The Early Care and Education (ECCE) system is made up of all the publicly and privately sponsored supports, services, and interventions provided to young children and their families in any country. In this course we are including supports, services and interventions for children of early elementary school age in our study of the ECCE system.

In the course we will examine policies and practices in child care, preschool, early intervention for infants and toddlers with disabilities, early childhood special education, parent support and education, and the transition to school (kindergarten through grade three). We will also touch on such broad supports as maternal and child health care, and policies and practices pertaining to financial support for young families (e.g. public assistance, parental leave and child allowances).

In the United States, as in other countries, the ECCE system is shaped by a complex set of factors, which we will call formative influences. These include:

- changing social, economic and demographic circumstances;
- defining conditions and events at particular times in history;
- enduring (and sometimes contested) societal values, beliefs, myths and preoccupations;
- the societal role and interests of key institutions (government, business, religious institutions); and ideas about what young children are like and what they need.

Because the mix and weight of formative influences differ from country to country ECCE systems also vary. We cannot speak of best systems or ideal systems – whether based on child development knowledge, social philosophy, public resources or other factors -- because each country’s system reflects its distinct context, history, demographics, priorities and culture.

Yet ECCE systems do evolve, even if some of the core influences remain the same. Social needs and conditions change; labor markets shift; political regimes change; the citizens of a country can become more aware of the consequences of priorities, choices, and values and introduce that awareness into public and policy debate; advocates with specific policy agendas emerge; and the knowledge base for policy and practice changes.

In addition, Americans, probably more than citizens of other countries, exhibit qualities that keep ECCE unsettled: a degree of openness about how they want to live together, a willingness to experiment, and a certain ambivalence about their core beliefs, even a degree of schizophrenia. Americans also recognize at some level -- and struggle with -- a gap between their ideals and their actual behavior (e.g. democratic ideals belied by a long history of racial discrimination, an ideal of being a child- and family-centered country belied by a reluctance to provide public resources for young children ad their families). Perhaps more then others, American society is never done trying to figure out how it wants to define and address children’s and families’ needs.
Core American Ideas and Beliefs

Core American ideas and beliefs shaping ECCE in the United States (not all of which are consistent with each other and some of which we have in fact been ambivalent about) include the following:

- a belief that individual interests and rights take precedence over common interests and obligations;

- a distrust of government, a belief that it is an alien institution rather than an expression of the people or a partner in meeting common needs, and therefore a belief that government action and its role in our common life should be circumscribed;

- a belief that the marketplace (competition, winners and losers, efficiency, consumer choice, etc.) is the best guide and framework for our common life as a people, although children should be protected from its harshness and excesses;

- a belief that (or at least acquiescence to the idea that) those with economic power and advantage have a right to a greater voice in our common affairs as a people;

- a view of families as a counter-weight to a harsh and unforgiving marketplace, a “haven in a heartless world”;

- a belief in family privacy rights, that child rearing is largely a private right and responsibility;

- at the same time a belief that there exists a common understanding of what good child rearing consists of, a distrust of some families’ ability to rear their children appropriately and a greater willingness to intervene in those families’ lives;

- a reification of motherhood and ambivalence towards mothers of young children who choose to work and/or have to work to assure their family’s well-being;

- an ideal of family self-sufficiency and self-reliance and a belief that families are largely responsible for their own well-being;

- when families cannot meet their needs without assistance, a belief that responsibility should fall first to local and private structures and only later to government; put another way, a reluctance to have government play an active, normative role in supporting young children and their families (and addressing economic inequality), rather a preference for it to play a residual role;

- a tendency to separate children’s fates from those of their parents; further, a tendency to “split” children and their parents – the good, the deserving child, the bad, the undeserving parent; in other words a distinction between child and family welfare;

- a belief that the circumstances of a person’s birth should not determine his or her eventual position in society and success in life;
• at the same time a belief that a certain degree of inequality is natural, since individuals’ economic success (or lack of success) is due largely to their own efforts and talents, and lack of such success is due to individual character failings;

• a belief that education is the great leveler of inequality and most powerful vehicle for social and economic mobility;

• a belief (not shared by all) that the best way to deal with differences of language, culture, heritage, and so forth – in other words the many dimensions of our pluralism -- is by minimizing them, and by emphasizing what we have in common;

• a pragmatic view of social problem solving; a belief that addressing and ameliorating social problems is primarily a matter of experimenting and finding what works.

We will find that the core beliefs, and the tensions surrounding them, have led to certain defining characteristics in the American social welfare system generally and in the ECCE system as an expression of social welfare.

With respect to the broad social welfare system:

It has been shaped -- and perhaps constrained -- by the search for a response to economic insecurity, hardship and inequality that was adequately strong yet would not force Americans to question basic assumptions and beliefs, social and economic arrangements (e.g. the assumption that all Americans share the same interests, regardless of their social position in society).

It has been shaped more by crisis than by deliberate debate about needs, rights, obligations, roles.

It has evolved as a residual, treatment/remediation-oriented and categorical system rather than a normatively based, developmentally oriented and universal system (“the ambulance service at the bottom of the cliff”).

It has developed also as a maternalist social welfare system, focused more on women’s and children’s issues, especially so-called domestic issues, than on broad socioeconomic issues (exceptions: social insurance for the aged, and some social protections for the unemployed).

Although government provides modest supports for income security, health protection and housing protection, our social welfare frame work is marked by a tendency to use helping services as an expression of our sense of responsibility to vulnerable children and families.

In both helping services and provision for basic needs there has been a tendency to make moral distinctions among those who are poor or otherwise vulnerable; to assess and categorize, to calculate deservingness; to help “carefully” rather than wholeheartedly, even warily at times, and to worry about the perverse effects of helping;

There has also been a tendency to view child and family welfare as separate phenomena; and a tendency to view individual and family difficulties through a predominantly psychological lens, that is, to view them as a function of character, quality of decision-making, and so on.
With respect to ECCE:

It has developed as a mostly child-focused system, intermittently as a parenting-focused system, with a de-emphasis on attending to families’ basic needs and rights (i.e. for income and housing security, access to health care, and a sense of social inclusion).

At the same time, there has been a tendency to justify ECCE by its ability to address fundamental societal challenges – economic inequality, inequality in educational opportunity, assimilation of immigrants, righting past social wrongs – challenges outside of its appropriate purview; by default the ECCE system has become one of our main vehicles for interpreting and responding to poverty and vulnerability.

In general, there has been a tendency to view ECCE in instrumental terms rather than as an inherent public good, something to provide children and families by virtue of their citizenship and the support they deserve from society.

The ECCE system has grown and evolved in fits and starts, with different pieces emerging in response to different preoccupations and perceived needs at different historical points in time; this has led also to a fragmented policy and regulatory framework with pieces residing in different public systems and at different levels of government.

ECCE has developed as a decentralized, mixed system, partly private, partly public, with the private components acting like a market place, public components rooted in more than one system, regulation also located in many places. (There is, in addition, a large, religiously sponsored component, exempt from the rules and regulations of the larger system.)

In part because it has multiple roots ECCE has developed a mixture of goals: protecting children; providing basic (“custodial”) care; socializing poor and immigrant children; compensating for poor and immigrant parents’ limitations as teachers/educators; enriching/balancing out the development more advantaged children. This mix of purposes in turn has led to – and is reflected in – different programs/services with different goals for poor children and their more economically advantaged peers (a “two-tiered” system of ECCE).

ECCE is also characterized by large numbers of small settings, with enormous diversity in the background, knowledge and qualifications of providers.

Putting all these factors together, children with different backgrounds and life circumstances, living in different communities, tend to participate in different types of services and programs.

For most of its history ECCE has been an inadequately and in many instances reluctantly funded system. Child care, in particular, has been viewed as necessary but not to be supported too directly or wholeheartedly with public resources. That, along with a devaluing of the difficulty and importance of ECCE practice has contributed to a devalued ECCE workforce.

What has changed/is changing:

Although government (both federal and to a significant extent state) remains reluctant to develop strong, broad policies with respect to young children and their families, it has nonetheless
gradually expanded its role and responsibility in young families’ lives over the course of the twentieth century.

Over the past two decades states have assumed a growing role and responsibility for ECCE policy, funding and program development, with some similarities and also many differences across states.

There has been a gradual, but steady shift in the locus of child rearing over the past forty years, toward more formal, often paid arrangements, linked to a dramatic increase in maternal employment rates; ECCE experiences are now normative for young children;

The idea of early childhood as a critical period in children’s lives, that early childhood experiences are determinative, has entered the broader culture (with mixed consequences, not all for the better).

An economic-human-capital-investment argument for ECCE has become central in public and policy discussion of ECCE, heightening the already strong tendency to view it in instrumental terms.

The various civil rights movements of the past half century have contributed to a more negotiated process for defining poor children’s and families’ needs, with somewhat greater voice for those historically without voice.

ECCE is evolving from a local, mostly private concern to a national, public concern.

There has been a corollary interest in standardizing both early childhood experiences in general and ECCE in particular.

There has been a shift from a view of ECCE as a dimension of child and family welfare to one of ECCE as a vehicle for addressing education policy concerns; more recently, a direct linkage of ECCE to public school agendas (closing the so called “achievement gap” between different groups of children) and public schools themselves.

ECCE is gradually coming to be viewed as the starting point for elementary education, breaking down the historical philosophical/curricular contrasts between the two.

Complicating variables:

As noted earlier, American society is still trying to figure out how it wants to define and address children’s and families’ needs, in part because competing impulses constantly interfere with each other.

Early childhood concerns are multi-dimensional; they do not fit neatly into the mandate and services of existing bureaucracies, rather they cross over bureaucratic boundaries.

It is difficult to create a coherent field from multiple histories, philosophies, purposes, concerns.

As with social welfare generally, there is a tendency for new forms and purposes of ECCE to develop out of perceived crisis or urgent need, rather than as the result of a deliberate debate.
At the same time there is a tendency to ignore history and repeat patterns that have proven problematic in the past.

Due to lack of a broader support system for families, there has been and remains a tendency of ECCE to be in over its head and to serve as a support of last resort.

There is very little reasoned public debate about child and family issues in the United States; such debate tends to get submerged in (or submerged by) the agendas of extreme ideological groups.

There remains a tendency in public/policy discourse: to use the concept of children’s needs or best interests to mask other concerns and interests that have little to do with children (e.g. socializing immigrants, making it easier or more difficult for women to enter the labor force, etc.); and to use ECCE to work through contradictions in our national ideology (e.g. between egalitarianism and meritocracy, pluralism and oneness as a people, self-reliance and collective responsibility);

There continues to be reluctance in public and policy discussion to acknowledge the gap between societal ideals and the realities of families’ lives; and a continuing reluctance to acknowledge and address the fact that families bear the brunt of social and economic forces.

It remains unclear who can and should speak for young children, for families and communities that have lacked voice in public/policy discussions. Partly for that reason, partly due to our ambivalence about key issues, questions about what young children are like and what they need don’t get settled.

**Ongoing Work for the Field (and the Country):**

finding the right rationale for and expectations of ECCE: getting away from the tendency to view it as a vehicle for preventing, remediating, compensating for failures elsewhere; giving ECCE deeper cultural authenticity;

initiating a more reflective and inclusive societal discussion about goals and expectations of ECCE (deepening the policy discourse involving ECCE); finding ways to give voice to those who have not had opportunity to share their perspective on ECCE debates;

finding the right institutional “model” for ECCE: the family, the community, the clinic, the school, the society;

articulating a model of the child that is more than the economic child and/or the school achievement child;

working through what it might mean for parents to have a better defined role all around – in contributing to policy discussion, in relation to providers and caregivers, and as learners about the field in general;

locating ECCE in, clarifying its relationship to, the larger public systems serving children and families, in particular figuring out how ECCE should relate to schooling;

holding on to ECCE’s distinct identity and values – i.e. being basically a positive institution that views children in a generous light, tries to withhold too much categorizing and labeling, etc.;
finding a way of strengthening the quality (or qualities) of ECCE without undermining its texture and identity as a local, community institution;

finding a more active, generous approach to helping young families cope with the competing demands of work and child rearing;

deciding how standardized we want ECCE (and by implication children’s early childhood experiences in general) to be – across social class, community context, religious belief, and related factors; figuring out what assumptions and ideas to use in forging standards;

figuring out what “equal treatment” is for children of different backgrounds and life experiences; find the best approach to righting past wrongs;

figuring out how to make sense of and respond to diversity; determining what our common obligation is to wrestling with our diversity;

developing policies and approaches that do not “split” children and parents.