Towards universal quality childcare: the Norwegian model

Anne Lise Ellingsæter

In a historical perspective, childcare services in Norway have developed from targeted services for the needy towards a universal arrangement (Ellingsæter & Gulbrandsen 2007). Today universal access to childcare is reflected both in that day care is institutionalised as a social right for children 1-5 and that the great majority of children in this age group – 90 percent - are enrolled in childcare services. The present model has developed gradually in a dynamic interplay of supply and demand over the past 30-40 years (ibid.). Although sharing similarities with the other Scandinavian welfare states, the Norwegian model exhibits some distinctive features. Central government is responsible for funding and legal/regulatory aspects, and thus vital in ensuring the establishment and expansion of day-care centres and a relatively unified standard of services. But ownership is a public-private mix, since the mid-1970s about half of all day care centres have been privately owned. Meeting parents’ demand, especially for places for children under the age of 3, and the institutionalisation of childcare as a legal right have been much slower than in the other Scandinavian countries. However, the 2000s saw concerted political commitment to expand access to childcare at reasonable costs for parents. Under the new condition of full coverage, policy efforts are directed at strengthening the quality of services, including all children. This chapter outlines main features of the Norwegian ECEC model and addresses key policy challenges.

Major policy reforms and rationales

The Day Care Institution Act of 1975 represented the start of modern childcare services in Norway. The 1975 act stated that day care should be a service for all parents who wanted it (Leira 1992). Childcare thus became part of universally oriented welfare services, supported
by nearly all political parties. But it would take more than three decades to achieve close to ‘full coverage’, i.e. provision of day care places to all parents who want a place for their child.

In the 1980s’ political debate about the development of childcare services, the political left wanted more day care places with longer hours while the political right considered too much day care as harmful to children (Vollset 2011: 93). In the 1990s, parents’ demand for childcare was overshadowed by the paramount policy debate of ‘more time for children’ and ‘parental choice’ (Ellingsæter 2003). The two major family policy reforms in the decade were the extension of parental leave to one year in 1993, and in 1998 the introduction of a cash for care benefit for 1-2 year olds who do not use publicly subsidised childcare services. The benefit could also be used to purchasing private care. The 1990s family policy debate was dominated by the controversy over the cash for care benefit which was supported by centre-right parties, with parties on the left in fierce opposition. The main aim of the cash for care reform was to improve parents’ opportunities to provide good childcare, based on the assumption that parental care is the best for the youngest children. Another main rationale was equal distribution of government care subsidies among families; private child minders should be subsidised like publicly funded childcare.

After the introduction of the cash for care benefit a new political situation emerged, giving space for a stronger focus on childcare services (Ellingsæter & Gulbrandsen 2007). The 2000s saw important reforms influencing the supply and demand for childcare. In 2003 an all-party Childcare Compromise was reached. This compromise was preceded by the Childcare Agreement in 2002. This was an agreement about financing and managing of the childcare sector among the majority parliament opposition; the Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party (agrarian base) in an unusual alliance with the Progress Party (whose earlier position has been that childcare is a private, not a public responsibility). The minority centre-right Government was requested to make proposals as to how the agreement could be implemented. This Government presented their proposal in 2003 (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs 2003a, b). The outcome of the parliament process was the all-party compromise about changes in economic and legal measures. The main aims were sector expansion and lower parents’ fees. Main measures were to increase state input and strengthen the municipalities’ responsibility for the childcare sector. Public subsidies to childcare services were to be increased substantially, to 80 percent of running costs. A maximum parent fee was to be introduced, inspired by the Swedish model. A legal obligation was imposed on
municipalities to offer childcare services. The principle of equal public subsidies to publicly and privately owned childcare institutions was stated. Moreover, when ‘full coverage’ was achieved, earmarked state grants to services should be replaced by a block grant to municipalities and a legal right to childcare should be introduced.

Modern Norwegian kindergartens have been guided by a social pedagogical tradition common to the Nordic countries, typified by a holistic approach to child development and learning. Childhood is perceived as a life stage with its own value, and care, play and learning are seen in relation to each other (NOU 2010: 44). The holistic approach is also reflected in the organisation of childcare services as a social institution: The kindergarten covers all children under 5, thus there is no division between care for the under 3s and preschool for children 3 and older, as in many other European countries.

The pedagogical aim of kindergartens in the best interest of the child has been the main legitimation of childcare services. Attitudes towards working mothers and use of full-time childcare services were long ambivalent (Ellingsæter & Gulbrandsen 2007). Today parents’ needs for childcare are acknowledged: «Besides being a service for children, kindergartens also facilitate care and supervision when parents are working or studying, and thus pedagogy and care go hand in hand in the Norwegian kindergarten tradition (Ministry of Children and Equality 2003: 7). Like in many other countries, a shift towards a social investment paradigm has taken place in recent years (see e.g. Jenson 2004). An important aim of the kindergarten is to give children language and communication competence, which is part of a long life learning perspective and an investment in future productive citizens (Ministry of Children and Equality 2003: 7). Responsibility for childcare services was transferred from the Ministry of Children and Equality to the Ministry of Education and Research in 2006. Emphasis on play and development of social competence is somewhat weakened, while cognitive development is more accentuated (NOU 2010: 46-47). In tandem with the increased efforts to achieve full coverage, quality of services has become a key policy issue, reflected in a number of policy document and commissioned government expert reports in the 2000s (e.g. Ministry of Education 2009, Ministry of Children and Family Affairs 1999, NOU 2010, 2012). Kindergartens of high quality are increasingly considered an important arena for securing equal opportunities and reducing social inequality (NOU 2009, 2010, 2012). Needs of immigrant children are emphasised in particular.
Children enrolled in childcare services

Today’s Kindergarten Act (Act no. 64 of June 2005 relating to Kindergartens) entered into force January 2006, regulates the authorisation, operation and supervision of childcare services. Municipalities are the local authorities for kindergartens, and must approve kindergartens, provide guidance to them and ensure that kindergartens are operated in accordance with existing rules. Privately owned kindergartens have a legal right to approval if they are suitable in terms of purpose and content and fulfil the requirements in the act. Childcare services are in the main provided at the municipal level (429 municipalities). In 2011, there were 6 579 day care centres, enrolling 277 000 children (Statistics Norway 2012). Opening hours vary between institutions, but 89 percent are open 9.5-10 hours per day (NOU 2012: 90). Children’s actual hours spent in day care are estimated to an average of 30-35 per week (NOU 2012: 91-92). Services are for the most part organised in day care centres. But there are also some family day care units in private homes; providing a regulated alternative to private nannies. The usual arrangement being one employee taking care of 4-5 children in one of the parents’ home, including 7 568 children in 2010, mostly children under 3 (NOU 2012: 75). In addition, there are ‘open kindergartens’, where children are not enrolled and parents/other care persons are present, including 5 720 children in 2011 (Statistics Norway 2012).

For several decades, there was a huge gap between the supply of childcare services and the demand of parents (Ellingsæter & Gulbrandsen 2007). In the 1960s, when mothers’ employment started to grow, barely 2 percent of preschool age children were enrolled in day care. The passing of the Day Care Institutions Act in 1975 was followed by an expansion in places, coverage rates increased from 7 percent in 1975 to 21 percent in 1980 (ibid.). But the places were mostly part-time and for the 5 and 6 year olds. In the 1980s, further expansion was slow, only 35 percent of preschool age children had a place at the beginning of the 1990s. In the 1990s, coverage rates improved considerably, mainly because the parental leave was extended to one year in 1993 and school age was lowered from 7 to 6 years in 1997. The expansion of places was actually lower than in the two preceding decades. Also, a significant amount of the new places for the youngest children were in family day care, which is less expensive to run as less staff is required per child compared to ordinary day care centres. Family day care was thought to be more ‘family like’, and thus better suited for the youngest children, than ordinary day care centres with many children. These units resemble private child minder arrangements,
except for the public subsidy and some public control of the operation, and the great majority of parents’ prefer ordinary day care (Ellingsæter & Gulbrandsen 2007).

The 2000s may deserve the characteristic of a childcare ‘revolution’: In 2000 two of three children aged 1-5 were enrolled in day care, in 2011 nine out of ten were enrolled (Table 1). Nearly all 3-5 year olds, 97 percent, had a place in childcare in 2011, for this group growth in rates levelled off in the most recent years. A remarkable increase took place among the 1 and 2 year olds, labelled a ‘toddler invasion’ by some (Løvgren & Gulbrandsen 2012: 8). In 2000, 37 percent of 1-2 year olds were enrolled in day care, compared to 80 percent in 2011; 88 percent among 2 year olds and 71 percent among 1 year olds. In 2011, children under 3 constituted 36 percent of all children in day care (Statistics Norway 2012). Parents’ demand for full-time places has also been met in this decade; 90 percent of 1-5 year olds were enrolled full-time in 2011. A huge expansion in the number of places is behind these coverage rates, but demographic trends also contributed as there was a decline in the number of children 1-5 years old (Ministry of Children and Equality 2005: 14). In a Nordic perspective, Norwegian coverage rates for children 2-5 year olds are on par with Denmark and Sweden, while coverage rates for the one year olds are somewhat lower than in Denmark, but higher than in Sweden (Table 2). Denmark also has a higher share of children under 1 year old in day care than Norway, where the coverage is only 4 percent.

Supply and demand of childcare services are influenced by the national childcare regime, i.e. the national mix of main care policy elements (Ellingsæter 2006). In Norway, the parental leave system and the cash for care benefit are important. The current paid parental leave is 47 weeks/100 percent or 57 weeks/80 percent wage replacement (2012). Nearly three of four parents choose the longest leave alternative (Grambo & Myklebø 2009). The cash for care benefit for 1-2 year olds was offered until 2012, when the benefit was amended. The tax-free benefit has been NOK 3303/month, approximately 400 euros. Children in part-time day care have received a reduced benefit proportionately to weekly attendance. When the benefit was introduced, a high proportion of Norwegian parents received it, but this has declined ever since: At the end of 1999, 75 percent of parents of 1-2 year olds received the benefit, compared to only 25 percent of parents at the end of 2011 (30 percent among 1 year olds and 20 percent among 2 year olds). The share of parents taking up full benefit also declined, from 84 to 75 percent. The massive decline is associated with the expansion of services and reduced parents’ fees. As of 1 August 2012 the majority centre-left government discontinued
the cash for care benefit for the 2 year olds. Graduation rules for one-year-old children were changed, and age based rates were introduced (Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion 2012). The rationale of the reform was the benefit’s negative impact on mothers’ employment and use of childcare, which is considered particularly harmful to the integration of women and children with immigrant background; especially to the development of children’s language skills (Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion 2012).

**Socio-economic variation in enrolment rates**

In the late 1980s, the socio-economic profile of parents using day care services was documented for the first time, showing an unequal distribution among socio-economic groups; middle class children were enrolled more often than children from less resourceful families (Gulbrandsen & Tønnesen 1988). Differences still exist, but have been reduced in the past decade in tandem with increasing supply of places and lower parents’ fees. For example, a study of change in the period 2004-2008 indicates that day care attendance was higher for those with higher income than for those with lower income, but the increase was higher for those from households with lower income (Sæther 2010: 6). The gap between children from households with high level of education and those with upper secondary education was also reduced.

A survey of families’ childcare preferences from 2010 shows that the use of childcare is correlated with parents’ employment status, educational level and income, but to a much lesser degree among children aged 3-5 than among those aged 1-2 (Moafi & Bjørkli 2011). Enrolment among children aged 3-5 is quite high in all family types; the lowest rates, 87 percent are found in families with no or one wage earner. In single parent or dual earner families more or less all children are enrolled in childcare (table 3). Variation among children aged 1-2 is larger: The highest enrolment rates were found among employed single parents (100 percent) and dual earner families (85 percent). Also the majority of children from one-income families, 58 percent, were enrolled in childcare services, while families with no wage income had the lowest rates.

Enrolment of the 3-5 year old by parents’ education varies between 97 percent among the highly educated and 88 percent among those with only primary education (Table 3). Figures for low income groups show a similar pattern. Enrolment by educational levels is considerably larger among the 1-2 year olds: 82 percent among the highly educated compared
to 53 percent among those with lowest educational levels. Children with a non-western background have lower enrolment rates, many in the low income/education groups are immigrants. Among the 3-5 year old immigrant children, the enrolment rate is high, 90 percent, but 7 percentage points lower than among children with western background (table 3). A slight majority, 58 percent, among children 1-2 with non-western background have a place in childcare services, 22 percentage points lower than among children with western background. Yet the number of immigrant children in day care has been increasing; in 2011 they constituted 11 percent of all children in day care (Statistics Norway 2012). Children with disabilities have priority access to day care (Ministry of Education and Research 2009: 91). In 2008, this group amounted to 5.5 percent of all children in childcare services. There is some geographical variation in coverage rates, ranging between 95 and 85 percent among the counties. The capital, Oslo, had the lowest rate (Statistics Norway 2012), which might reflect its higher immigrant population.

Children who are not attending day care are hence increasingly becoming a minority, especially among children aged 3 and older. Parents of these children have lower education and income than parents with children in day care (Sæther 2010). Qualitative studies report cultural differences in how parents talk about childcare. One study finds that working class parents believe that 1 and 2 year olds need peaceful surroundings, while middle class parents emphasise more the child’s individual development (Stefansen & Farstad 2008). That children need peaceful surroundings is also mentioned in a study of parents who do not use childcare for their 3-5 year olds (Seeberg 2010). These parents see day care as part of an organised and stressful life based on the premises of working life. Parents (read: mothers) are considered the best care persons for their children, and mothers’ opportunity to stay at home is a privilege and a choice they have the right to take. The latter study found different rationales related to class, ethnicity and place, but there were also many similarities. The extent to which values/attitudes are the reason for parents' choices or a justification of choices already made is difficult to tell (ibid.). Some class differences in opinions on kindergarten pedagogics are also reported from a qualitative study (Stefansen & Skogen 2010).

Several explanations have been suggested for the lower use of childcare among immigrant children (NOU 2012: 72). The introduction of the cash for care benefit for the 1-2 year olds was associated with a decline in immigrant parents’ use of day care. However, the take up of the benefit has fallen also among parents with background from Asia and Africa, but much
less than the general trend. Parents’ fees seem important to the use of services. Since 2006, pilot projects in parts of the capital, Oslo, offer free day care for 20 hours per week for all 4 and 5 year olds. Evaluation reports show that almost all children participate, and there has been a shift towards more full-time day care as the total costs has become lower (NOU 2010: 56). However, when a parent fee of NOK 650 (about 80 euros)/month was introduced, about one third of those in the target group failed to appear (NOU 2012: 72). Although free part-time services provide language training, the effect may be limited when almost all children participating have a minority background (majority share 2-10 percent).

Childcare as a social right – principle and practice

The 1975 Day Care Institution Act established that municipalities had the responsibility for developing and managing childcare facilities, but this did not entail an obligation to establish such services (NOU 2012: 68). Only in the 2000s this responsibility became clarified legally. In 2004 municipalities were assigned the obligation to provide a sufficient number of places. In 2009 the majority red-green government established a legal right to childcare services for children 1-5 years old. The right to childcare is not dependent on parents’ labour market status, in contrast to for instance Sweden, where the right to childcare is reserved for economically active parents.

The right to childcare comes into force when the child is one year of age, i.e. the municipality has to offer services from August to children who have become one year or more before 1 September. This date is related to the main annual uptake of children in day care, nearly 60 000 places are made available each year when the six year olds start school. Children who become 1 year after this date do not have the right to a place before August next year, and thus may have to wait up to a year if places are not available. Only a few municipalities are not able to provide places to all parents entitled to this right. For parents whose child becomes 1 year after 1 September, it may imply an extended period on unpaid leave and thus economic loss, or finding a temporary private nanny. It is claimed that parents have adapted to the new regulation by planning their births; midwives at maternity wards report the top months of child births to be the summer months, compared to previously the spring months. However, this trend started before the legal right was established, and is likely to be caused by the recent decade’s rapid increase in supply of services for the youngest children combined with only one annual uptake of children to day care centres. Municipalities practice the regulation
differently, and two annual uptakes are suggested by an expert commission (NOU 2012). The government contends that this is very costly, involving scarce personnel resources; no political party has suggested this to the parliament so far.\textsuperscript{8}

The discontinuation of the cash for care benefit for the 2 year olds is expected to increase the demand for childcare services further. However, 19 municipalities have decided to offer the benefit for the 2 year olds; most of them are centre-right local governments in the more conservative regions of Norway.\textsuperscript{9} For example, the fourth largest city in Norway introduces a cash for care benefit of NOK 4000 (about 500 euros) for 2 year olds from the fall of 2012, provided that the child does not use childcare services at all.\textsuperscript{10} The argument is that it will support the ‘choice’ of families, but it is also emphasised that it will strengthen the municipal’s economy as a place in the childcare services is more expensive than the cash benefit. The number of places for 2 year olds in childcare services will be reduced. However, few parents are reported to have applied for the benefit in the municipalities offering it. If interest is increasing, the government considers taxing this benefit.\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{Financing of services}

Kindergartens are financed by the state, the municipalities and the parents.\textsuperscript{12} Government grants have been the key incentive for expansion and operation of services. Government earmarked grants to childcare services amounted to 26.3 billion NOK in 2010 (about 3.3 billion euros). In 2011, municipalities took over the responsibility of financing childcare services, both municipal and non-municipal institutions. Government funding of childcare services was then shifted from earmarked grants, i.e. targeted for this specific service, to general purpose grants to municipalities, i.e. block grants that are not earmarked for particular services or sector Block grants are used for well-established services. General purpose grants have been the key principle in government transfers to municipalities since 1986 (NOU 2010: 52). They are considered important for local decision making, encouraging local initiatives, giving the municipality the opportunity to prioritise resources according to local costs and service needs of the population. The earmarked grants were based on the number of children in services; their age and the number of weekly hours spent in day care, while block grants are based on a distributional key based on several objective criteria related to municipal characteristics. Kindergartens with children that need extra resources receive extra economic funding from the state and the municipality.\textsuperscript{13} There are also earmarked state grants to
municipalities for support to improving language skills among minority children.\textsuperscript{14} In 2011, the financing of childcare services included 1 percent state grants, 83 percent municipal grants and 15 percent user fees (Statistics Norway 2012). Childcare services constituted 14.9 percent of the total net operational costs of municipalities, and were the third largest municipal service sector, next after care services and primary education.

Block grants are a significantly different way of distributing finances of childcare institutions; childcare services will have to compete with other municipal welfare services (NOU 2010: 54). Experts maintain that the childcare sector is not yet stable, new day centres are still built and the lack of pre-school teachers is considerable (ibid.). However, in the short term the shift from earmarked to block grants does not seem to have caused changes in the municipalities’ provision of places (NOU 2012: 150).

\textit{Equity in funding of publicly and privately owned institutions}

Norwegian childcare services are based on a mixed public-private ownership model. Most of the early institutions were private; in 1963 only 21 percent were publicly owned (Gulbrandsen 2007). Since the mid-1970s the public-private ownership distribution has been about fifty-fifty, with a somewhat higher public share until the mid-1995, and a somewhat higher private share during the 2000s, thus the recent rapid expansion also relied on the initiatives of private owners. In 2010, 54 percent of childcare centres were privately owned (Bjørnestad & Samuelsson 2012, table 16). However, 53 percent of all children were enrolled in publicly owned day care centres, which often are larger than the private ones. Almost all publicly owned centres are owned by municipalities. When municipalities failed to accommodate the increasing demand, the public system of financing day care made it possible for parents and organisations to move in. A substantial proportion of private centres have been owned by parents (29 percent of privately owned childcare institutions, representing 50 percent of the places in 2002).

A principle of equal treatment of public and private institutions with regard to funding was part of the 2003 Childcare Compromise. Equal treatment implies a gradual increase in municipal grants to non-municipal services (to reach 100 percent in 2014). This will enable non-municipal childcare institutions to offer working conditions/pay equal to the municipal institutions (NOU 2010: 52). Cost estimates suggest that non-municipal kindergartens have had lower costs than municipal ones, mainly generated by differences in employee-child ratio
and personnel costs. Costs in non-municipal centres in 2010 were 92 percent of the costs in municipal centres (NOU 2012: 73).

While the majority of private owners previously were non-profit, the ownership structure is changing. For profit ownership has become more common, posing new policy challenges (Prop. 98 L (2011-2012)). Since 2003, several new organisational forms have been established in the private sector, some with commercial motives (Ministry of Education 2011: 5). There is a clear shift towards limited liability companies among private owners. Profit for commercial owners is a disputed issue in relation to welfare services in general in Norway, profit extraction is not allowed for private schools, for example. The main opportunity to generate profit in the private childcare sector would be through cost adjustments, i.e. operating with lower costs than municipal services. Profit extraction is not widespread today, but a problem in some cases. The majority Red-green Government has introduced regulations for the use of public subsidies and parents’ fees in non-municipal childcare institutions, in force from 2013, in order to ‘secure that equal financing leads to equal quality in the kindergartens […] and that municipal grants and parents’ fees in non-municipal kindergartens are put to the benefit of children’ (Ministry of Education 2011: 5). Private institutions are allowed a reasonable profit (‘a reasonable annual result’).

Municipalities may use economic sanctions if private owners do not comply with the regulation. It was stated that the general impression is that non-municipal day care centres are well run (ibid.). The centre-right parliament opposition voted against the law, contending that the regulation was based on a general mistrust to private ownership in day care institutions, and a view that money in the private day care sector are not put to the benefit of children (Innst. 352 L (2011-2012: 8).

Parents’ fees

Parents’ fees have been substantially reduced over the past decade due to the maximum fee. The maximum fee is decided in the government’s annual budgets. In 2012 the maximum parent fee was 2330 NOK per month, about 300 euros.16 The Kindergarten Act states that for the second child fees should be reduced by at least 30 percent, for the third child and subsequent children reduction should be at least 50 percent. Moreover, municipalities also have an obligation to establish arrangements that offer families with the lowest ability to pay a reduction or exemption of parents’ fees, including non-municipal day care centres. The arrangement is up to the municipality. Families with the lowest incomes have had a lower real
reduction in fees than parents with high income (NOU 2010: 54). Low income families spend two or three times more of their income on childcare compared to high income families (Ministry of Education and Research 2009). A survey from 2006 showed that 11 percent of municipalities had no arrangement for the families with the lowest ability to pay; a more recent survey suggested 8 percent (ibid.). Most municipalities employ social assistance schemes or income graded schemes; 30 percent offer income graded fees, while 38 percent offer economic social assistance. Income graded fees are supposed to include non-municipal institutions, but this is not the case in 14 percent of the municipalities. It is the most densely populated municipalities that have income graded fees. Almost half of all children in municipal day care institutions live in a municipality with no such arrangement.

**Regulations and quality of services**

There are variations in the childcare sector with regard to size, organisation, personnel and quality (Ministry of Education and Research 2009). The Kindergarten Act is the most important tool to secure quality in the services (NOU 2010). The aims of childcare services stated in the Kindergarten Act are general; there are few standard requirements which give space for local accommodations (NOU 2010: 53). The act states that kindergartens shall lay a sound foundation for the child’s development, life-long learning and active participation in a democratic society. The Framework Plan, which is a regulation to the Kindergarten Act, specifies the content and tasks of kindergartens. The owner and employees decide work methods, equipment and organisation, based on children’s needs. Children and parents have a right to participation. A coordinating committee must establish an annual plan for the pedagogical activities. The Framework Plan establishes a national curriculum, and there is a clear connection between the Framework Plan and the curricula for Norwegian primary schools.

**Staff**

Among the few specific requirements in the Kindergarten Act regards staff qualifications and pedagogue-child ratios. According to the act, educated pre-school teachers are required in all day-care centres. Head teachers and pedagogical leaders must be trained pre-school teachers or have other college education that gives qualifications for working with children and pedagogical expertise. Pre-school teacher education is a three years university college study with bachelor degree. Educational requirements can be exempted if there are no qualified
applicants. The norm for pedagogue/child ratio stated is minimum one pedagogical leader per 14-18 children when children are three years or older, and minimum one pedagogical leader per 7-9 children when children are younger than three years old and the time spent in childcare is six hours or more per day.18 There is no specification of a general staff-child ratio; the act just states that staffing should be adequate. A new regulation specifying staff-child ration has been proposed by an expert commission (NOU 2012).19

A total of 88 800 persons were employed in childcare services in 2011 (Statistics Norway 2012). Many new places for education of preschool teachers were established during the recent decade of services expansion (NOU 2010). Still, there is a lack of qualified staff in Norwegian kindergartens today. Compared to other countries, the competence level in the sector is rather low - an expert government committee express worries about the ‘competence situation’ (NOU 2010: 49). Among all head teachers and pedagogical leaders 91 percent had preschool teacher education or pedagogical education, 13 percent were granted exemption. Pre-school teachers are stable employees, 84 percent of those employed in childcare services in 2003 were still employed in the sector four years later, compared to 63 percent of staff without such education (ibid.). The proportion of assistants with some pedagogical education was 25percent. A rather high proportion of staff, 23 percent in 2007, had only primary education, while 39 percent had secondary education (Gulbrandsen 2009). Moreover, full coverage means that the kindergartens are changing: the composition of children in day care has changed. There are more toddlers, more immigrant children and more children with special needs. Parents may also have greater demands. This situation is demanding for the staff, requiring competencies that many are lacking (NOU 2010: 51).

Day care employees have met ‘the toddler invasion’ with some reservation: about half of them think that children should start later and spend fewer hours in day care than toddlers actually do (Løvgren & Gulbrandsen 2012). Older employees are somewhat more conservative than younger ones, and the best educated staff the most positive.

Policies on quality development
Quality of childcare services is the major policy concern of the further development of childcare services. Efforts to increase quality have intensified. In 1999, a government white paper announced a three-year program to improve quality, starting in 2001 (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs 1999). Three issues were considered crucial for quality
development: a kindergarten for all children, varied and user oriented services in line with the needs of parents and children, and competent staff. Quality has been the major topic of all succeeding policy documents dealing with kindergartens. In 2009, the government presented a white paper to the Parliament focusing exclusively on the quality of kindergartens (Ministry of Education and Research 2009). The three main aims were stated: Ensure equity and high quality in all kindergartens; strengthen the kindergarten as a learning area; kindergartens should offer all children the possibility to participate in an inclusive community. Emphasis was on the further development of three quality indicators: 1) staff competence, 2) quality of the kindergarten’s learning milieu, 3) children with specific needs.

A survey among centre managers conducted in 2002 suggested that the work on quality improvement had started well (Gulbrandsen & Sundnes 2004). By the end of 2003 all kindergartens should have established routines, tools and systems designed to maintain and further develop and secure the quality. However, a new survey in 2004 suggested that only one in five managers felt that their day care centre had attained the stated goals (Gulbrandsen & Sundnes 2004). A vital question is how the strong expansion of childcare placed affected quality of services. The main finding from a survey among kindergartens in 2008 is that the expansion did not occur at the expense of quality (Winsvold & Gulbrandsen 2009). Rather the contrary, there are indications that the quality of services improved in parallel with sector expansion. A comparison of 30 different quality indicators in 2004 and 2008 indicates that day care centres in 2008 on average get a higher score than in 2004. The study indicates that the larger the day care centre, the more goals from the previous quality improvement program had been achieved.

The percentage of educated preschool teachers in day care centres varies a lot. In one in four day care centres, 27 percent or fewer of the staff had preschool teacher education (Winsvold & Gulbrandsen 2009). In another fourth of the day care centres, 43 percent or more were educated preschool teachers. Compared to 2004 there had been no decrease in the proportion of preschool teachers. The proportion of preschool teachers had increased more in the private day care centres than in municipal day care centres. Municipal day care centres were best at planning and providing training and post-qualifying education facilities for their staff. The contact between day care centres and the municipality did not improve, however, and the least contact was with private centres. This is problematic seen in light of the municipality’s authority to control centres (ibid.).
**Organisation, size and quality**

Larger day care centres and more flexible forms of organisation are main trends. New centres are usually larger than those previously established. The average number of children per day care centre is 47 (NOU 2012: 88). 62 percent have less than 52 children, covering a third of all children, while 14 percent have more than 75 children, accounting for another third of all children. Municipal kindergarten are on average larger than the private ones. Very large centres are still quite rare; centres with more than 100 children represent only 4 percent of all kindergartens and 10 percent of all children.

Worries have been voiced about these trends, particularly in relation to the increasing share of children under 3 in day care. A study in 2010 draws a complex picture of how ‘structural quality’ is ensured in kindergartens with different sizes and organisational forms (Vassenden et al. 2011). A wide range of indicators of ‘structural quality’ were measured: staff composition, competence, experience and areas of responsibility, stability, and compliance with the norms for pedagogical staffing. Other dimensions were the number of children per group (group size) and the number of children per adult in the groups, as well as opening hours, physical space (m\(^2\) per child), routines for user participation and for children’s transition periods.

A narrow majority in the sample was organized as traditional group-based kindergartens. However, most kindergartens established after 2005 had either flexible grouping, or a combination. There was no clear correlation between size and organizational form, but the majority of the largest centres (100 children or more) had either flexible grouping or a combination model. On several dimensions, large kindergartens were considerably more ‘professional’ than the smaller ones. Employees in the large kindergartens had the highest qualification, they also scored better on carrying out questionnaires concerning user and employee contentment, whether or not they have regular key persons for the children, supervision of assistants on a regular basis, and having special needs teachers among the staff. However, the smaller kindergartens did better on other indicators. For instance, the bigger the kindergarten, the smaller amount of the working hours the head teacher will spend with the children.
A general trend is towards larger groups of children. In the study sample, the average group size for 1–2 year olds was 12 children. Groups of 3-5 year olds had an average size of 19 children. The mean size of mixed groups was 18 children. In small kindergartens (less than 45 children), groups of 1-2 year olds varied between 9-11 children, compared to 13-14 in large kindergartens (80 children or more). Kindergartens with flexible grouping operated with larger groups of children than the group-based kindergartens do. The qualitative in-depth study of educational quality suggested that the most significant difference was between the small, group-based kindergartens and the large kindergartens with flexible grouping (Vassenden et al. 2011). The former were characterized by a small and stable staff, with high levels of trust and social integration between staff, children and parents. But their potential for staff development was limited. The larger kindergartens with flexible grouping had less of the stable, integrated and transparent characteristics. There was ambivalence among the staff related to organisation and communication within a more complex enterprise. However, they had a large, varied and more qualified staff and better possibilities for professional development. The medium sized, group-based kindergartens seemed to be able to combine the respective strengths of the other two: trust and stability combined with professional development.

**The Norwegian model: characteristics and challenges**

The kindergarten has become an important social institution in Norway, as part of normal childhood and parenthood, and in terms of public finances and employment. This has generated a new understanding of its importance to society and increased attention to quality. Close to full child care coverage has been achieved by sector expansion and the institutionalisation of children’s right to child care: Municipalities succeed in providing childcare to parents who want a place for their child.

Together with lower parents’ fees, the choice between childcare services and other care arrangements has become a real choice for most parents, and most parents prefer day care. Childcare for children aged 3 or older is today considered an undisputed good, and also accepted to a considerable degree for 2 year olds. There is still some public debate about the benefit of day care for the 1 year olds. The number of hours children should spend in day care is continuously debated. Several surveys over the past 20 years indicate that parents in general are satisfied with childcare services and experience the cooperation with the kindergarten as
good (Ministry of Education and Research 2009: 38). High parent satisfaction is somewhat paradoxical given the variation in quality of services. In a situation of full coverage, parents may make more demands on the quality of services in the future.

The great expansion of services in the past decade did not lower quality. But educating enough skilled pedagogical staff continues to be the main challenge. The traditional social pedagogical model is somewhat weakened, there is more emphasis on investment in human capital; on cognitive development and learning. Larger and more flexibly organised centres, and the changing age composition with more children are 1-2 years old, create new challenges to kindergarten quality.

Children not attending day care are becoming a small minority, especially among the 3-5 year olds. Children from low income/education and immigrant families are overrepresented, undermining the kindergarten as an arena for reducing socio-economic inequalities in society. Research indicates that children from such backgrounds benefit the most from attending daycare (NOU 2009). Parents’ fees are seen as an important obstacle to attendance, and several government expert commissions have proposed a free number of weekly hours to all children (NOU 2009, 2012). It is also proposed that when the quality of services reaches a satisfactory level regarding staff’s pedagogical competence, obligatory attendance for 5 year olds should be considered (NOU 2009).

Two main features of the Norwegian model of childcare services cause problems of governance: the relationship between the central versus the local level (see Evers, Lewis & Riedel 2005) and the mixed ownership model. How the shift from earmarked funding to block grants to municipalities may affect the provision of places in the long term is uncertain. For example, some municipalities will continue to offer cash for care benefit to 2 years olds after the benefit was abolished in 2012 by the Government. Also regulations setting limits to private profit extraction from childcare services is a disputed political issue, and policies may change in the future.
References


Gulbrandsen, L. (2007)


Ministry of Children and Equality (2005) Om evaluering av makspris i barnehager. [on the evaluation of maximum parents’ fees in kindergartens].


Table 1. Coverage rate in childcare services by children’s age. Percent. 1980-2011.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Barnehagestatistikk, Statistics Norway

Table 2. Children in day care by age in the Scandinavian countries. Percent. 2010. 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of child</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Norway 2)</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total 0-5</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1) Total or partly publicly funded day care.

Table 1. Children enrolled in day care by socio-economic groups. 2010. Percent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Children 1-2 years old</th>
<th>Children 3-5 years old</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family type</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single provider, no wage income</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single provider, wage income</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married/cohabiting, no wage income</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married/cohabiting, one wage income</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married/cohabiting, two wage incomes</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parents’ educational level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary education</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary education</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low income families</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low income (OECD 50%)</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not low income (OECD 50%)</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low income (EU 60%)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not low income (EU 60%)</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mother’s country of birth</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia, Africa, Latin America, other non-western countries</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Moafi & Bjørkli 2011, Tables 2.2 and 2.3.
Notes

1. Also rules for tax exemption for employer owned/run services were established. [http://www.lovdata.no/all/hl-20050617-064.html](http://www.lovdata.no/all/hl-20050617-064.html); English version: [http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/KD/Vedlegg/Barnehager/engelsk/Act_no_64_of_June_2005_web.pdf](http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/KD/Vedlegg/Barnehager/engelsk/Act_no_64_of_June_2005_web.pdf)
2. Family day units are regulated by the Kindergarten Act.
3. Either a full or a 50 percent benefit will be paid (for children in care services less than 20 hours/week) Children 13-18 months and 19-23 months receive 5000 and 3303 NOK/month respectively in full benefit.
4. Parents must be registered residents in the municipality.
5. Family day units are regulated by the Kindergarten Act.
9. ‘Liten interesse for lokal kontantstøtte’, Kommunal rapport nr. 22/12, p. 4.
10. [www.kristiansand.kommune.no](http://www.kristiansand.kommune.no)
11. ‘Vil vurdere skatt på kontantstøtte’, Kommunal rapport nr. 22/12, p. 4.
12. Contributions from companies are not common.
13. In 2008, 3.3 percent of all children in day care received extra economic resources; in most cases used for increasing personnel resources. Children with needs that exceed what is can be handled within ordinary arrangements and resources, have an individual right to special pedagogical support (Education Act).
14. 92 percent of all municipalities have schemes to map children’s language skills in municipal kindergartens, 75 percent of the municipalities with non-municipal facilities have such schemes also in these institutions (Ministry of Education and Research 2009: 96).
15. Some reported to be owned by corporations registered in tax havens, Klassekampen 3.8.2012.
16. Parent allowance for documented costs associated with childcare can be deduced from taxes: NOK 25 000 for 1 child and an additional NOK 5000 for each subsequent child.
18. In childcare centres where the majority of children have shorter hours the number of children per pedagogical leader can be increased somewhat (NOU 2012: 49).
19. The proposal is for children under 3: one staff per 3 children, one pedagogue per 6 children; for 3-5 years old: one staff per 6 children and one pedagogue per 12 children. This gives a 50 percent share of pedagogues, and is estimated to cost 1.4 billion NOK (NOU 2012).