarding staffing, facilities and social and educational programmes. The second factor is :

the confirmation, through systematic research across a range of disciplines, of the crucial importance of a child's earliest years, and the unequivocal

findings that investment in quality education and care during early childhood reaps significant long term benefits for children, their families and the community. (SEETRC, 1996, p. 1)

Early years care and education provision in different countries shows wide variation in diversity, access, quality, affordability and patterns of usage (Gifford, 1993; Greenblat & Ochiltree, 1993; Ochiltree, 1994; RSA, 1994; Wangmann, 1994, 1995; Ochiltree & Edgar, 1995). The preferred or identified competencies and outcomes for both care and education evolve from, or may be influenced by, the particular culture, subculture and political period in which they are under scrutiny (Ochiltree & Edgar, 1995). Of greater significance, however, is the wide variation in early years care and education objectives due to divergent socio-cultural, political and economic agendas and the consequent policy formation, interpretation and delivery.

As an experienced practitioner in the early childhood field in Australia, the researcher was keen to explore another country's approach to early years care and education. The focus of the study was originally naive, aiming to analyse relevant policy documents and "map" the provision of care and education services. Because of the significance of tradition and culture to the nature of early childhood services in Denmark, the study developed into an analysis of the apparent impact of history, coupled with socio-cultural influences, on early years care and education in the small, but culturally rich nation of Denmark.

### Significance

The late 1990s in Australia have seen major stresses occurring in Federal and State systems of early childhood service provision. Recognition of such stresses heralded a number of important reviews. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) *Discussion Paper on a Proposed National Framework for Children's Services* states

that “changing arrangements to encourage linkages between preschool and child care is one of the most important issues in the provision of services for children under school age” (COAG, 1995, p. 19). More recently, the SEETRC report *Childhood Matters* aims, as part of its terms of reference, to:

examine recent notable early childhood education initiatives in Australia and OECD countries and report on the implications for, or desirable changes to, Commonwealth policies and priorities in education and child support.  
(SEETRC, 1996, p. iv)

The Report also addresses concerns which have arisen from dramatic changes to policy and funding of early childhood services, particularly child care:

These changes have thrown into relief important questions about the development of children, and how families should be supported in their vital role of nurturing and guiding children through those critical years between birth and around the age of eight. (SEETRC, 1996, p. 1)

The observation, analysis and evaluation of children’s services in other countries is a time-consuming, costly and complex process. The Commonwealth Government has acknowledged that there have been few Australian research initiatives that have provided useful or meaningful data to inform policy planning and development. As Cox (1996) bluntly states, “There is a need in the medium to short term to shift some perceptions of policy. We have put child care on the economic agenda and now we need to link this to the social agenda” (p. 85). Whilst acknowledging that the policy and provision of children’s services cannot be transplanted from one country to another, surveys of services in countries deemed to be advanced in their social and family policies can result in clearer lenses through which to view, critique and re-shape children’s services in Australia. This study, conducted in Denmark, aims to provide

such a picture from one of the Scandinavian countries cited frequently for comprehensive, high quality, integrated services for children and their families. Particular attention to the social and cultural dimensions of Danish early childhood services may help reveal policy features of Australian early childhood services which are in contrast or have never been contested.

### Investigating Other Systems: Comparative Education Theory

Kandel (1955) believes that each nation seeks, through education, to mould the character of its people and by doing so reveals its political, social, economic and cultural aims. Goodings and Lauwerys (1969) observe that “always the mirror of the society which sustains it, education will be one of the first agencies called upon to mould the minds of men into a new image” (p. 77). Bereday (1964) uses a similar metaphor, describing education as a “mirror held against the face of a people” adding that, despite nations’ attempts to present impressive facades, “how they take care of their children tells unerringly who they are” (p. 5). Although his observations were made over 30 years ago, they still hold true today. By investigating and seeking to understand the psyche of another nation, one may come to gain a deeper understanding of one’s own culture and what it stands for.

The first question arising from a study investigating the Danish approach to early years care and education is: What is the validity and significance of investigating Danish provision and how will it add to knowledge in Australia? How will the reader be enlightened by the data and what will its impact be on the Australian system? Kandel (1955) believes that the comparative study of education systems can broaden the approach to and understanding of one’s own education system and so make a contribution to the philosophy of education. Bereday (1964) concurs, suggesting that the primary justification for comparative education is intellectual and that far from being merely esoteric, comparative studies have potential for practical application by



contributing to the fields of pedagogy and the social sciences. Comparative studies not only satisfy one's curiosity about people from other cultures, but invite reflection and self-knowledge.

Nevertheless, a caution needs to be entered. As Bereday (1964) plainly states, "Educational facts are deeply enmeshed in a matrix of other social circumstances [and] cannot be compared without a careful accounting for the total situation" (p. ix).

Descriptive analyses of national education systems can be useful provided they are accurate and give some insight into the forces that give them meaning. Although these studies may provide the data for comparative education, they are not, in Kandel's (1955) opinion, entitled to be called by that name.

Kandel (1933) continues this line of argument, observing that despite the volume of literature on international education, the study of foreign systems of education has not assumed a significant place in the study of education and suggests several reasons for this, which have relevance today. One reason is that many accounts have been mere descriptions of administration, organisation and practices which, although interesting, are not directly applicable or transferable from one country to another. Secondly, many studies have been conducted wholly from an education standpoint and lack any reasoned analysis of what overarching values these systems stand for or represent.

Sadler (1900, cited in Hans, 1949) in his famous address *How Far Can We Learn Anything of Practical Value from the Study of Foreign Systems of Education?* offers some insight into the complexities of studying foreign cultures. He speaks of intangible, impalpable spiritual forces that underpin a nation's system of education:

In studying foreign systems of education we should not forget that the things outside the schools matter even more than the things inside the schools, and govern and interpret the things inside. We cannot wander at

pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden, and pick off a flower from one bush and some leaves from another, and then expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant. A national system of education is a living thing, the outcome of forgotten struggles and difficulties and 'of battles long ago'. It has in it some of the secret workings of national life. (Sadler, 1900 in Hans, 1949, p. 3)

There have been many failed attempts to “transfer” educational systems from one country to another. This is not to say that nations cannot be inspired by each other, or that a cross-fertilisation of ideas may not occur. The Danish study could be considered as an area study, a logical, rigorous and methodologically sound foundation for a later comparative study. Bereday (1964) believes that an area study is the only way a comparative researcher can attain the required breadth of perception. Thus, the present study developed with Kandel (1933, 1955) and Bereday's (1964) insights in mind.

### Researching in a New Cultural Context

There are diverse challenges associated with conducting research in a foreign country, especially where English is not the indigenous language. Although the researcher may be very familiar with the topic in her own country, this does not preclude the possibility of misconstruing information gleaned from both literature reviews and interviews with experts in the field under investigation.

One of the first revelations the researcher experienced in Denmark was regarding interpretation of the literature. Although an extensive literature review had been conducted prior to arrival Denmark, the researcher soon discovered that the review had clearly developed from an Australian perspective, or more specifically, a “centralist viewpoint”. This led to the preparation of a topical, but unworkable research proposal.

The Danish care and education “system” is not a system in the Australian sense of the word (centralised), but is decentralised in its approach, both philosophically and in practice.

Bereday (1964) believes that, somewhat paradoxically, data are more difficult to collect in centralised than in decentralised systems. Data collection in the latter may appear haphazard due to their diverse sources which need to be “welded together into uneasy generalizations” (Bereday, 1964, p. 162). However, this may pose less of a problem than the inherent dangers of “politically correct” and controlled releases of information issuing from educational bureaucracies with centralised agendas and powers. In the latter, the gap between rhetoric and reality may be significant which, in Bereday’s (1964) opinion, maintains the “ethnographic plague: . . . the comparative educator must ask what light can history, philosophy, sociology, economics, and so forth shed on the educational information assembled” (p. 162).

### Developing a New Professional Network

Developing a new network of professional contacts in a foreign country can be challenging. Despite many months of preparation before arrival in Denmark, the researcher found it difficult to find the appropriate people to contact. It can be a simple question of not knowing who to contact and where they can be found, or even what questions to ask. Danish researchers, like their Australian counterparts, may work from a set of tacit assumptions about their field of expertise. The importance of accurate and thorough background information cannot be underestimated.

Some of the most helpful and rewarding experiences the researcher had in Denmark were the numerous visits to early childhood centres and various discussions with professionals in the field. It was necessary, as well as insightful, to speak with researchers from diverse disciplines such as psychology, sociology and history, as well

as education. Of particular significance was the need to undertake extensive background reading in the area of Danish history and culture. The unequivocal linking of culture and education in Denmark necessitated this broadening of viewpoint and perspective, and was an important source of information.

Bereday (1964) believes that every comparative researcher must have a working knowledge of one or more disciplines other than education so that sociology, history, economics, psychology or other areas may be applied to the field of interest:

By exposing the data to a rosette of different disciplines one emerges with an evaluation of not only educational happenings but also of their causes and connections. It is the *why* rather than the *how* that permits one to embark on direct comparison. (Bereday, 1964, p. 21)

The months of intensive reading and discussion with professionals in the field enabled the researcher to broaden her outlook and develop ways of seeing and hearing which were more attuned to the Danish perspective. Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes this process as an “ecological transition [which occurs] whenever a person’s position in the ecological environment is altered as the result of a change in role, setting, or both” (p. 26). Jensen (1994) when describing a joint research venture between schools and researchers in Denmark, England and Russia observes that “the dialogue is the inspiration” (p. 141). The researcher’s discussions and conversations with researchers from diverse disciplines led to reflection on Western Australian settings and critical re-examination of basic beliefs and assumptions about early years care and education services. It was essential to make tacit understandings about teaching and learning explicit for the benefit of the researcher and the Danish network.

## Minimising Ethnocentrism

Bereday (1964) believes that when preparing for an area study, it is essential to consider the following three factors; (a) a knowledge of the language of the area under study, (b) residence in the area under investigation, and (c) continuous vigilance regarding cultural and personal biases. As Bereday (1964) bluntly states, “failure to comply with these prerequisites cuts one off from the true nature of the educational system under observation as effectively as blindness” (1964, p. 10).

A major challenge the researcher faced in Denmark was the language. This was in no way related to the Danes' facility with English (it is mostly flawless), but to the lack of recent, topical literature in English, particularly on issues currently under debate.

Reisby (1991) observes that Danish research is both “in front” and “behind” internationally. The majority of Danish research, until recently, has been published in Danish which has, in Reisby's (1991) opinion, narrowed its audience and limited its penetration power. On the positive side, Danish educational research is in front in that it is characterised by practice-proximity and embraces many innovative topics and issues valued in international circles (Reisby, 1991). The researcher set out to learn the Danish language, but the “university level” vocabulary required for in-depth reading and interviewing is difficult to acquire in the short term.

Bereday (1964) believes that knowledge (at least rudimentary) of the language, travel and residence abroad are the keys to selecting reliable texts and adopting the most appropriate methodology. Such factors can help keep in check unconscious biases and prejudices: comparative researchers must choose whether they will take a dispassionate or committed stance when evaluating evidence from other countries and if taking the latter approach, “must state at the outset of their work what ideology or viewpoint they espouse” (p. 11). Bereday (1964) cautions that the technique used for data collection is the most formidable obstacle of the discipline due to the ethnocentrism. Nevertheless,

scholarly, unbiased information with no “cover-ups” may be difficult to access. Likewise, translations of official government documents can tend to be “sanitised” both culturally and linguistically, presumably for easier consumption. The researcher endeavoured to adopt an impartial stance when evaluating evidence from printed material and discussions with professionals.

### Respecting Cultural Norms and Practices

Research progress in Denmark can be slow. The ritual of “getting to know each other” is widespread in many Danish institutions. This involves sharing many cups of coffee and talking about general matters that are not necessarily directly related to the topic under investigation. It is not possible (or polite) to “short-cut” this process. The Danes, as a rule, do not possess a great urgency to “get things done” but encourage philosophical discussion and debate before the research issues are addressed.

### Linking Theory and Practice in a New Cultural Context

The researcher spent many hours reflecting on what was learned during her stay in Denmark. How might the researcher share observations and experiences in a meaningful way with colleagues in Australia? What insights can be offered to newly established colleagues in Denmark? Henriksen (1994) when writing about exporting theory and practice notes that:

Practice can be compared to a somewhat obscure field, on which some light is being cast by the development of theories and research . . . the light changes colours depending on the time and place. This image should not be understood in the sense that the light will ever succeed in illuminating the whole field . . . but rather that we will become a little wiser each time the field is illuminated. (p. 131)

The researcher has come to understand that it is not only important to make the theory-practice connection, but also to have some understanding of the culture of the country in which the theory is embedded. Madsen (1994) suggests that an effective approach to educational research is to use a cultural-anthropological approach which enables educational development and social and cultural conditions to be linked, however tenuously. She elaborates by describing “learning as appropriation,” the process through which individuals are integrated into a certain culture and during which the “know how” and “know what” of the culture are appropriated (Madsen, 1994, p. 94). By defining and describing these, it is possible for researchers to understand a little about the backbone of the everyday life of a particular culture. This is a prerequisite for the next stage in the process of understanding, “learning as transcendent” [*sic*] where the purpose is to reflect critically on the “taken-for-grantedness” of a particular culture and discover the “know why” (Madsen, 1994, p. 94).

### The Importance of Being “in Context”

Another observation the researcher made was that there is no substitute for *being* in the environment one is investigating, whether at the macro, meso or micro levels. The “reality,” or the researcher’s current perception of reality, may change as a result of being immersed in the environment, rather than viewing it from afar. It is impossible for authentic observation and reflection to take place in a cultural vacuum. The challenge for the researcher is to move beyond Madsen’s (1994) “know how” and “know what” to the exciting dimension of the “know why”. Such a journey is the essence of this thesis.

### Purpose

The main purpose of the study is to investigate, describe and analyse early years care and education in Denmark, a country considered to be exemplary in the field (Gifford,

1993; Ochiltree, 1994; RSA, 1994; Wangmann, 1994, 1995; Ochiltree & Edgar, 1995). The study takes an ecological approach in its description and critique of the historical, socio-cultural, political and economic agendas shaping both policy and provision. The Danish profile could provide impetus for identifying the unique characteristics of early years care and education in both countries as a background for informed and critical self-analysis and for informing current practices in Western Australia. Gifford (1992) refers to *Zeitgeist*, the notion that all ideas “have their time” and are strongly influenced by the thinking of other nations. Although the experience of one country cannot be transferred literally to another, lessons can be gleaned from the history and ethos of children's services policy and provision in other countries. The study does not seek to compare Danish and Australian systems *per se*.

In addition to presenting a comprehensive overview of early years care and education in Denmark, the study identifies issues and raises alternative viewpoints for ongoing debate and discussion in Australia. A series of key findings are discussed and analysed and areas for future research and development identified.

### The Australian Context: A Vignette

The provision of early years care and education in Australia suffers from the lack of a comprehensive and integrated policy for children's services, despite a number of centralised initiatives. Policies have been offshoots of the prevailing welfare, health, education, employment, equity and economic agendas (Gifford, 1992; Kagan, 1993; Wangmann, 1995). Responses from practitioners in the early childhood field to The Schools Council discussion paper, *The Early Years of Schooling*, indicated frustration with the apparent unquestioning acceptance by many professionals of the widening gulf between schooling and other early childhood services (NBEET, 1991). Today, the gulf between education and care is acknowledged as an equally disturbing trend (NBEET, 1992c; Gifford, 1993; RSA, 1994; Wangmann, 1994, 1995; Ochiltree &



Edgar, 1995). There is consensus that it is no longer appropriate to separate care and education and there is growing support for the creation of “edu-care” programmes for children aged from three to eight.

### The Great Divide

Wangmann (1995) has described the historical position between the care and education sectors as “the great divide”. Some services are considered (or have been until recently) to be essentially for child care, while others are primarily for child education. This configuration is an historical product of the actual sources of funding for the different service types from which general community perceptions about their purposes have evolved. Characterisation of early childhood services as primarily for care or education “does not reflect current knowledge about the needs of children in settings outside the home” (Wangmann, 1995, p. 48). Further, existing policy and administrative structures do not support the notion of a seamless, co-ordinated provision and “impede the kind of service delivery, financial support and agency cooperation which are being affirmed by both research and the actual requirements of families” (SEETRC, 1996, p. 1).

The early childhood services of today were designed and established in the socio-economic and political context of earlier decades. In order for services to meet adequately the needs of today's families, provision must be made for both care and education (Gifford, 1993). Without an analysis of whose interests are being served (is it the child's?), those involved with the early care and education of children may be in danger of perpetuating a somewhat dysfunctional socio-political agenda or find themselves implementing policy changes which fail to meet the needs of those they serve.

One of the major problems for Australian early childhood providers in the current social and political climate is the lack of a cohesive or integrated approach between Commonwealth and State Governments, education, health and welfare authorities, and training institutions. Early childhood programmes, especially those from the care sector, are virtually invisible in the large volume of reports about education. Those reports which suggest remedies often fail to consider the impact of change on the early childhood sector, or assume that early childhood programmes will fit neatly into models developed for primary schools (NBEET, 1992b). The care sector has a large volume of literature on the benefits of quality child care programs, but likewise, rarely mentions early education programs in its dialogue on children's services.

The lack of advocacy for the rights and needs of young children and of early childhood carers and educators, the absence of a united voice to call for modifications to proposals for change and the lack of power wielded by those expert in the field, have serious implications for the future of early care and education (NBEET, 1992b). Progress has been hindered further by insufficient data about early childhood service provision due to the lack of a common nomenclature for the field.

The challenge in Australia is for government, the care and education sectors and the wider community to preserve their existing strengths and make improvements that will enable them to meet the changing needs of families into the next century (Wangmann, 1995). To do this well, surveys of other systems can be used to scrutinise local policies and help clarify priorities.

### Policy and Delivery Issues

A significant contributing factor to the lack of resolution of both policy and delivery issues is that the various facets of child care have not been delineated and examined as a whole (Gifford, 1992, 1993; Jackson, 1993; Fler & Waniganayake, 1994;

Wangmann, 1994, 1995). A similar dilemma faces the education sector. To integrate diverse service types, current care and education policies need to be scrutinised to detect and correct inequities, inefficiencies and duplications. Kagan (1991, cited in Wangmann, 1995) suggests the convergence of "an appropriate knowledge base, the political will and a social strategy" in order to develop and implement public policy (p. 48).

Wangmann (1995) believes that although the early childhood field in Australia has a solid knowledge base, it lacks "a coherent social strategy that has general political agreement" and that unless a new strategy is developed, the fragmentation that has characterised the "patchwork approach" to the provision of early years care and education in this country will continue (p. 49). Wangmann (1995) continues this argument by suggesting that the development of an effective strategy will necessitate agreement on the philosophical foundations of service provision and a coherent answer to the question "What are early childhood services for?" The response to this question will have far-reaching implications for general policy directions, funding, and the pre-service and ongoing professional development of staff working in the early years care and education field.

Early years care and education is underpinned by a set of values and assumptions which shape its character. These may include: (a) the prevailing views about who is responsible for early years care and education, (b) what types of programmes should be provided, (c) equity and access issues, and (d) the nature of the early years care and education workforce (Gifford, 1992). These values and assumptions do not necessarily emerge from sound theories of child growth and development, but are filtered and motivated by political expediency. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) *A Discussion Paper for a Proposed National Framework for Children's Services in Australia* (1995) addressing the future of children's services typifies the lack of attention given to analysing the values and assumptions contained within such

documents. The recommendations for a more integrated approach to early years care and education provision contained in *Childhood Matters* (SEETRC, 1996) may not be implemented, due to a change of government, at least in their original (and more wide-reaching) form. The dominating two-party system of politics and government in Australia does not always serve to sharpen or clarify debate about the needs of children and families, or the role of government in supporting family groups.

Gifford (1992) observes that debates about early years care and education often fail because the various stakeholders fail to acknowledge and recognise their differing assumptions and value positions which in turn restricts consideration of other or different perspectives. This “professional territorialism” hinders the streamlining of current policy and provision which could lead to the development of integrated care and education policy for children’s services. Crowley, Chair of the SEETRC, notes that it is important to ascertain the degree of priority Australia is prepared to give to children - its youngest citizens:

Nothing less than a national vision of the early childhood years, and a clear determination by governments to stay with that vision for the long haul, will provide the conditions necessary for our children, their families and hence our community, to flourish. (SEETRC, 1996, p. 2)

### Research Questions

The research proposed two dimensions. On one level, questions related to provision, namely:

1. What early years care and education services are available in Denmark?
2. Who provides these services?
3. Who uses these services?

A second level question related to policy:

What statements do Danish Government policies and reports make about early years care and education provision?

Early into the study, it became clear that the original questions would yield relatively superficial information and would leave the reader without any sense of the Danish mentality or approach to early years care and education. The researcher discovered that the most fundamental matters of history, culture and tradition needed to be broached before any meaningful description, analysis and discussion could be attempted. Kandel (1933) suggests that a range of questions need to be considered when conducting an area study. The fundamental direction of such questions is towards understanding *why* early years care and education services manifest in the way that they do. Hence, the study sought to explain Danish early years services by moving beyond *what* and *how* to matters of *why* (Madsen, 1994).

### Definition of Terms

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), in line with agreed international definitions, defines *early childhood* as the period from birth to eight years (NAEYC, in Decker & Decker, 1988). In this study, the pre-compulsory years of care and education under investigation are defined as those occurring before children are legally required to attend school (seven years in Denmark).

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The importance of the contextual influences on human development has been recognised by many researchers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Garbarino & Abramowitz,

1992; Harms & Clifford, 1993; Ochlilree & Edgar, 1995). This study takes the ecological approach developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979). Ochlilree and Edgar (1995) describe the ecological approach as "placing the child inside a series of concentric and overlapping circles of environmental influences, so that the simplistic notions of one 'cause' for one 'effect' " are avoided (p. 20).

Any discussion of child development and early years care and education should consider the context or setting in which it occurs. It is not only the immediate "micro-level" influences of family, local community and school that affect the developing child. The less immediate "macro-level" forces of the prevailing laws and social and cultural attitudes that affect the institutions in which children can be found also have a powerful influence (Bronfenbrenner, 1979 ; Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992; Harms & Clifford, 1993). Garbarino and Abramowitz (1992) describe the combined influence of forces working in a setting to shape the behaviour and development of individuals in that setting as "environmental press" (p. 12). The authors note that the child's environment not only has specific physical dimensions, but also multiple cultural facets and social levels forming a complex web of forces.

Any investigation of early years care and education policy and provision must therefore be preceded by a thorough description and analysis of the wider socio-economic, political and cultural context in which they are developed. Australia approaches children's services from a centralist viewpoint, with little co-ordination between the various government departments and agencies dealing with children (COAG, 1995, SEETKC, 1996). Denmark, by contrast, takes a decentralised approach, where early years care and education policy and provision is not a discrete area, but is inexorably linked with social and family policy.

## Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Framework

Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes a set of “nested structures” or systems which allow the researcher to look “beyond, within and across” to see how these systems interlock and interact (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992). Harms and Clifford (1993) have adapted a theoretical framework for the study of early childhood care and education settings based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model. The four “spheres of influence” are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. See Appendix A for a diagrammatic representation of the four spheres of influence.

### Microsystem

The microsystem is the most immediate environment surrounding the developing child. It is the place he inhabits, the people she lives with and the things they do together - the “psychological realities of the actual settings in which the individual experiences and creates day-to-day reality” (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992, p. 24). In an educational context, this may include: (a) the group of children in the particular setting; (b) the caregivers or teachers responsible for the individual or group; (c) the administration of the setting, including personnel, programme and management; and (d) specific group structures, processes and interactions (Harms & Clifford, 1993).

### Mesosystem

Mesosystems could be described as relationships *between* the various microsystems in which the child is developing. Although the mesosystem contains influences that are outside the microsystem, it may have a significant, direct impact on the child. In an educational context these influences include; (a) quality improvement efforts, (b) regulation, (c) sponsorship, (d) funding, (e) family responsibility, and (f) staff training and support (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992; Harms & Clifford, 1993). Garbarino

and Abramowitz (1992) suggest that the richness of the child's mesosystem can be measured by the number and quality of the interactions between settings. Further, the stronger and more complementary these links are, the more powerfully the resulting mesosystem will influence the developing child.

### Exosystem

Exosystems are influences that affect or have power over the developing child, but which the child cannot directly influence. These forces include the; (a) local community, (b) local economic climate, (c) education system, (d) government, and (e) parents' workplace and other centres of power that are in a position to make decisions that affect the daily life of the child. These forces may influence the child through their impact on the teacher or caregiver responsible for the child and also on the physical environment of the immediate care and education system or systems (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992; Harms & Clifford, 1993). Garbarino and Abramowitz (1992) believe that exosystem risk can occur when the child lacks effective advocates in decision-making bodies and that this is largely a political matter because "who gets what" is usually the fundamental political issue.

### Macrosystem

The macrosystem is the broad ideological and institutional pattern in a particular culture or sub-culture within which the meso and exosystems lie. Garbarino and Abramowitz (1992) suggest that macrosystems could be described as "blueprints" for the ecology of human development, because they reflect the culture's shared assumptions about "how things should be done" or "the general organization of the world as it is and *as it might be*" (p. 27).



Identifying a macrosystem is more than naming a particular group (for example the Danish people) and is more akin to labelling a cultural system (such as democratic or post-modern). Moreover, comparisons between macrosystems must be based on some common scales of measurement, such as “collective versus individual orientation”. Garbarino and Abramowitz (1992) note that this type of systematic analysis is more complex and necessitates the identification of variables rather than the creation of simple labels. Garbarino and Abramowitz (1992) believe that “any social pattern or societal event that impoverishes the ability and willingness of adults to care for children and children to learn from adults” is macrosystem risk, while opportunity is “a social pattern or event that encourages and supports parents and children” (p. 28).

### Strengths of the Ecological Approach

The ecological approach can contribute to our understanding of early years care and education by encouraging dialogue between researchers from different cultures. Garbarino and Abramowitz (1992) believe that the ecological approach encourages the “critical mode” as well as the subjective side of experience (phenomenology), which is a major theme in European work. By seeking to integrate an interest in the “objective,” such as in Australia and the United States, with the European tendency towards the “subjective,” a more valid conception of “meaning” can emerge. This approach provides a vehicle for fruitful dialogue between sociologists, developmental psychologists and educationalists.

Garbarino and Abramowitz (1992) believe that an additional benefit to taking an ecological approach is that it enables the development of a new model or paradigm:

The experimental ecology of human development is not a ‘theory’ . . . [but] a point of view or definition of a field of inquiry that aids in question formulation. Its content is that of other disciplines. . . Its principal virtue is

in its potential for eclecticism. In fact, it requires such an eclecticism - or 'interdisciplinary focus' - because it focuses on inter-system relationships.  
( p. 15)

The disciplines contributing to the dialogue on macrosystem issues are anthropology, sociology, philosophy, political science and economics. These should expand to include education. Taking an inter-disciplinary approach - rather than the prevalent (and narrow) intra-system approach - enables subsequent critical analysis of policy issues, research findings, socio-historical events and intervention strategies and provides a platform for cross-cultural research in order to observe, document and analyse the effects of macrosystem variation (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992).

#### The Ecological Approach and Early Years Care and Education Policy

The ecological approach described above provides the theoretical framework for a description and analysis of early years care and education policy and provision in Denmark. In the Danish context, the ecological approach enables the researcher to investigate the way Danish society functions in relation to the upbringing of their children who, in turn, will take their place within that society. Children's lives reflect and provide a snapshot of culture and society at a given point in time (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992).

The analysis will focus on the exosystem and macrosystem levels to enable the reader to understand better the historical, cultural, socio-political and economic forces influencing and impacting on early years care and education policy and provision in Denmark. It is essential to understand the impact of these broader forces before any meaningful analysis of mesosystem and microsystem forces can be conducted. This is particularly true when conducting research in a foreign culture, where it is important to

identify and acknowledge the ideological differences and meanings across cultural contexts.

## METHOD

This study takes an ecological approach described by Bronfenbrenner (1979). The data were collected via: (a) extensive literature reviews, both in Australia and Denmark; (b) government reports; (c) research institute reports and discussion papers; (d) interviews with personnel from two Danish kommuner; (e) observations in Danish børnehaver; (f) discussions with pædagoger in vuggestuer and børnehaver; and (g) ongoing discussion with researchers from research institutes and universities.

The researcher has been mindful of the dangers of ethnocentrism and has adhered to the guidelines for “comparative method” as described by Bereday (1964) and Kandel (1933, 1955). Particular care was taken with the data collection and the discussion. The researcher checked regularly with Danish researchers and practitioners to ensure that the data were accurate and expressed faithfully the Danish context and the early childhood services in place.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND PRESENTATION OF CONTEXT

### The Danish Context

Denmark’s geography, history, politics and economy are important aspects to consider when describing and investigating care and education policy and practice. Of particular significance is the Danish “outlook” and the attitudes described in *Jantelov*, as they underpin almost every aspect of Danish life.

It has been said that Denmark “is a cat that always lands on its feet” (Lauring, 1960, p. 259). According to many Danish historians, throughout its thousand year history, Denmark has remained relatively unscathed, despite its involvement in the political strife of Europe. And although Denmark has been obliged to cede vast territories to both Germany and Sweden, it has never completely surrendered to foreign dominion:

With every inch of her soil marked indelibly by the lives, conditions and history of her inhabitants . . . she has always managed to pull through - Jutland and the five hundred green islands, Denmark, the Land of the Danes. (Lauring, 1960, p. 260)

### Geography

Denmark is a small country situated in Northern Europe between the North Sea and the Baltic. The country’s total area covers almost 44,000 square kilometres, with the Jutland Peninsula connected to the Continent, and the rest of the country made up of over 400 islands. The two largest islands are Zealand, where Copenhagen is located, and Funen. The kingdom of Denmark also includes the world’s largest island, Greenland and the Faroe Islands, also in the North Atlantic.

### The People

The total population of Denmark is just over 5.2 million, distributed over 2.4 million households. Around 4% of the population come from countries other than Denmark, half of whom come from the other Nordic or European countries. Until very recently, Denmark has been a homogeneous society, with Danes speaking the same language and sharing the same religious confession within a common culture with few regional conflicts. To date, the Danes have been fortunate to experience few social or political

Developments in Denmark that have attracted much interest in other countries include the Folk High School movement founded by N.F.S. Grundtvig and Christen Kold, the co-operative movement and the structure and processes involved in establishing and maintaining a welfare state. Quite apart from the material prosperity enjoyed by the Danes, their “quality of life” has also been widely praised. Denmark’s democratic and political institutions appear to function smoothly and her cultural activities are rich and varied (Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1994b).

### History

Denmark has been a sovereign kingdom for over a thousand years. On 5 June, 1849, Frederik VII signed the *Grundlov* (Constitutional Act) of the Danish realm which brought to a close 189 years of absolutism and ushered in Denmark’s first constitutional monarchy. By all reports, the transition was undramatic and gradual (Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1994a).

Frederik VII’s motto for the Grundlov was “my people’s love, my strength” and with it came the guarantees of freedom of religion, freedom of speech, association and assembly, and compulsory education. Although the Act has been amended and updated twice since 1849 (in 1915 and 1953), the right of personal liberty has remained integral to the Grundlov:

Personal liberty shall be inviolable. No Danish subject shall, in any manner whatsoever, be deprived of his liberty because of his political or religious convictions or because of his descent . . . Any person shall be at liberty to publish his ideas in print, in writing, and in speech, subject to his being held responsible in a court of law. Censorship and other preventive measures shall never again be introduced.

(The Constitutional Act, 6 June 1953, Part VIII, § 71. (1) & § 77.)

In 1915, the second June Constitution was adopted which, among other things, granted proportional representation and the right of servants and women to vote. At the election held in 1918, women were elected to the *Folketing* (Danish Parliament) for the first time.

### Politics

Historically, the Social Democratic Party has generally made up the majority in the Folketing. Prime Minister Poul Schlüter led a four party coalition, the so-called “four leaf clover government” (Conservative, Liberal Democrat, Centre Democrat and Christian People’s parties) from September 1982 to January 1993. Since then, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen (Social Democratic Party) has led coalition governments. The first was a majority government and, since September 1994, a minority government consisting of the Social Democratic Party, Social Liberal Party and the Centre Democrats (Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1994a, 1994b, 1995).

### Economy

Denmark has been a member of the European Community (now European Union) since 1973 and is considered to have one of the strongest economies in Europe. Denmark is one of only three member countries in the EU that has been able to comply with the strict membership conditions applying to the third phase of the economic and monetary union - a balanced state budget, low inflation and interest rates and a stable currency. Denmark is one of the wealthiest economies in the world per capita, currently standing at thirteenth (Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1994a, 1994b, 1995).

Factors that have remained intractable for the Danish government are the taxation burden, which remains at over 50% and unemployment, at the average European level

of 10%. The current government's economic policy is to achieve broad agreement on measures to balance the national budget, to reduce Denmark's foreign debt and to increase employment (Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1994a, 1994b).

### Income Tax

Personal income taxation in Denmark is one of the highest in the world, with the current base rate being 52.9%. All three levels of government - the *Stat* (central government), *amter* (counties) and *kommuner* (municipalities) - collect income tax. The Stat income tax rates are graduated, while local taxes are calculated proportionally. The collected taxes and duties are not earmarked for specific purposes, but are placed in a pool from which they are redistributed (Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1993).

Most taxes are levied by the *amter* (23.1%) and the *kommuner* (19.7%), the remainder being wealth and corporate tax (7.7%), labour market contributions (3.6%) and a voluntary church tax (Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1993, p. 5). The high taxation burden appears to encourage increasing numbers of Danes to enter the workforce in order to maintain the high standard of living they have come to enjoy (Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1993).

### Public Expenditure

The public sector's revenues come from income tax (61% of Stat and kommuner incomes in 1994), and taxes on the turnover of goods and services (value added, customs and duties taxes amounting to 31%). Sale and turnover taxes include a general charge of 25% on virtually all goods and services (Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1995).

Public sector expenditure in 1994 amounted to 594 billion DKK (Danish kroner) (approximately 150 billion AUD) of which 66 billion DKK (16.5 billion AUD) was interest on the national debt. General expenditure for this period was:

social security benefits (including child care)	46%
education and research	13%
business economic measures	10%
health	10%
defence	3%
cultural undertakings and the church	3%
housing subsidies	2%
judicial system and the police	2%

The remaining 11% was absorbed by general administration, contribution to the EU and aid to developing countries (Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1995, pp. 14-15).

### The Danish Outlook on Life

It is quite true what Philosophy says: that Life must be understood backwards. But that makes one forget the other saying: that it must be lived - forwards. The more one ponders this, the more it comes to mean that life in the temporal existence never becomes quite intelligible, precisely because at no moment can I find complete quiet to find the backward-looking position. (Søren Kierkegaard, 1843, in Rohde, 1960)

This quotation from Denmark's most famous philosopher sums up the Danish mentality rather well. The Danes have a great penchant for philosophising about all kinds of



things, particularly on matters they consider important, such as personal liberty, the uniqueness of the individual, creativity of thought and action and Danish language, philosophy and culture.

The Danes also place great importance on maintaining a healthy balance between work and leisure. They appear to take a relaxed approach to life's challenges, both at home and in the workplace. Palle Lauring, a well-known Danish historian and writer believes that Danes possess "a calm, congenial confidence (at times bordering on the reckless) . . . the belief that, in Denmark, things can never really go wrong" (1960, p. 259).

The word *Jantelov* (Jante's Law) comes up often in philosophical discussions about "what makes the Danes tick". Jante is a character from a novel entitled *A Refugee Crosses His Own Track* by the Danish author Aksel Sandemose. The story is about a young boy who, after a repressed youth, reflects on what he has learned from his suffering in the form of "laws". These laws could be described as the attitude one should adopt regarding one's place in the world. Several of the central tenets of *Jantelov* (translated from the Danish) are:

- You shall not believe that you are something.
- You shall not believe that you are wiser than us.
- You shall not pretend that you are better than us.
- You shall not believe that you are more important than us.
- You shall not believe that you are good at anything.
- You shall not believe that anyone cares for you.
- You shall not believe that you can teach us anything.

Although the average Dane may be unaware of the origin of *Jantelov*, the beliefs it espouses underpin almost every aspect of Danish life. Generally speaking, Danes shun

pretence of any kind such as conspicuous consumption or overt proclamations of personal status or achievement and say that they are proud of the egalitarian society in which they live.

The Danes appear to have contradictory attitudes regarding authority, adhering to strict regulation and control, yet exhibiting a certain “lawlessness” towards it. Many Danes are not overly reverent towards authority in the workplace, preferring to see all workers on the “same level”. This is particularly true in schools, where children address their teachers by their Christian name and are sometimes permitted to eat, drink and “do their own thing” in the classroom. Informality of dress is characteristic of almost all walks of life in Denmark, even in the business world and certainly in schools. On the other hand, there are complex and comprehensive (some would say invasive) government controls. Every Danish resident (including the researcher) is allocated a *Centrale Personregisternummer* (CPR number) which is a centrally registered identification number linking all legal aspects of the resident’s life. Without a CPR number residents are unable to attend school or university, take a job of any kind, join a library, open a bank account or use the comprehensive medical services.

It is widely believed that modern Danes consider themselves fortunate to live in a peaceful, stable Scandinavian democracy. In line with the mentality underpinning Jantelov, the Danish researchers Qvortrup and Christoffersen (1991) suggest that “our modesty, however, forbids us to believe that we inhabit the best of all countries; we would rather claim that it is not the very worst” (p. 7).

### Danish Educational Philosophy: An Historical Overview

Danes engage in regular and impassioned dialogue about educational theory and philosophy. Names that occur regularly in conversations are Grundtvig, Kold, Fröbel, Freire, Piaget, Foucault, Habermas and Kierkegaard, to mention a few. It is interesting

to note that three of the significant philosophers are Danish, all with a strong theological background and perspective.

### N.F.S. Grundtvig: A National Icon?

N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1832) is best known outside Denmark as the creator of the *Folkehøjskole* (Folk High School) movement. In Denmark, he has had a profound influence on various aspects of cultural life and the Danish cultural identity. Grundtvig studied theology and worked as clergyman, but was also an important historian, philosopher and poet (Rerup, 1993).

The philosophy and practice of education in Denmark has been influenced greatly by the work of Grundtvig (Bugge, 1993). It has been suggested that Grundtvig “managed to establish, almost single handedly, a radical alternative to the predominant way of looking at education in the nineteenth century” at least in Denmark (Bjerg, Callewaert, Elle, Mylov, Nissen & Silherbrandt, 1995, p. 31). Despite Grundtvig’s profound influence on Danish education, culture and tradition, surprisingly little of his work has been published in English.

Grundtvig believed that the starting point for any pedagogical discussion should be the individual, his needs and his chances of realising his full intellectual and emotional potential. As a natural progression from this position, Grundtvig spoke of *Skolen for Livet* (The school for Life). *Skolen for Livet* has inspired many Danish educationalists because it focuses on the process of learning as it unfolds as what matters most, not the product. In Grundtvig’s (1838) own words:

I maintain that if the school really is to be an educational institution for the benefit of life, it must first of all make neither education nor itself its goal but the requirements of life, and secondly it must take life as it really is and

only strive to shed light on and promote its usefulness. (in Jensen, 1984, p. 71)

Grundtvig's pragmatic approach to education encompasses three major themes: freedom and responsibility, interaction and cultural identity.

### Freedom and responsibility.

Grundtvig believed that "liberty is the element of the spirit" but that with this liberty comes a responsibility towards one's fellow man, a balance of emancipation and commitment:

I know from my own personal experience that it can be very difficult indeed . . . to be satisfied with the amount of freedom that leaves some freedom also to my neighbour. (in Bugge, 1993, p. 276)

This attitude towards freedom and responsibility has filtered through into Danish schools, kindergartens and day care centres. It has led to the notion of a "democratic" education, where parents, teachers and children are able (perhaps expected) to exert their own influence on the form and content of their education. There is a tradition in Denmark for teachers to exercise complete freedom of teaching methodology provided they can demonstrate their students are developing. Children are given a great deal of freedom (far more so than Australian students), but are expected to exercise the responsibility that accompanies this liberty.

### Interaction.

Grundtvig placed great emphasis on the *living* or *spoken word* as the most meaningful form of communication between people and as something that conveys our most vital

and fundamental experiences. The importance of *vekselvirkning* (interaction) plays a central role in Grundtvig's ideas about teaching and learning. Bugge (1993) suggests that the three adjectives "free, living and natural" express the quality of *vekselvirkning* well. These adjectives apply to the function of the interaction itself and the conditions under which it functions so that "supreme importance is attached to the actual function, the actual life it unfolds, not what all this might eventually lead to" (pp. 272-273). Further, education should begin with oral teaching by the experienced teacher but soon develop into an animated dialogue between teacher and students and between the students themselves (Bugge, 1993; Jensen, 1984; Rerup, 1993).

Grundtvig also emphasised the importance of appealing to the pupil's interests and diverting conversation from the abstract to the concrete and "useful" level. Despite being a learned man and a prolific writer, Grundtvig voiced considerable scepticism regarding the place of books in the school and believed that they should be kept "in their proper place" to be consulted "like good friends in reserve" (Bugge, 1993, p. 274).

### Cultural identity.

Another central tenet of Grundtvig's work was the concept of *folkelig*. As many translators of Grundtvig's writings have discovered, translating the meaning of the word *folkelig* is a difficult, if not impossible task. Bugge (1993) describes it as an adjective referring to the noun "folk" which means a "people" understood in its totality:

It is a term including all the inhabitants of a nation and the togetherness of this nation in history and in the present situation. The adjective 'folkelig' therefore means: pertaining to that people, and even more: expressing the identity of that people. Such expressions of identity are

to be found in the totality of its culture, but are concentrated in its history, its myths and its lasting values. (pp. 278-279)

Although Grundtvig's work has been associated largely with the folkehøjskole and friskole movement (promoting *folkeoplysning* or popular enlightenment), it has nevertheless permeated all levels of education. Features that have been adopted and are highly valued by early childhood workers are the value of interaction via the spoken word, learning for life and the importance of integrating culture with all aspects of life.

### Decentralisation in Denmark

Denmark has three tiers of government. The *Stat* (State) can be likened to the Commonwealth government in Australia, although it could be argued that the Stat's powers are less pervasive than those of the Commonwealth. The second tier is the *amt* (county council) which is similar to, although smaller than, the Australian State level. The third tier is the *kommune* (municipal council), which is a similar level to the local shire council in an Australian context. The Danish *kommune*, however, has much greater power and more diverse responsibilities than its Australian counterpart.

During the 1980s, the overriding goal of social policies in Denmark was seen as "normalisation through integration in the family, the social network, the local community and the workplace" (Koch-Nielsen & Ploug, 1993, p. 28). This process aimed at involving the local community (decentralisation) and devising new initiatives for the social sector, such as deinstitutionalisation and deprofessionalisation. Koch-Nielsen and Ploug (1993) suggest that the budgetary and legitimacy crisis of the welfare state experienced in Denmark (and other Western welfare states) has led to a quest to replace it with a "welfare society".

Concomitant with this shift in philosophy has come further decentralisation, involving the local community in new initiatives for the social sector, such as deinstitutionalisation and deprofessionalisation. Consequently, many responsibilities borne previously by large public institutions are being transferred gradually from the *amter* to the *kommuner* (Koch-Nielsen & Ploug, 1993). The provision of almost all social services, including early years care and education services, has been devolved to the *kommuner*. This decentralisation has been mandated by the Folketing and is outlined in Section One of the *Bistandslov* (Social Assistance Act):

It is the duty of the competent public authorities to grant assistance to any person staying in the country who for himself or members of his family is in need of advice, financial or practical assistance, support for development or restoration of earning capacity. Responsibility for the social and political measures rest with the local authorities [*kommuner*], who in turn have the right to levy taxes. (Koch-Nielsen & Ploug, 1993, pp. 28-29)

### Municipalities and Counties

Denmark is divided into 275 *kommuner* (municipalities, each having a municipal council). The number of inhabitants in the *kommuner* range from three thousand to half a million. The largest *kommune* is Copenhagen, followed by Frederiksberg, Aarhus, Odense and Aalborg. The *kommuner* are grouped into 14 *amter* (counties, each having a county council) with the exception of Copenhagen and Frederiksberg, which function as *kommuner* with *amter* duties. The *amter* cover natural geographical units, with the number of inhabitants ranging from 200,000 to 544,000 (Kampmann & von Nordheim Nielsen, 1995).

The Grundlov entitles the *kommuner* to manage their own local affairs independently, with some liberties being defrayed due to legislation, rules and agreements and financial

frameworks that the Stat has laid down. Within these wide parameters, however, the kommuner are free to make their own plans, decisions and policies (Just Jeppesen, 1993). The amter and kommuner are responsible for the “assignments” in the social field, while the Stat and social funds have a lower priority, as does the private sector. The kommuner take care of the majority of duties under the umbrella of welfare and health, which amounts to almost 60 % of the cost of provision. Whilst the Stat finances half of the expenses for welfare and health, the kommuner finance 30% and the amter about 6% (Plovsing, 1992 in Just Jeppesen, 1993).

### Elections

Kommuner hold elections every fourth year. The citizens within a kommune elect a council which is empowered to make decisions for them regarding the guidelines for the running and development of the kommune. The executive power within a kommune is held by the mayor, who is elected by and from among the members of the local council immediately after the election. The daily work of the kommune is performed by local officials as well as various committees appointed by the local council. As with the kommuner, amter are governed by a council elected by the people, with the amt mayor elected by the council. Both the amt council and mayor are elected every fourth year (Just Jeppesen, 1993).

### Duties and Responsibilities

The primary duties of the kommune are welfare and health. Each kommune is responsible for the payment of social benefits, including housing, sickness, maternity and child benefits. An additional function is to establish and run various services for children and senior citizens. Children and youth services include family day care, day nurseries, day care centres, kindergartens, primary and lower secondary school, after school recreation centres, clubs and school health services. Vedel-Petersen (1992)



observes that “the public daycare system is one of the cornerstones of Danish policy to support families with small children . . . [but] it is also the most cost-intensive element” (p. 18). Services provided for the elderly include rest homes, day centres, welfare arrangements, housing, home help and home nursing. The kommune is also responsible for the running and maintenance of sports grounds, swimming pools, parks and libraries (Just Jeppesen, 1993).

The role of the amt is to manage services and facilities that are too large for individual kommuner. In regard to health and welfare, the amt’s most important duty is to run and fund hospitals and to administrate and finance public health insurance. The amt must also provide services such as rehabilitation, housing for homeless adults and youth, children at risk and handicapped people. Expenditure on these services is equally shared between the amt and the kommune for users under 67 years, whilst the costs are fully met by the kommune for users over 67 years. Further, the amt must provide expert support and guidance for the kommuner within the social field. Upper secondary education institutions are also funded and run by the amt (Just Jeppesen, 1993).

### Income and Funding Arrangements

The kommune finances its activities from four major sources. The first means is local income and real estate tax, of which most is income tax. The kommune also receives national reimbursement of a number of social benefits, such as parental leave and family and supplementary allowances. Block grants from the Stat are made in order to “top up” expenses for certain “problem areas” which are too large to be funded by the kommune alone. The last major source of income is working income derived from sources such as parents’ payment for day care. Amter fund their services by amt taxes, block grants from the Stat and working income from amt establishments (Just Jeppesen, 1993).

## Private and Voluntary Organisations

Private and independent institutions and organisations augment the services provided by the public welfare and health system. The majority of these services and institutions function on the basis of agreements with the kommuner. Many day care centres and kindergartens fall into this category. The majority of these centres are funded by the kommuner, are subject to public supervision and effectively “form part of the public social policy” (Just Jeppesen, 1993, p. 10). Other centres are funded mainly by the kommuner, with additional private funds at their disposal. A minority of centres are run and funded totally independently.

### Contemporary Society in Denmark

This section provides a more detailed background on contemporary life in Denmark and is a further development of the more general section earlier in the introduction. It outlines demographic and economic trends and canvasses issues such as the changes in family conditions and perspectives on and conditions of modern childhood.

Denmark has been described as a “post-industrial society,” a term often used loosely to describe highly developed countries in the Western world. Sociologists and economists may add their own characteristics, but usually agree that such countries are “marked by the ascendancy of the service sector, with attendant economic, technological, and social changes that transform the character of contemporary life” (Moen, 1989, p. 17). Phenomena associated with this transformation include; (a) declining fertility rates, (b) fewer normative constraints on life style (such as whether to marry or have children), (c) a steady shift toward public (rather than private) provision

of care for the young and aged, and (d) narrowing of sex roles at every stage of the life course (Moen, 1989).

A number of these trends have become evident in contemporary Denmark (Dencik, Langsted & Sommer, 1989; Kampmann & von Nordheim Nielsen, 1995; Moen, 1989; Qvortrup, 1991; Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1994b; Vedel-Petersen, 1992). Significant demographic and economic changes appear to have made an impact on family conditions and the conditions of childhood in Denmark. Much of the following data were obtained from the government funded National Institute of Social Research (Vedel-Petersen, 1992), Danmarks Statistik (Kampmann & von Nordheim Nielsen, 1995) and the South Jutland University Centre (Qvortrup, 1991).

### Demographic Changes

During this century Denmark has experienced steady urbanisation, with the migration of families from rural to urban areas. Over 65% of Danish children between birth and 17 years live in cities (10,000 to 100,000 inhabitants), 28% in “built-up” areas or towns and the remaining 7% in rural areas (Kampmann & von Nordheim Nielsen, 1995). This has resulted in markedly different conditions of childhood for children today compared with the rural way of life experienced by their parents and grandparents. The modern phenomenon of an “urban childhood” has led to a “cultural lag” between generations where parents’ and grandparents’ experiences in the rural way of life do not harmonise with their children’s conditions of growing up in an urban environment (Dencik et al. , 1989).

The birthrate in Denmark, like many other Western European countries, has been stagnant for a number of years. Age groups as a proportion of the total population are : 1-19 years, 23.6%; 20-64 years, 61.1%; and 65 years and above, 15.2% (Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1995, p. 3). In Denmark today, children under six

years represent only 7.7% of the total population (Kampmann & von Nordheim Nielsen, 1995). Despite a recent rising trend in the fertility rate, Denmark is moving into an age distribution problem, where there will be fewer economically active residents to support a growing number of economically dependent elderly people (Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1994b).

### Economic Change

The standard of living in Denmark has improved markedly over the last few decades. This applies to the economic stability of Danish families, standards of housing, health, and care and education (Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1995).

The radical transformation of family life in Denmark from the “classic” family model of working father and a stay-at-home mother, to two breadwinning parents has occurred over a period of 20 years (Qvortrup, 1991; Vedel-Petersen, 1992). Vedel-Petersen (1992) believes that this development has been linked to two powerful social processes contributing to the same outcome. The first influence developed in the 1960s, as increasing numbers of women sought to join the labour force. This, coupled with the equal rights movement, encouraged large numbers of women to seek an education and employment. In more recent years, there has been a growing concern for the welfare of children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Vedel-Petersen, 1992).

The Danish taxation system is steeply progressive so that it has been financially more advantageous for two parents to work than for one of them to earn their combined wages. The system of progressive individual, rather than family taxation, is likely to have provided a strong incentive for women to enter and remain in the labour force. Further, employers discourage part-time work and child care schemes are biased towards full-time workers (Moen, 1989).

## Changes in Family Conditions

Almost half of all Danish families have one child, 41% have two children and 10% have three or more children (Kampmann & von Nordheim Nielsen, 1995). Recent demographic data suggest that more Danish women are having fewer children than ever before (Kampmann & von Nordheim Nielsen, 1995; Qvortrup, 1991).

Over the last 20 years, increasing numbers of Danish children experience the divorce of their parents and greater numbers live with only one of their biological parents, either alone or as a “blended” or “two nucleus” family. However, the majority of young children still live with both of their biological parents (Dencik et al. , 1989; Kampmann & von Nordheim Nielsen. 1995; Qvortrup, 1991).

Danish people have a relaxed attitude towards co-habitation and having children out of marriage. Although co-habitation has not replaced marriage “it is a form of living together which many children have been born into and which has been the frame within which they live their lives” (Dencik et al. . 1989, p. 28). It is not uncommon for Danish couples to have children out of wedlock and to marry when the child or children are in their pre-school years.

## Changes in the Conditions of Childhood

Dencik et al. (1989) describe childhood as the “life space” during which children grow and develop and believe that this life space is not constant, but changing across time and space as a function of societal development. Many researchers have observed that the everyday lives of today’s children in the Nordic countries are no longer what they used to be and differ profoundly from that experienced by their own parents. One of the most significant consequences for young children growing up in Denmark is the rapidly changing social context that surrounds and influences their parents’ attitudes

and daily lives (Dencik et al. , 1989; Qvortrup, 1991). As a consequence, adults' experiences of the conditions of their own childhood do not constitute reality for today's children which raises the question of whether the experiences of parents, teachers, politicians, policy-writers and other decision-makers can any longer be used as frameworks for understanding the lives of today's children (Dencik et al. , 1989; Qvortrup, 1991).

### Perspectives on Childhood

What constitutes "normal" family life in Denmark is very different from only 20 years ago. Not only has the "reality" of family life changed , but also the "outlook". Both parents working full-time while the child spends six to eight hours each week-day in child care is the everyday reality for the majority of Danish children (over 90% of women are in the workforce, most of them full-time). The idea of "staying home" to care for a child until he or she attends school is rare (or virtually unknown). The average Danish suburban home is empty from 7:00 am until 4:00 or 5:00 pm, so that anyone choosing to stay home will be "home alone!" The concept of the busy neighbourhood with mums and children socialising is long gone in Denmark.

Dencik et al. (1989) suggest three central perspectives around which a deeper analysis of childhood conditions should be organised. These are the: (a) material perspective, describing the chronological, physical and economic frames around the child's life; (b) social perspective, presenting the modern conditions for the child's social interactions; and (c) cultural perspective, concerning the ideological, norm-determined climate surrounding today's young child (p. 4).

Dencik et al. (1989) ascertain that an unambiguous and clear marking of parental and family responsibility for a new generation of children is prevailing in modern Nordic

societies. The public authorities at both state and local levels influence children's living conditions in many and various ways:

The clearest example of this is probably the fact that, even though the father and mother are charged with the main responsibility for the child's thriving and development, they have no control or direct influence on the way in which the child develops in the childcare within the public sphere. (Dencik et al. , 1989, p. 24)

This situation raises issues and questions about child behaviour and the respective responsibilities of parents and care-givers in socialising young children into Danish society.

### Dual Socialisation

Many researchers have observed that increasing numbers of children are being cared for outside the home. The Nordic country with the greatest number of young children in public day care institutions (and for the longest number of hours each day) is Denmark, with 76% of children being in either public (55%) or private (21%) day care (Dencik et al., 1989).

These figures show that increasing numbers of Danish and other Nordic children are spending a significant part of their lives socialising with adults and children other than those in their own family. Children live, therefore, in more than one 'world' capable of influencing their development, which makes it difficult to explain or describe the young child's new reality in discrete concepts such as primary or secondary socialisation:

We prefer to call the situation in which the child finds itself [*sic*] a 'dual-socialisation situation'. . . What is crucial is not what is experienced in the daycare centre itself, but how this fits into the whole life pattern of experience which the child has. (Dencik et al. , 1989, p. 13)

### Norm-Pluralism

Dencik et al. (1989) believe that there has also been a loss of norm-stability and that "norm-pluralism" has been established as a principle in modern Danish society. This norm-pluralism involves the relations between generations of adults and children and has led to the development of four significant phenomena: (a) a paradoxical tendency which demands both commitment and the abdication of responsibility regarding children's upbringing; (b) an increasing professionalisation of the supervision of children; (c) a "pedagogicisation" [*sic*] of the children's lives and of the environments in which they grow and develop; and (d) a "pathologisation"[*sic*] of the undesirable characteristics which, in themselves, are within a quite normal behavioural repertoire.

There are many possible implications for these recent phenomena, one of them being the "normalisation" of childhood or viewing the day care experience as a "civilising" process (Dencik et al. , 1989; Qvortrup, 1991; Qvortrup & Christoffersen, 1991). Of considerable concern in Denmark, is the increasing "institutionalisation" of childhood and the implications arising from this. Possible issues may include questions about who is the primary "group" (state, parents or early childhood staff) responsible for transmitting cultural, societal, family and moral values. Other challenges may be the content and quality of early childhood programmes and the educational background of staff responsible for the children.

The goal of child and family policy is not to reject the past in favour of the present, but to reaffirm the values of family and home within the changing context of contemporary



society. A policy agenda that can support families in all their forms and at all their life stages is not easy to construct and requires creative “life cycle” solutions that address the particular needs of parents of young children in all types of family settings (Moen, 1989).

## Danish Social and Family Policy

### Social and Historical Context

The first day care centres for children under seven years were established in Denmark around 1820. These refuges, or *asylers*, as they were called in Danish, were privately run child care institutions for the children of working-class families in which both parents worked outside the home. In the second half of the 1800s, private, fee paying institutions for children from the upper classes began to appear. These operated on a part-time basis and were inspired by the ideas of Friedrich Fröbel and Maria Montessori (European Commission, 1995b; Vedel-Petersen, 1992).

The first *vuggestue* (day nursery) was established in 1849. It was a private initiative and provided care for children under the age of three years. The growth of *vuggestuer* was slow, with only 26 additional institutions being established up to 1927. In 1888 commercial child care for children under the age of 14 years was outlawed, unless approved by the *kommune*. This requirement was retained in subsequent child welfare legislation of 1933 and 1961 (European Commission, 1995b).

By the early 1900s, efforts were being made to convert the *asylers* into kindergarten-type institutions and the first “public” *børnehaver* (kindergartens) were established. By 1919, the government had begun to provide grants for *børnehaver* to function as welfare institutions. Social reforms carried out in 1933 extended public financial

assistance to cover up to half of the running costs of these institutions (European Commission, 1995b).

The Stat and the kommuner have assumed increasing economic and educational responsibility for the administration of these institutions. By 1949, “by grant-aiding all institutions, even those which did not cater for children from underprivileged areas, the state recognised the educational objective of pre-school provision” (European Commission, 1995b, p. 69).

Vedel-Petersen (1992) notes that Denmark has long since abandoned the division of day care institutions into those with the purpose of caring for underprivileged children from low income families and others for the educational enrichment of privileged children from high income families. The explanation given for this development is that:

Middle class families in rapidly growing numbers have demanded daycare places, and that they will not tolerate low-quality institutions, nor be content with part-time care. It is also obvious that children from disadvantaged families need educational stimulation to at least the same extent as children from other families. (Vedel-Petersen, 1992, p. 8)

Towards the end of the 1960s, the first kommunal institutions were established. For the last 30 years, the kommuner have been required by law to make all public services available to all citizens. In 1976, the *Bistandslov* (Social Assistance Act) placed a duty on the kommuner to “create the structures necessary to meet families’ needs” and also gave the municipalities the responsibility for pre-school institutions (European Commission, 1995b, p. 69). Since 1976, independent day care centres and pre-schools have been treated on the same basis as the kommunal institutions.

Koch-Nielsen and Ploug (1993) believe that “on the whole, Denmark is a homogeneous society without great social disparities and practically without social tensions and unrest - or at least she has been so until recently” (p. 13). This bold statement, taken from a report entitled *Social Integration* published by the Danish National Institute of Social Research gives a clue as to the apparent commitment and success of the Danish government in relation to social policies for its people (Koch-Nielsen & Ploug, 1993). The authors of this Report, suggest that this is because the natural vehicles for integration - the family network, the local community, educational institutions, workplaces and associations - function effectively for the majority of Danish people.

The following quotation captures the essence of the philosophy underpinning Danish social and family policy. The *Socialministeriet* (Ministry of Social Affairs) issues broad policy guidelines which, via the *kommuner*, are interpreted and translated into provision:

Danish child and family policies are based on the fundamental principle that the family is the core element for children while growing up and that children’s living conditions are mainly the responsibility of the parents. The public authorities have an overall responsibility to create sound social frameworks and the best possible conditions for families with children. (Ministry of Social Affairs, 1995, p. 4)

A significant factor influencing Denmark’s policy initiatives in the work-family domain is the prevailing view of the role of government in society. Vedel-Petersen (1992) suggests that the transformation of Danish societal and family life has been “without profound ideological conflicts” and that the reason official policy has lagged behind

development is due to economic rather than conservative resistance (p. 18). Further, the development that has already occurred has been backed by a broad-based political consensus applying to legislation passed by the Folketing and decisions made by the kommuner:

This debate has not focused to any significant extent on whether the State, via these institutions, is taking over the children's upbringing, thereby undermining the parents' role. Nor has there been much debate of [*sic*] whether support to families with employed parents was a public responsibility or not. (Vedel-Petersen, 1992, p. 18)

Rather, the debate has centred on the high public expenditure and its distribution. The question of equity, based on the fact that parents with children in public day care receive substantial subsidies from the kommuner while parents who use other forms of care do not, has also been raised (Vedel-Petersen, 1992).

### Perceptions of "The Family"

Since the 1960s, the welfare state in Denmark has expanded significantly its obligations towards financial support, service provision and to a certain extent, responsibility for the well-being of its people. Koch-Nielsen, a researcher at the Danish National Institute of Social Research notes, however, that:

[Denmark has moved] from a situation where the unit in social policy measures was the household or family . . . towards a situation where the unit is the individual. Moreover, we have simultaneously witnessed attempts in certain areas to redefine the family so that its members would be identified not by marriage but by cohabitation. (Koch-Nielsen, 1996, p. 9)

Koch-Nielsen (1996) questions whether there has been a change in those obligations as a consequence of the so-called crisis of the welfare state. One concern has been whether there is an attempt by the government to reintroduce the family, rather than the individual, as the legal unit as far as financial rights and obligations are concerned. Koch-Nielsen (1996) stresses that this is not the case, noting that strong political support for the trend towards individualisation was formulated in a parliamentary decision of 14 May, 1987 which requires the government to:

elaborate a plan of how to implement, gradually but decisively, rules concerning the independence of spouses and equal rights of cohabiting partners (the principle of individuality) in social legislation and all other areas of legislation, in accordance with a report from a committee set up by the Ministry of Social Affairs - equal treatment of marriage and cohabitation. (p. 9)

The second, more general concern, is whether the government is gradually drawing back from its responsibilities and obligations, leaving the family to take increasing care and support of its members. Koch-Nielsen (1996) again stresses that this is not the case and that government expenditure in the social sector remains at high levels. Recent public debates indicate a trend towards stressing the obligation between family members on a moral level, using as its point of departure the provision of services and support from the welfare state. Koch-Nielsen (1996) concludes that “the aim of the debate is primarily to recall the obligations of the individual to be involved in, to look after and to fulfil *social* more than financial obligations” (p. 10). Further:

The Danish daycare institution policy is thus not based on a desire to maintain the traditional family structure, nor an ideology that this structure is the critical foundation for a stable society. This policy has not resulted in the disintegration of the Danish family. The daycare programme should

instead be regarded as a pragmatic solution which has given many families greater freedom to choose their lifestyle, contributed to families' standard of living, and provided many families otherwise obliged to accept social security with the incomes [*sic*] to be financially self-sufficient. (Vedel-Petersen, 1992, pp. 52-53)

### The Family and the Care of Children

In Denmark, the everyday life of the family has changed dramatically over the past 20 years. In the course of a single generation, the Danish nuclear family has changed from the "one breadwinner model" with mother and children at home to a "two breadwinner model" with day care needs for the children (Vedel-Petersen, 1992). The majority of parents (over 90%), particularly those with young children, work outside the home for most of the day. As a consequence, most Danish children aged between six months and seven years are cared for by adults other than their parents for six to eight hours each week-day (30 to 40 hours per week). It has been suggested that:

Today's nuclear family is thus a family whose individual members live much of their everyday lives in different 'worlds' . . . So an opportunity is needed for parents to achieve a better balance between working life and family life, primarily with the purpose of spending more time with their children. (Ministry of Social Affairs, 1995, p. 11)

The increase in labour demands and the prospect of two incomes, coupled with the equal opportunity movement, have promoted this development at such a rate that "the traditional family structure and division of sexual roles have been overshadowed by the new lifestyle" (Vedel-Petersen, 1992, p. 52). The sharp rise in demand for child care places has led to a crisis of provision. Vedel-Petersen (1992) observes that many parents have had to accept "substandard, barely responsible daycare arrangements on

what could be described more or less as a black market, and many children were obliged to do without their homes, families and mothers for a large part of the day, without (*sic*) substitution of other values” (p. 52).

### Government Response to the Changing Demand for Child Care

The Danish “welfare society” (at both Stat and kommuner levels) has responded to the day care crisis with policy and legislation supporting subsidised day care schemes as well as the required budget allocations. Although provision has expanded greatly in recent years, supply has not kept pace with demand and waiting lists still exist in many kommuner. Nevertheless, Vedel-Petersen (1992) notes, there has “by and large been a political consensus that children should not pay the price of development, and that responsible daycare schemes should be a fundamental element of family policy” (p. 52). Further:

The [day care] system plays an important role in Danish society, because it releases a large number of women to the labour market, and because it secures a considerable number of families with children two incomes, and single parents the possibility of taking up employment. This provides families with children with a standard of living which they could not otherwise attain. (Vedel-Petersen, 1992, p. 7)

Government subsidies have enabled a large number of Danish families to have their children cared for in high quality environments. However, the public day care programme favours families who opt for the two breadwinner model because these families are the recipients of the public subsidies for child care. The question of equity arises when families who choose to have one parent stay home to care for their children are not eligible to receive these same subsidies. Nevertheless, Vedel-Petersen (1992) believes:

It is certain that subsidies for daycare provision are of benefit to the children, in contrast to cash benefits to all families. The daycare programme is thus not only part of family policy, but also a child-policy issue. (p. 52)

“Harmonising” work and family life.

In Denmark, the debate on nuclear families’ working hours (hours out of the home) started in the mid-1980s, by which time the current rates of female workforce participation (over 90%) had been reached. Although the extent of day nursery provision in Denmark was high by European standards, there were “widespread doubts as to whether nuclear families’ everyday lives were ideal” (Ministry of Social Affairs, 1992, p. 7).

In 1989, in response to this concern, the Danish Government prepared a memorandum on parents’ affiliation with the labour market, attitudes to working hours and obstacles to reform. Key issues under scrutiny were: (a) providing opportunities for families to spend more time together, (b) developing options to enable both parents to look after their children, (c) establishing schemes to provide care for sick children, (d) alleviating burdens on single providers, and (e) improving parents’ opportunities to support their older children (Inter-Ministerial Committee on Children, 1992; Ministry of Social Affairs, 1992).

Some of the issues raised were the amount of time children spent away from their parents and siblings, whether the day nursery or the parents were responsible for bringing up the children, and why fathers did not participate more actively in the family’s everyday routines. A question of greater concern was why both parents



worked full-time when so many of them expressed a wish for a different everyday life (Ministry of Social Affairs, 1992). However:

It is characteristic that the Danish debate on harmonization of family life and working life started with a discussion of the families' own views on their own and their children's lives. It was much less a question of labour market needs . . . The answers were to be found not only in legislation but also in a change of attitude on the part of local authorities [kommuner], workplaces, day nurseries, and in the families themselves. Finally, it was realized that one single ministry with a limited area of responsibility would not be able to face the challenge alone (Ministry of Social Affairs, 1992, pp. 7-8)

In 1987, in direct response to the debate surrounding these issues, the Danish government established an *Inter-Ministerial Committee on Children*. The Committee was set up as an interdisciplinary body, with representatives from 15 ministries according to their respective fields of responsibility (Ministry of Social Affairs, 1995). The *Socialministeriet* (Ministry of Social Affairs) was appointed to chair and act as secretariat for the Committee. The Inter-Ministerial Committee's central objective was:

to create coherence and unity in areas relating to children and families, and to take initiatives across sectors to improve the living conditions for children and young persons while growing up. (Ministry of Social Affairs, 1995, p. 5)

The initial work of the Inter-Ministerial Committee was to set general objectives for child and family policy, which was the first time a Danish government had done so. The objectives were that children should; (a) have close and stable relations with their parents, (b) be given the opportunity to live as children, (c) be members of society, (d)

have responsibilities, and (e) be given the opportunity to live a healthy life (Ministry of Social Affairs, 1992, p. 8). The Government required the Inter-Ministerial Committee to implement certain child and family policies within a year.

### Benefits and Subsidies for Families

Families with children in Denmark are eligible to receive a number of government benefits and subsidies.

#### Parental Leave

Parental and education leave were introduced in Denmark in 1992, initially as part of a two year social experiment. In 1994 parental leave was officially introduced “with the mixed objectives of reducing unemployment, giving parents the opportunity to be at home with their children below the age of eight and reducing the need for day care” (Koch-Nielsen, 1996, p. 26). The benefit originally amounted to 80% of the unemployment benefit, but from 1995 was reduced to 70%. It should be noted that unemployment benefits are considerably higher in Denmark (relative to income) than in Australia. If the child to whom the leave is related is between birth and two years, the parent is denied access to child care facilities and a part-time place only is allowed if the child is between three and eight years.

Despite these rules, parental leave has been very popular. More than 70,000 families have taken the opportunity to care for their children at home, although the majority of home-based carers have been women. Parental leave has been criticised from a number of viewpoints, including the high costs involved. Koch-Nielsen (1996) suggests that parental leave “may in the long run undermine the position of women in the labour market” adding that it is problematic in some areas of the public sector, particularly health, care and education (p. 26).

## Child Care Benefits

The obligation of parents to support their children until the age of 18 years is clearly stated in both family and social legislation. However, the costs of raising children are, to some extent, shared by the Stat through cash benefits and benefits in kind (Koch-Nielsen, 1996).

### Cash benefits: Family and supplementary allowances.

Cash benefits comprise the family allowance and supplementary children's allowance. The *family allowance* (ordinary child benefit) is paid to all families, regardless of income and is non-taxable. The allowance is currently 700 DKK (175 AUD) per child per month for children under seven years and drops to 550 DKK (138 AUD) for children between seven and 18 years. The public expenditure amounts to 6.6 billion DKK (approximately 1.65 billion AUD) and is financed by the Stat (Plovsing, 1994, in Koch-Nielsen, 1996, p. 24). The family allowance was introduced as a compensation for the removal of tax deductions for dependent children in 1987.

The *supplementary children's allowance* comprises additional benefits paid especially to one parent families, but also to other families or children in very specific circumstances. Whilst the family allowance (ordinary child benefit) is paid to lone parents on application, with one benefit per child (which is not means-tested and is non-taxable), the supplementary children's allowance (extra child benefit) is paid regardless of the number of children. The supplementary children's allowance is currently 650 DKK (163 AUD) per child per month. More than 100,000 families are recipients of this benefit, with the total expenditure amounting to 1.5 billion DKK (approximately 375 million AUD) (Plovsing, 1994, in Koch-Nielsen, 1996, p. 25). In addition, there are special benefits paid to parents of disabled children under the age of 18 years.

## Benefits in kind.

Benefits in kind, are “of course first and foremost a question of child care” (Koch-Nielsen, 1996, p. 25). Child care is the responsibility of the kommuner according to the Bistandslov. Although the kommuner regulate, provide and finance child care, parents also contribute to the payment of the expenses. The Bistandslov specifies that parents’ contributions must cover only 30% of the total running expenses of the child care facility. The most recent data from Danmarks Statistik (in Koch-Nielsen, 1996, p. 25) on the average payments per month, per child for day care in 1992 are:

<i>Daginstitutioner</i> (kommunal day care centres)	1400 DKK (350 AUD)
<i>Vuggestuer</i> (crèches)	1550 DKK (375 AUD)
<i>Børnehaver</i> (kindergartens)	1000 DKK (250 AUD)
<i>Fritidscentres</i> (before and after school care)	700 DKK (175 AUD)

Free child care is granted to families with an annual income below 45,000 DKK (approximately 11,250 AUD) a year. Families with a total annual income between DKK 45,000 and 140,000 (approximately 35,000 AUD) make partial payments. These limits have been amended over the last 10 years in an attempt to improve the conditions of families with children (Koch-Nielsen, 1996). In 1991, the Følketing ruled, in connection with the *Børnepakke* (Children’s Package), that the scales for free child care would be indexed with other social benefits (Plovsing, 1994, in Koch-Nielsen, 1996).

Vedel-Petersen (1992) claims that although this “transfer income” is important, particularly for low-income families, it is the income that families are able to earn because of the day care system that is the primary reason for their high standard of living. Therefore:

It could be said that the public daycare programme has achieved an important welfare policy objective. Nuclear families have not been allowed to lag behind in the general improvement in affluence, and they are not left to carry the breadwinner's burden alone. This development has taken place in accordance with the labour market's manpower requirements and in harmony with equal opportunity objectives. (Vedel-Petersen, 1992, p. 54)

## EARLY YEARS CARE AND EDUCATION PROVISION IN DENMARK

### Types of Centres

Denmark has a highly developed system of care institutions for children under school age. It has been suggested that Denmark has the most comprehensive system within the European Union (Broström & Vejleskov, 1994; European Commission, 1995a; European Commission, 1995b; Eurydice, 1994; Vedel-Petersen, 1992).

### Vuggestuer

Vuggestuer are day nurseries or crèches for children from birth to three years. They are open for 10-12 hours each week-day and enrol between 30 and 40 children, divided into groups of 10 children and two adults.

### Børnehaver

Børnehaver are kindergarten-type institutions for children aged between three and six years. They are usually open for 10-12 hours each week-day, although some operate half-time or mixed half and full-time. Børnehaver enrol 20 to 80 children, usually divided into groups of 20 children and two adults. These groups may be grouped by

age although some institutions prefer age-integrated (mixed-age) groups. Some centres may incorporate a vuggestue. If there is an infant group of children under three years, the prescribed number is 12 children and two adults.

### Aldersintegrerede Institutioner

These are age-integrated centres for children ranging from birth to 14 years and generally accommodate 50 to 60 children. In practice they include children aged between one to 10-12 years. Some centres enrol children aged between one and six years. The youngest children (up to two years old) are frequently put into one group, while the other children are divided into “family groups” according to their level of development and particular interests.

Age-integrated institutions were established during the 1970s based on the belief that siblings should be cared for in the same institution and that very young children could benefit from playing with slightly older children. Other reasons cited were that it would be easier to initiate activity groups corresponding to the children’s interest and developmental levels as well as enabling the kommuner to better respond to fluctuating local demands.

### Kommunal Dagpleje

Family day care (or supervised child care) is provided in the homes of registered carers for children between six months and 13 years, the majority of children being between six months and two years. Dagpleje carers are licensed to accept a minimum of three to a maximum of five children of different ages, including up to two of their own children. A “team” of two adults may care for up to 10 children.

This form of care was established in 1967 as an emergency measure to meet a particularly high demand for child care pending the establishment of purpose-built day care institutions. The rising demand for child care, however, has firmly established family day care as a viable alternative to institutional care.

### Børnehaveklasser

Børnehaveklasser are kindergarten, reception or pre-school classes available to children one year before they commence compulsory schooling in the *folkeskole* (primary school) at age seven. Admission at five years is possible in special circumstances, but is not common. Børnehaveklasser form part of the regular school system and are located on the school site where the children will later start compulsory schooling. Børnehaveklasser operate five days a week from around 8:30 am to 12:30 pm and have the same holiday breaks as the folkeskole. Admission is voluntary and free of charge.

The relatively short børnehaveklasse day, compared to the parents' normal working day, has burdened parents with the problems of finding care, as well as delivering and picking up their children (Vedel-Petersen, 1992). Attempts have been made to ease this problem by arranging before and after school-care schemes for children from both børnehaver and folkeskoler.

### Naturbørnehaver and Skovbørnehaver

These are a recent phenomenon and are outdoor kindergartens held in the forest for children aged between three and six years. Increasing numbers of purpose-built børnehaver have a "forest group" as an extra option for parents. Children participating in these programs spend most of the day outdoors in the forest (from 9:00 am to 3:00 pm) in both winter and summer. There may be a makeshift outdoor "shed" for shelter from the cold, but in practice the children spend little, if any time there. Traditional

activities such as painting or puzzles are not generally offered. Parents drop off and pick up their children from the purpose-built centre.

### Busbørnehaver

Busbørnehaver are mobile kindergartens for children aged from three to six years. Like naturbørnehaver and skovbørnehaver, these groups may be attached to a purpose-built centre. The children travel on a bus which visits various places of interest such as museums, parks or other areas in a town or city. Activities may be carried out in public areas (in a museum for example) or on the bus, which is a type of mobile activity area.

New schemes for child care are being initiated by various kommuner. This has been in the form of per-capita subsidies to groups of parents, business people and associations wishing to establish day care schemes. The regulations governing these schemes are far more liberal than those for existing institutions.

### Natbørnehaver

Recently three "night care" institutions have been established in Denmark. These centres offer overnight care for children aged between birth and seven years while their parents are working a night shift. These centres were initially established to meet the needs of Danish railway and postal workers.

### Weekendbørnehaver

These are day care centres offering weekend care for children aged between birth and seven years. They operate like week-day centres.



## Other Forms of Provision

There are two other forms of provision for children aged between six and 10 years in Denmark. These operate outside normal school hours and are open before school begins at 8:00 am and after school from 12:00 pm to 5:00 pm. *Fritidshjem* are off-site leisure centres while *fritidsordninger* are school-based leisure centres. Both offer opportunities for a range of leisure activities such as woodwork, art and craft, visits to the cinema or other parts of the community, television and general play. Currently, 70% of children participating in these activities attend the school-based fritidsordninger. The maximum parental contribution for use of these facilities is 30% of the running cost, but in the case of school-based facilities, there are no established rules (European Commission, 1995b).

The general purpose of these school-based leisure centres is to facilitate children's daily transition between the *børnehaveklasse* or *folkeskoleklasse* (primary school class) and their activities outside school hours. *Børnehaveklasse* staff are, where possible, attached to these centres which are located within or near schools. (European Commission, 1995b, p. 73).

## Administration

Vuggestuer, børnehaver, alderintegrede institutioner, kommunal dagpleje, naturbørnehaver and skovbørnehaver, bus børnehaver, natbørnehaver and fritidshjem operate under the *Bistandslov* (Social Assistance Act) issued through the *Socialministeriet* (Ministry of Social Affairs). *Børnehaveklasse* and fritidsordninger operate under the *Folkeskolelov* (Primary and Lower Secondary School Act) through the *Undervisningsministeriet* (Ministry of Education).

## General Objective of Public Day Care

The general objective of public day care in Denmark is laid down in social legislation via the *Bistandslov*. In Denmark, however, there has been a long tradition of decentralised child care provision. Broström and Vejleskov (1994, p. 4) believe that this may have led to the lack of a “proper educational programme for child care centres”. The only officially adopted programme is the *Circular of Day Care Offers* from 1976, which contains a very open statement about educational work:

It is the task of day care centres, in co-operation with the parents, to create an environment for the children that supplements the upbringing in the home. The child care workers must strive for that the [sic] individual child develops itself [sic] to an openly [sic] and independent person, who has the will to co-operate, and who seeks to use his knowledge to reform his and others conditions of life . . . Therefore the day care centres must offer the children safety and possibilities for experiences that stimulate them to explore the surroundings, so that their field of experience be increased [sic] and their activity be encouraged [sic]. (Broström & Vejleskov, 1994, p. 4)

The 1976 Circular was replaced in 1990 by the *Circular of Day Care Offers for Children and Youth* (as part of the *Bistandslov*). This contains an even more open objective:

In collaboration with the parents, the day care should create such conditions that encourage the children’s development, well-being, and independence. (Broström & Vejleskov, 1994, p. 4)

The Circular also stresses the importance of parents and children influencing the day care institution. Beyond this, there are very few provisions regulating the educational

programme of the various types of care and education facilities in Denmark (Broström & Vejleskov, 1994; Vedel-Petersen, 1992).

In 1987, the government devolved responsibility for the financial management of pre-school provision to the kommuner. Each kommune decides on the structure of its own pre-school provision and can elect to establish and administer institutions, which then become kommunal institutions. The kommune may decide to provide family day care for the younger children and selects, employs and pays the family day care child carers (European Commission, 1995b).

The kommuner also have responsibility for making decisions on the allocation of available places in the various types of centre they offer. The kommune sets regulations for the opening hours of the institutions, the employment of staff, the definition of programme goals and the level of parental financial contributions. The kommuner, in fact, “supervise all measures affecting pre-school education” (European Commission, 1995b, p. 71).

On 1 January 1993, a law was passed requiring every kommunal institution to form a *Forældrebestyrelsen* (Parent Board). This Board enables parents to contribute to various aspects of the pre-school administration such as the selection of staff, curriculum content, co-operation with outside bodies and certain guidelines relating to the budget (European Commission, 1995b). Within each institution, the director has “administrative and educational responsibility for the institution and implements the decisions of the parents’ committee (Forældrebestyrelsen), as well as undertaking the day-to-day management” (European Commission, 1995b, p. 71). The kommune, as well as the local school authorities, are responsible for the management of the børnehaveklasse.

In addition to the kommunal institutions, there is a significant independent sector with privately run institutions receiving kommunal funding. Since 1990, the Bistandslov has enabled private individuals, enterprises or associations to establish institutions with the aid of kommunal grants. As with the kommunal institutions, a Forældrebestyrelsen is responsible for the management of the institution and makes decisions regarding the expenditure of the kommunal grants and the appointment of the director and staff (European Commission, 1995b). Kommunale institutions constitute about two thirds of the provision, with the remainder being independent or private. Both types of institution are funded in the same way (European Commission, 1995b).

## Organisation

### Admission Arrangements

Because of the expansion of pre-school provision in Denmark over the last 30 years, most parents are able to enrol their child in a pre-school establishment. In 1995, in an effort to remedy the lack of places and meet demands, the Socialministeriet mandated that the kommuner should make places (day offers) available for all children under school age. As a consequence, many kommuner have been unable to meet fully the demand for places and have waiting lists, particularly for care services for children under three years. This has required the setting of preference criteria for the allocation of places. Children with special educational, social or medical needs and children referred by another kommune receive special consideration. First priority is given to single-parent families and families where both parents work out of the home (European Commission, 1995b).

## Fees and Charges

Programmes provided in the børnehaveklasse are free of charge. However, parents who send their child to any of the other forms of pre-school offered by the kommune (such as børnehaver) must pay a maximum of 30% of the running cost of the institution, excluding rental costs. The average cost per month for a børnehave place is 1, 200 DKK (350 AUD). Kommuner fix their fees after consideration of their particular financial situation and in some cases, provide additional grants to reduce or meet in full the cost to parents. Low income families and parents with children with special intellectual, physical or social needs, are either partially or fully exempt from fees. Parents with several children in pre-school institutions are eligible for a discount on fees (European Commission, 1995b).

## Child-Adult Ratios

Child-adult ratios in early childhood centres are set by individual kommuner and so may vary from area to area. The average child-adult ratios in 1995 were:

Børnehaver (three to six years)	6.6 : 1
Aldersintegrerede institutioner (birth to 14 years)	4.8 : 1
Vuggestuer (birth to three years)	3.5 : 1
Dagpleje (six months to two years)	5.0 : 1
Fritidshjem (six to 10 years)	9:9 : 1

In the børnehaveklasse, the number of children enrolled must not exceed 28. If the number of children is over 24, two pædagoger must be present (Kampmann & von Nordheim Nielsen, 1995).

Børnehave assistants are generally young (18 to 22 years old) and it is assumed that these young people will go on to pursue a higher education of some kind. It is not uncommon to find male pædagoger or assistants in børnehaver (around 10% of the staff), but the majority of staff is female. In Denmark, it is socially acceptable to have men working with young children, in marked contrast to Australian social norms.

## The Education and Training of Early Childhood Workers

### The Educator Training Programme

*Pædagoger* (educators) working in early years care and education settings train in *seminarier* (educator training colleges), which are technical institutions offering both theory and practical training. The training of staff in early childhood institutions rests on Act no. 370 on the Training of Educators which was mandated on 6 June 1991 and came into operation in the 1992/93 academic year. There are currently 32 seminarier, each with total enrolments between 300 and 600 (Danish Ministry of Education, 1994).

On 1 January 1992, the training of pædagoger was merged from three separate courses into one general training programme. Formerly there were discrete programmes for *børnehavepædagoger* (kindergarten educators), *fritidspædagoger* (recreation centre educators) and *socialpædagoger* (educators working in nurseries or institutions for the handicapped). Graduates may now find themselves working with babies and pre-schoolers, disabled children and adults or (somewhat paradoxically), the elderly. They may also work in hospitals and the numerous fritidscentre (after-school and recreation centres):

This training provides students with the educational theory and teaching skills needed for working with children, young people and adults, including those with social problems or physical or mental handicaps.

While this training remains general, covering the entire social and educational spectrum, students have the opportunity to specialise during their course. (European Commission, 1995b, p. 74)

Danish children start compulsory schooling at seven years. The *folkeskole* is a combined primary and junior high school, which enrolls children from six to 15 years. A quite separate training for folkeskole teachers is offered at several campuses of *Danmarks Lærerhøjskole* (Royal Danish School of Educational Studies). Folkeskole teachers are not permitted to work in *børnehaver* or *børnehaveklasser*. *Gymnasier* (senior high schools) enrol students from 16 to 19 years. Teachers who work in these schools undergo a separate and specialised university education.

*Pædagog* is a difficult word to translate directly into English. It could be described as educator, but not teacher. *Lærer* is the Danish word for teacher and has a similar meaning to teacher in English. Whereas *pædagoger* work in *børnehaver* and *børnehaveklasser*, *lærere* are employed in *folkeskoler* and *gymnasier*. The role of the *pædagog* lies somewhere between that of an Australian child care worker and pre-school teacher. *Pædagoger* are mainly associated with the pre-compulsory years of schooling and after-school programmes and are generally not permitted to teach year classes in the *folkeskole*.

### Aims of the Training Programme

The four main aims of the educator training programme are that the student acquires the:

- (a) theoretical and practical prerequisites for educational work with children, young people and adults, including children, young people and adults in social difficulties or with physical or mental handicaps;
- (b) prerequisites for maintaining, communicating and developing cultural values through his work;
- (c) prerequisites for cooperation, including cooperation with colleagues and other professional groups; and
- (d) basis for

developing his pedagogical practice and for participating in the development within the pedagogical field of activity. An additional aim of the programme is that the personal development of the student is furthered through the study programme and through participation and co-operation in different forms of work (Danish Ministry of Education, 1994, pp. 5-6).

### Course Content

The duration of the initial training course is 41 calendar months, or three and a half years, including “practical placements” (European Commission, 1995b) or “teaching practice” (Danish Ministry of Education, 1994) amounting to 15 months. The content of the study programme covers the following subject groups, including the percentage weighting of the various areas (Danish Ministry of Education, 1994, pp. 6-7):

1. Pedagogical-psychological subjects (30%);
2. Social and health subjects - including Danish, music, motion subjects, workshop subjects, drama and science (20%);
3. Activity and culture subjects (40%);
4. Communication - organisation and management (10%).

The Educator Training Programme course outline suggests that:

An important traditional element is the alternance [*sic*] between theory and practice and between traditional theoretical subjects and activity and cultural subjects. As a whole, the study programmes are mixed so that one third consists of teaching practice, one third of theoretical subjects and one third of activity and cultural subjects. (Danish Ministry of Education, 1994, pp. 7-8)



Students, either individually or in groups, have the opportunity to specialise in a particular area in the course of a 10 week teaching practice. The course qualification is at the level of “shorter further education” or “bachelor” and graduates are called pædagoger (educators) rather than lærer (teachers).

### The Role and Management of Seminarier

Within the framework of the Ministerial Order, each seminarium is effectively responsible for laying down provisions regarding a number of matters including; (a) the aims, content and scope of the individual elements of the programme, (b) the forms of teaching, including educational guidance and other special study activities, (c) assignments, including specialisation and teaching practice assignments, and (d) offers of general and subject-related guidance and general proficiency assessment (Danish Ministry of Education, 1994, pp. 9-10). Each of the 32 seminarier develops its own individual profile, which in reality allows for some variation in the study courses offered.

Each seminarium is headed by a rector who is responsible to a Board of Governors comprising a majority of members from the relevant fields of activity, as well as members from the local community. The Board is responsible for the overall management of the seminarium, as well as safeguarding its interests as an educational institution. The board also sets guidelines for the seminarium’s external activities and for its longer-term development.

The rector is the pedagogical head of the seminarium and is responsible for its day to day administration and financial management. The rector submits the recommended curriculum, which is in turn approved by the Board. Each seminarium also has two councils, one to represent the staff and the other for the students. These councils have

an advisory function vis-a-vis the management of the seminarium (Danish Ministry of Education, 1994).

### Admission Requirements

Applicants must be at least 18 years of age and have a general qualifying examination, such as an upper secondary school leaving examination or a higher technical or commercial examination. The minimum requirement is completion of the tenth year of secondary schooling coupled with work experience or a vocational education and training qualification. Individual seminarier, however, can make their own decisions about the basic admission requirements as well as the relative weighting given to the various qualifying examinations (Danish Ministry of Education, 1994; European Commission, 1995b).

### Early Years Care and Education Objectives

Numerous statements have been made about the purpose and objectives of day care programmes. The European Commission (1995b) in its recent report on pre-school education in the European Union believes that the “general purpose” of pre-school provision is:

to give children the opportunity for daily growth in an environment which offers both security and stimulation and enables them to forge close ties with adults. Children’s spontaneous activities and games have to be combined with planned and organised group activities, so that they develop their skills in working with others. . . Children must also, depending on their age and degree of maturity, become involved in organising and carrying out their activities, in order to develop a sense of responsibility towards both themselves and the community. (p. 73)

The European Commission (1995b) believes that pre-school education also plays an important preventive role because it promotes close contact between staff, children and their families, which enables the staff to provide support to families in need. The Education Information Network in the European Union (Eurydice) states that all member States of the European Union have one common objective in the field of pre-school education which is “to familiarise children with life in society and to teach them to live alongside others” (1994, p. 59). In some countries, such as Denmark, Germany, Ireland and the Netherlands:

The primary role of pre-school education is defined in terms which see it as complementary to young children’s family life, their general up-bringing and education being provided primarily by the family unit. Teachers [pædagoger] are essentially responsible for the socialisation and awakening of the child but have no remit to instruction. (Eurydice, 1994, p. 59)

In other countries such as Belgium, France, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg and Spain, importance is also placed on learning skills, with the mission being to progressively familiarise the child with the world of school. Nevertheless, the current tendency in most parts of Europe “is to seek a harmonious balance between the two functions, socialisation and learning skills” (Eurydice, 1994, p. 59).

### Early Years Care and Education Objectives: The Danish Perspective

It has been noted earlier that in seeking to understand the Danish approach to early childhood education it is important to acknowledge that it is a part of the social welfare system, a long established tradition in Denmark. Vuggestuer and børnehaver have been integral to the social welfare system since the early 1900s, mainly due to the

progressive ideas and work of people from the working class (European Commission, 1995b; Vedel-Petersen, 1992).

Vedel-Petersen (1992) notes that in some countries there are two types of institutions for young children (such as in Australia). One type has the primary objective of caring for children whose parents are in full-time employment, whilst the other serves primarily an educational purpose. However, despite the assertions quoted earlier (Eurydice, 1994, p. 59), Vedel-Petersen (1992) claims that this division has been avoided in Denmark “by seeking to establish the same standard for all institutions and to unite social and educational functions” (p. 53). Further:

It is best for children to meet challenges and participate in activities in step with their own personal growth to maturity, and that self-confidence, independence and social competence are more important than knowledge and specific abilities. This viewpoint has roots in Danish culture and an unwillingness to discard the weakest children in the community. (Vedel-Petersen, 1992, p. 53)

Vedel-Petersen (1992) notes that although there are several types of institutions for children of pre-school age, the common aim is to provide the same level of quality for all. He believes that there is no intention of giving different day care services to different social groups because “the social aims of the daycare are integrated with the educational aims” (Vedel-Petersen, 1992, p. 8).

### Social and Educational Aims of Early Childhood Programmes

Discussion continues amongst researchers outside Denmark about the relative benefits of structured educational programmes versus more socially-based programmes in supporting children’s development. Vedel-Petersen (1992) believes that the discussion

is related primarily to the aspect of child development different researchers find most important. The particular function or purpose of the various types of provision may also influence the arguments raised. Vedel-Petersen (1992) boldly states that:

This division is not found in the Danish system, and the results of researchers abroad are therefore not so interesting in Denmark, although the problem itself is. Even though Scandinavian research has approved of our nursery schools, it is possible that resources could be utilized better and that without infringing fundamental ideas an even more stimulating and varied work programme could be established. (p. 46)

Andersen (1993) believes that the social aspects of children's development is crucial and that:

The characteristic features of the young child's development are, first of all play, and through the social contexts the child enters into, learning by experience and, to a lesser degree, achieving results from education. (p. 20)

### Curriculum and Methodology

Vedel-Petersen (1992) believes that in Danish børnehavne programmes children have a "large say" in the activities and educational opportunities they choose to respond to. Further, børnehavne programmes "pay little heed to formal instruction, completion and achievement" but encourage children to regulate their own games and social relationships (p. 17). Emphasis is placed on a versatile development promoting self-expression, independence and self-sufficiency and the achievement of social maturity through group activities (Vedel-Petersen, 1992). Andersen (1993) concurs:

If possible, the child organizes the content and theme of his play according to his *own wishes* . . . the play starts from the child himself. Early childhood education chooses as its starting point *the teacher organizing* the child's activities, with the object of [helping] him acquire knowledge about a specific subject or learning certain skills. (p. 20)

The social goals for many Danish børnehaver support this notion. Commonly stated objectives include: (a) awareness, imagination and a desire to learn; (b) confidence in their abilities; (c) understanding of other cultures and the interaction between people and nature; and (d) active participation, consciousness of rights and duties in a society characterised by democracy and liberty (Eurydice, 1994, p. 86). Andersen (1993) believes that the pædagog should reflect these goals in the børnehave:

Without the teacher's ability to grasp the children's signals and to react accordingly . . . without a *responsive behaviour*, the quality of the educational process is reduced to an outer framework and adult control. (p. 10)

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Now that the reader has become acquainted with the Danish approach to early years care and education, the question "so what?" needs to be addressed. How can these data add to knowledge and help contribute to early years programmes and outcomes in Australia?

One of the most striking observations the researcher made was that a nation's view of family and children affects significantly the policy and subsequent provision of children's services. Bereday's (1964) notion that how nations take care of their children "tells unerringly who they are" (p. 5) is most apt:

It is not sufficient simply to look at how parents socialize children, rather it is important to look at how a particular society at a given point in history structures its money, its political laws and social rules to use children instrumentally for the broader social purposes defined by that age. (Edgar, 1993, p. 21)

### Ideological, Cultural and Institutional Roots of Policy

The researcher believes that the cultural beliefs and norms underpinning policy are crucial keys to unlocking a nation's approach to early years care and education provision. Before any discussion about the content or intent of policy can occur, it is important to attempt to define what "policy" is. Definitions of policy have been discussed by Garbarino, Garboursy and Plantz (1992). They suggest that policies come in many guises and forms such as cultural norms, laws, regulations, judicial rulings, administrative practices and tradition. Policies can address the means or processes to be used to achieve a policy goal objective (framed in either positive or negative terms) and can be either prescriptive or proscriptive - they are "principles that guide actions" (Garbarino et al., 1992, p. 276).

The following diagram is an interpretation of the interlinking social pressures discussed by Garbarino et al. (1992, pp. 277-279):

## **BELIEF SYSTEMS**

*(the blueprints of a given society)*

are both a source and reflection of



## **CULTURAL CONSENSUS**

*(the way things should be)*

from which arise



## **POLICIES AND MECHANISMS**

which enforce and reinforce the fundamental ideology



which give rise to

## **CONSISTENCY OF AIMS AND ACTIONS**



which in turn express the

## **IDEOLOGICAL ROOTS**

of a particular culture

Garbarino et al. (1992) assert that policy has its roots in the macrosystem because “notions of desired and undesired ends, of acceptable and unacceptable means, and of who has responsibility and priority flow from the shared belief systems of a society” (p. 277). Although the belief system of a society may not have total consensus and the power and resources may not be equally shared, those in power must at least give lip service to these beliefs by couching their policies and initiatives in the language of these overarching values. Therefore the shared belief system of the macrosystem exerts a moderating influence, at least in democratic societies (Garbarino et al. , 1992).



## Issues of Concern Regarding Danish Early Years Policy and Provision

Denmark, in many regards, is exemplary for its coherent approach to and provision of services for young children and their families. At least on a superficial level, children's services are driven by broad social goals to meet the social and economic needs of the Danish people. This appears to be in stark contrast to Australian services which, until recently, have been driven almost solely by economic agendas. The function of providing child care services for the increasing numbers of women joining the paid workforce arose pragmatically, but was not implemented with parallel concerns seeking to review and refine the nation's conceptualisation of child and family life and the place of the state in supporting Australian families.

Qvortrup and Christoffersen (1991) believe that although it is important to study childhood from a developmental point of view, a deeper understanding of childhood will be enhanced by identifying what is common for children from a societal point of view. They stress that it is important to determine the macro-parameters of the particular society in question and for childhood in the society of which it is a part.

Qvortrup and Christoffersen (1991) believe that children are a minority group, with the dominant group, globally speaking, being adults with a hegemonic power over them:

There is, however, no doubt that it is much easier to identify the interests of industrial capitalism with adults' interests than with children's interests. The resulting improvements in children's lives, therefore, assume the nature of 'trickle-down' effects, rather than top-priority interests. (p. 7)

The rather harsh viewpoint of these Danish sociologists may not reflect the Danish context in the light of its advanced social and family policies. Nevertheless, the researcher experienced uneasiness regarding some aspects of the Danish experience.

These could be divided loosely into three main areas, being issues relating to (a) equity and choice, (b) the conditions of childhood, and (c) quality.

### Equity and Choice

It appears that in Denmark the prevailing parenting ideal is the “two breadwinner” model, with both parents (biological or otherwise) in paid employment outside the family home, while the children spend six to eight hours in some form of care each week-day. Recent surveys conducted by the Socialministeriet, in collaboration with the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Children (1992), suggest that despite the affluent lifestyle this pattern of employment supports, the majority of parents, given the choice, would opt for a combination of part-time work or job-sharing in order to spend more time with their children. Part-time work is generally discouraged by employers and unions, who argue that most jobs do not lend themselves to part-time employment.

Parents who choose to stay at home to care for their young children find themselves ineligible for access to child care services (either subsidies or places), so must resort to private (and frequently) expensive alternatives. Occasional care, whilst very popular in Australia, is uncommon in Denmark. “Stay at home” parents (who represent under 10% of parents in Denmark, excluding the unemployed) are finding themselves, as mentioned earlier, “home alone” in the near-empty suburbs. Not only are parents at risk of social isolation (and perhaps social stigma), but also their children, who will rarely have playmates next door or nearby (as they are nearly all in day care institutions).

Has the former stigma attached to “working mothers” been exchanged for another? Is it now socially (as well as economically) unacceptable to stay at home? Does the present Danish situation represent choice or equality of opportunity, or does Danish social and family policy now favour the “working parent” (with subtle undertones of the “user-

pays” approach). Is it unreasonable to allow for parents to access occasional care as a respite from the daily challenges of child-rearing or to pursue “non-career” interests?

## The Conditions of Childhood

### The Child's View

Child issues are at stake too! Does the child have a choice about his or her lifestyle? Qvortrup (1991) suggests that: “The question which must be raised is whether it can be taken for granted that adults always represent children’s interests when they are called on to do so” and that in determining the main agencies in the construction of childhood (such as the state, the parents and the market) it is important not to forget the children themselves (p. 16). Research which focuses on children’s views of early years programmes or lifestyle is not common in Australia or Denmark.

The researcher had many informal conversations with Danish parents who are concerned about the “business” of their young children’s lives - the rush to be out of the house by 7:00 am and the weary return at 6:00 pm. Some parents have reported that their children are exhausted by these busy routines and that “quality time” must be deferred to weekends. Has modern Danish family life been reduced to a schedule of work and institutional day care? Has anyone paused to consider the child’s experience and point of view? What *do* Danish children think about their lifestyle? Can children speak for themselves? Qvortrup (1991) believes that there is a need for more discussion on the rights of children in their own surroundings: “Children have seen no progress in their rights *as a social group* in such everyday institutional settings as families, day care and schools” (p. 39).

The issues raised above flow naturally on to the broader implications for children in Denmark today. What are the conditions of childhood? The timetabling, business and increasing “institutionalisation” emerged as issues of concern to the researcher.

The conception of childhood as a social construction or a structural form underpins the *Childhood as a Social Phenomenon* project which was funded by the European Centre. The primary goal of the Project was to “locate those societal *agencies* and *factors*, which play a *dynamic* role in creating and constructing childhood as a social category” (Qvortrup, 1991, p. 15). The theoretical assumption is that children are no less actively involved in society at large or affected by significant societal events than are adults:

... one of the basic tenets of this project is that childhood and the life conditions of children are fundamentally determined by the same economic, political and social forces, which create the framework of adults’ lives. Macroscopic changes which at a societal level have altered opportunities and prospects for adults are also assumed to be relevant for explaining the main features of childhood. We assume that when the political and economic landscape changes it is bound to have an impact on all population groups, unless specific measures are taken to prevent it. (Qvortrup, 1991, pp. 14-15)

Qvortrup (1991) acknowledges that not all groups will be equally affected by these forces and the impact of various factors may have a direct bearing on some groups whilst not on others.

As Danish children spend increasing periods of time outside their home environment, how will this influence their development? As questioned earlier by Dencik et al. (1989): Who is the primary socialiser of the child? Whose values and beliefs will the child adopt if, in apparent “dual-socialisation” contexts, the values and beliefs are in

conflict? Whose linguistic models will be the most powerful, whose attitudes towards learning? Will “norm-pluralism” prevail and if so, what are its implications?

Acknowledging that we cannot turn back the clock and return to the “way things were” and conceding that the “traditional” family model of a breadwinner parent and a home-based parent caring for children no longer reflects reality for the majority of people, several questions still need to be raised. How do Danish children construe the notion of “family”? Do children need “traditional” models of parenting to equip them for future parenthood? What will future paternal and maternal roles be? Is quality child care a substitute for family life as we know it?

### Quality Issues

Given the concerns about equity and the conditions of childhood, quality emerges as a key factor impacting either negatively or positively on children and families. Can high or exemplary quality services relieve some of the concerns and defuse the rising pressures on family and society?

The researcher proposes that an important question to be addressed concerning quality is: How do we (the collective society in which we participate) appear to view children and what role do we have to play in relation to their lives? Subsidiary questions concern the perceived role and purpose of child care, kindergarten, formal schooling and social services and how to balance these with broader societal needs. How too, do we balance the needs of the individual and the group and the respective responsibilities of family and state?

The challenge for policy-makers, researchers, practitioners and parents is to explore how quality can be defined and described. How can the various viewpoints be accommodated? More importantly, how can a framework for identifying (and

measuring) quality embrace those more elusive affective and motivational elements embedded in quality whilst also remaining dynamic and responsive to change at the macro, meso and micro levels? Who is the “Quality Watchdog” and who is its master?

Decentralised provision, such as in Denmark, presents opportunities for flexible and high quality provision, but also allows generous margins for “error”. Politicians in the Danish kommuner have the power and authority to structure early childhood provision within their own kommune. One needs to determine how well-informed politicians’ decisions are and how well they balance the varying needs of their constituents. What relative weighting is given to services for the elderly and services for the young? Can inequities be checked and by whom? Qvortrup (1991) speaks of “distributive justice” and considers it important to ask whether resources “be they economic, social or cultural - [are] evenly distributed between generations. . . For children, the crude question would be - do they get a fair share of societal resources?” (pp. 132-33).

The recently mandated regulations regarding Forældrebestyrelsen (Parent Boards) for early childhood institutions add another dimension to concerns surrounding decentralisation. As in Australia, Danish parents vary widely in their educational backgrounds and awareness of care and education issues. Although well-educated, politically-aware parents may advocate effectively for their children, what of the less articulate parent population? Informal discussions where the researcher was included indicated that early childhood workers are less attracted to working in the “poorer” areas (such as outer Copenhagen) and that staff transience is a problem. Further, it has been suggested that early childhood services are “impoverished” in poorer kommuner in their environs, staffing and programmes. Despite Denmark’s laudable egalitarian society, inequities do exist, albeit with fewer extremes than in Australia. Who will speak out for the needs and interests of the Danish “under-class” and is there a danger that they might be offered and expected to accept sub-standard services?

## Who “Owns” Children?

Oakley (1993) challenges researchers in the area of children’s studies to consider closely the choice of preposition appropriate for describing their research: “Is the work being done *about* or *on* children, or is it in some sense *for* children?” (p. 60). Qvortrup (1991) observes that it is common for different groups of professionals to compete to be “in charge” of children.

The question of who *owns* children is an issue under debate in Denmark and to a lesser degree, in Australia. Perspectives on who owns, or is responsible for, children may differ according to the point of view and function of the respondent (child care worker, teacher, health worker, social worker, paediatricians psychologists, parents):

The point of children’s studies is to critically examine these perspectives and measure them against the knowledge about children supplied by children themselves. But it is also essentially for the practitioners of children’s studies to consider the *ultimate goal* of their exercise. Is it to *provide knowledge* capable of being used *by children* in their struggle for some notion of their civil rights? Or is it to *advance the academic positions* of researchers, who can build on their work in children’s studies . . . [and] claim to be the developers of a new specialism to join all the others that already exist and that segment children’s lives and minds and bodies between different professional groups? (Oakley, 1993, pp. 66-67)

### The Policy Dilemma

Kagan (1993) identifies four challenges associated with applying research to policy in early years care and education. The first involves the differing values about the role of researchers in policy formation and more fundamentally, the role of government in the lives of children and their families. A second challenge concerns the lack of definitional clarity or agreed upon definitions of various forms of policy-related research and policy analysis and their relevance or impact on policy generation or reformation. The third challenge is the differing process and context agendas of researchers and policy-makers. Kagan (1993) suggests that whilst policy-makers are concerned primarily with the direct impact of intervention programmes or policies on child outcomes, researchers must broaden the conceptualisation and frame of reference for policy-makers "to include synergistic effects on children, families, and community" (pp. 508-509). The challenge for those researching early years care and education using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework of human development, is to shift the focus from the familiar and comfortable microsystem to the murky and uncharted waters of the exo and macrosystems (Phillips, 1984, in Kagan, 1993). The fourth challenge relates to the problems associated with devising and measuring child outcomes that are relevant and informative to researchers, policy-makers, children and their families.

Kagan (1993) suggests that two central questions arise from these dilemmas: "What is right for young children and their families to ensure their optimal development?" and "To what are young children rightfully entitled?" (p. 510). Most researchers in the field of early years care and education agree on the rights of young children (Harms & Clifford, 1993; Kagan, 1993; RSA, 1994; Ochiltree & Edgar, 1995; Wangmann, 1995). Disagreement arises, however, over the question of entitlement. The issues that come under scrutiny are: (a) quality and cost effectiveness of early care and



education; (b) access, affordability, diversity and integration of services; and (c) type of training and ongoing professional development of early years care and education staff (Harms & Clifford, 1993; Gifford, 1993; Kagan, 1993; RSA, 1993; Ochiltree & Edgar, 1995; Wangmann, 1995). What has yet to be achieved is the development of a culturally appropriate, clearly shared vision and agenda for children and family services in Australia. Such a re-conceptualisation should foster equity, inform policy-makers and encourage the integration of services.

### Comparative Research: Lessons from Denmark

One of the benefits of conducting research in a foreign country such as Denmark is that the researcher had the opportunity to stand back from her own, all too familiar system and view it from afar. It was challenging to describe in objective terms, the Western Australian approach to early years care and education to those in another and different cultural and political context. It was difficult to ascertain the “taken-for-granted” variables influencing both policy and provision. In addition to the standard or predictable factors such as centralised versus decentralised approaches, administrative styles, “edu-care” versus separate concepts of education and care, relevant policies and legislation and inter-sectorial relationships, the researcher found herself drawn repeatedly into dialogues relating to history, philosophy, sociology and culture. These issues included prevailing views about the role of government in society, particularly as they relate to family and parenthood and children and childhood.

The researcher believes that the power of history cannot be overlooked, nor can deeply ingrained philosophical approaches and established cultural practices be ignored when investigating a nation’s approach to care and education (or any other area for that matter). Further, the researcher would, in the light of recent experience, view with extreme caution, reports from foreign countries resulting from “flying visits” of researchers, practitioners or policy-makers. The taken-for-grantedness of a myriad of

beliefs and practices relating to the area under investigation takes many months to “unfold” and (rather inconveniently) is rarely found in papers and reports, but is frequently revealed through casual conversations, observation and serendipity.

On a more practical level, the researcher was able to identify exo and mesosystem influences affecting children’s services in Denmark which helped her understand better the process of policy development, implementation and subsequent provision. Asking “naive questions” (one of the privileges granted to foreign researchers) was enormously valuable and surprisingly, often left interviewees flummoxed because the matter was so “basic” that it was assumed the researcher would *already* know such things. This has alerted the researcher to the hidden dangers of assuming background knowledge (a common teaching flaw) and also equipped her with a greater awareness of the diverse range of variables to consider when studying foreign or local systems of provision.

### Critical Issues for Discourse

The overarching issue as the researcher sees it is: “Whose interests are being served by early childhood services?” Is it the Folketing’s social and economic agendas, employers and their unions, parents, or children? Who are the beneficiaries? Who are the visionaries and advocates and who do they represent? Who has the loudest “voice” and is sufficiently powerful to sound an alarm? The researcher questions whether policy-makers, researchers, practitioners and parents have taken sufficient time to reflect on their assumptions about their own children and their views on childhood:

Overwhelmingly, it is still the parents or the state who speak on behalf of children, and not the children themselves. Parents and state constitute the main agencies in the construction of childhood. This reality, therefore, must be accepted as a dominant aspect of childhood in modern society -

even though the two agencies do not always speak with the same voice, but rather as parties in a continuous negotiation over childhood. (Qvortrup, 1991, p. 39)

How do those interested in the welfare of children influence the conditions of childhood? The recent wave of innovations such as natbørnehaver and weekendbørnehaver (night and weekend kindergartens) signal developments that the researcher considers insidious and in need of serious contemplation. Perhaps we should “take stock” of current trends and re-assess the underlying priorities

The researcher proposes that all people involved with and interested in the welfare of young children re-analyse the role of government in society and establish consensus on the respective responsibilities of family and state in regard to children. Has the pursuit of affluence and personal fulfilment clouded certain fundamental human values? With whose voice will the next generation speak and who will raise our children?

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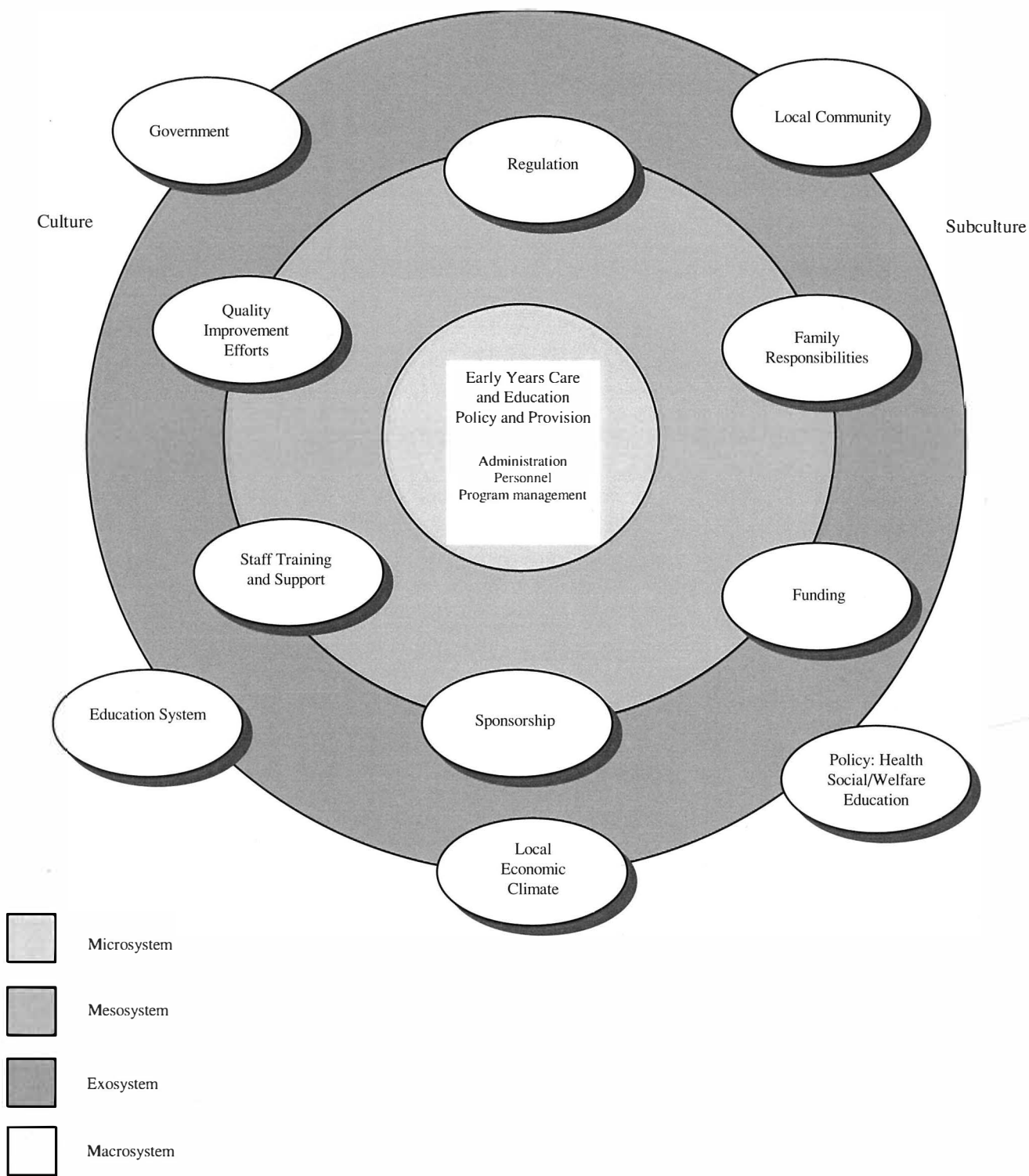
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APPENDIX A

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**



Theoretical Framework for Analysis of Early Years Care and Education Policy and Provision (adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Harms & Clifford, 1993, p. 480)