

Why is early years provision so different in Sweden and the UK?

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EXCERPTS

Between 1996 and 1998, England, Scotland and Sweden moved responsibility for all early childhood education and care and school-age childcare services from welfare into education. This change aimed to improve access to services as well as improving the quality of those services, by making it an objective of early and school age childcare not only to look after children, but to contribute to their development.

If we look at how many children are using childcare and the educational focus of childcare, the policy move has had the most success in Sweden. New research looks at why the outcomes have been different in the three countries. It finds that while much of the difference can be explained by factors outside of governments' immediate, short term control, different approaches to integrating education and childcare in England, Scotland and Sweden have contributed to these different outcomes.

In Sweden, the impact of joining childcare and education was that more children were enrolled in places and the effect of where they were born or their parents' employment had less of an impact on whether they used childcare. The result, according to one evaluation, was 'improved family finances, especially for lone parent and lower income families, and greater social inclusion'. The integration of childcare and education has been achieved with the introduction of a national curriculum, similar to the Early Years Foundation Stage requirements in England.

In England and Scotland, more children are accessing childcare than they were when this policy was introduced. However, we know from our Childcare Surveys that where a child is born or their parents' work continue to play a major role in whether or not they access childcare, and significant gaps in provision remain. This is especially true for school age children, with only one in four areas in England reporting enough childcare for 5-11 year olds.

While the introduction of a curriculum for early years childcare has improved the links between early years and school education, the system is 'still only part-integrated, remaining deeply split between "childcare" and "education", with a continuing plethora of fragmented services'. The authors blame this on the 'divisive language' of childcare services, childcare workers and childcare costs, and an absence of recognition that 'care, socialisation and learning together form a coherent whole'.

This meant that the approach to integrating education and care differed across the three countries. A large part of this difference can be put down to the fact that education and care services had been policy priorities in Sweden for much longer. In Sweden, expanding availability of childcare and integrating it with education could be done through the predominant provider – local government – with issues around funding and a professional workforce settled.

In England and Scotland, on the other hand, the policy decision meant working with services 'that were underdeveloped, fragmented and split between education and care and provided by a diversity of perspectives'. The authors claim that governments in England and Scotland 'opted for more of the same, rather than attempt the sustained and challenging systemic reform needed for a fully integrated [education and childcare] system'.

Support with accessing childcare has not been as universal nor as generous in England and Scotland, and take up of services has been lower. The really radical changes in England – Sure Start children's centres and the Every Child Matters programme – have declined in recent years. The workforce remains relatively poorly paid in England and Scotland compared with Sweden, potentially contributing to lower quality provision.

Together, the authors claim, these differences between the countries have contributed to differences in the access to childhood education and care services and the quality of those services. Improved access to higher quality services in Sweden is likely to benefit both children and parents.

We are calling on Government to make sure there is enough high quality childcare for all children, including school age children, and to make sure that every parent is better off working after childcare costs. This research provides evidence that more radical proposals may be needed to achieve these aims.

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