

In focus: A golden opportunity?^[1]

The reform of early childhood education and care in England, Scotland and Sweden is a story of missed opportunities and incremental change, argues Peter Moss

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Excerpts

Between 1996 and 1998, England, Scotland and Sweden undertook a similar major reform of early childhood education and care (ECEC): they moved responsibility for all ECEC into education.

An Anglo-Scottish team (myself, Bronwen Cohen, Pat Petrie and Jennifer Wallace) has been studying the consequences of this reform, comparing what happened next in the three countries. The results raise serious and worrying questions about policy and provision in England and Scotland.

The countries were at very different stages of development when ECEC was moved into education. Swedish ECEC, which had been the responsibility of the welfare ministry, was a well-resourced, fully integrated system based on 'pre-schools', centres for children from one to six years old, and a graduate workforce of 'pre-school teachers'. Provision was extensive, with all children of employed or studying parents entitled to a pre-school place from their first birthday.

By contrast, at the time of transfer, ECEC in England and Scotland had suffered long neglect and poor resourcing, and was fragmented between a plethora of services: day nurseries, playgroups and childminders came under health ministries; nursery classes and schools, and primary school Reception classes, came under education.

This reflected a deep split between 'early education' and 'childcare', reflected not only in types of provision but also funding, workforce and regulation. But with the transfer to education coinciding with ECEC becoming a new Government priority, an opportunity opened up for major reform, moving towards a more integrated and coherent system.

So, what happened next?

SWEDEN:

Incremental change

Sweden's story was one of incremental change, mostly in integrating ECEC deeper into the education system. Access was made a universal entitlement for children over 12 months old, irrespective of parents' employment. A substantial period of free attendance was introduced for three- to five-year-olds, with a cap put on parental fees for other attendance (approximately £110 a month).

Greater emphasis was placed on the educational role of pre-schools; a short, framework curriculum was introduced, pre-schools were defined as a type of school and their heads accorded the same status as school heads.

Deeper integration, however, did not work out in one important respect. A new system of joint education for pre-school teachers, school teachers and free-time pedagogues (a profession working mainly in out-of-school services) was introduced, comprising 18 months' common study before students decided on professional specialisation.

But this reform was reversed, returning to the previous system of separate basic education, a response to falling numbers of pre-school teachers and free-time pedagogues as students in the new system chose school teaching over the other options. It was also a response to concerns that the new professional education paid insufficient attention to certain types of pedagogical work, endangering specific identities and expertise.

One potential downside to the move of ECEC into education should be noted. Some hoped the move would lead to pre-schools influencing schools; but the influence may flow the other way – what has been called 'schoolification'. While it has been suggested that the pre-school has influenced the school's early grades, introducing greater informality in ethos and practice, others report a tendency for pre-schools to place greater emphasis on preparing children for schooling and on one curriculum area, language development, at the expense of a more holistic approach.

This issue reaches far beyond Sweden, 'schoolification' being a risk everywhere under the gravitational force exerted by the school; and

the risk is certainly greater in countries with weaker early childhood sectors.

Did England and Scotland take the opportunities opened up by integrating responsibility for ECEC into education? Did they move closer to an integrated and inclusive system like Sweden? The verdict has to be no.

ENGLAND:

Stalled integration

The English story was one of stalled integration. Transferring responsibility to education led to some further integration, with a unified inspection system (Ofsted) and a birth-to-end-of-Reception curriculum.

But progress stalled without tackling the 'wicked' issues of access, funding, workforce and provision.

By 2017, England's ECEC was only partially integrated, still split between 'childcare' and 'education', still with a plethora of fragmented services. This failure was exemplified by the absence of any broad integrative understanding of ECEC that recognised, in the words of the Swedish pre-school curriculum, 'that care, socialisation and learning together form a coherent whole'.

Instead, England clung to 'childcare' as a separate concept and continued a public discourse on 'childcare services', 'childcare workers' and 'childcare costs', culminating in the introduction of 30 hours' free 'childcare' for employed parents. While the Swedes moved from a parental to a child entitlement to early education, England introduced a 'childcare' benefit limited to certain parents.

Failure to achieve systemic reform was evident too in the stalled development of Children's Centres. This innovative model of integrated, multi-purpose ECEC might, like Swedish pre-schools, have become the main form of provision, gradually replacing existing fragmentation. In fact, Children's Centres merely increased fragmentation, then went into decline under the post-2010 austerity regime. Overall, England combined continuity in the system's dysfunctional aspects with discontinuity in its major attempt at radical reform.

SCOTLAND:

Double miss

Scotland had a double opportunity for reform, transfer into education being matched by government devolution; freed from Whitehall, the Scottish Government could have taken a new, possibly Nordic, direction. This never happened.

Scotland, like England, has steadily extended entitlement to ECEC, most recently with the announcement of increased hours of entitlement by 2020, applied to all three- and four-year-olds, and not, as in England, limited to employed parents. But overall, there has been a failure to make systemic change, without even the ambitious but unsuccessful attempt at reform represented by England's Children's Centres.

Integration of ECEC services stalled at an even earlier stage than in England, with inspection remaining split between education and welfare and a curriculum limited to older pre-school children. As in England, the workforce has remained split, most badly paid 'childcare' workers with relatively low qualifications.

SAME POLICY, VERY DIFFERENT RESULTS

The transfer of Sweden's long- and well-integrated ECEC into the education system led to important benefits: improved entitlement and affordability and, consequently, access for families, as well as enhanced status for early childhood services and workers.

In contrast, England and Scotland failed to deliver either a fully integrated ECEC system or universally available services. Core issues – access, funding, the workforce, provision – remained unresolved, as did the 'early education'/'childcare' fault line. How to account for these differences? Some reasons are apparent.

Timing of transfer

First, transfer of responsibility occurred at very different stages of ECEC development. In Sweden, these services had been policy priorities since at least the 1960s and by the 1990s were extensively developed, well-funded and fully integrated. Furthermore, there was one predominant type of service and one predominant provider: local authorities. By 1996, therefore, Sweden no longer expended time and energy on fundamentals like the supply of services, funding or the need for a professional workforce – such issues were long settled. By contrast, transfer of responsibility in both England and Scotland was the consequence of recent policy interest, which encountered services that were under-developed, fragmented and split between education and care and provided by a diversity of providers, with differing perspectives and interests.

Expanding services

Second, and closely related, having well-developed services, Sweden could focus on steady and incremental development, taking advantage of the new home for ECEC in education. England and Scotland, however, were faced with an immediate need for more places and expanded services. They opted for more of the same, rather than attempt the sustained and challenging systemic reform needed for a fully integrated ECEC system.

Scotland could argue as a partial explanation of its modest achievements that it remained subject to a UK-wide system of demand subsidies for parents using 'childcare services' and a UK framework of qualification for 'childcare workers'. However, the lack of significant

change suggests a more fundamental failure of vision and purpose.

Decentralised power

Third, power was decentralised in Sweden, and local authorities initiated the integration of ECEC into local education departments – transfer at national level followed the local lead. Local authorities in England and Scotland had played an important role in developing more integrated ECEC in the 1980s; for instance, Strathclyde Regional Council in Scotland pioneered a Pre-Fives Unit within its Education Department with responsibility for all ECEC services. But highly centralised government in England and Scotland, national government antipathy to local authority provision in England and large cuts in local authority budgets post-2010 meant LAs were no longer able to exercise strong local leadership.

Policy-making

Fourth, there are differences in policy-making. Sweden has a strong tradition of gradual evolution of policy and provision, based on extensive discussion, inquiry and building widespread support; a reflective democratic culture has permeated ECEC. England and Scotland were very different.

Once ECEC became a policy priority, from 1997 there seemed neither time nor willingness to think more deeply about policy questions and options, including how to realise the potential of transferring services into education; the policy imperative was for more 'childcare' and more 'early education' as quickly as possible, and an unquestioned ideological commitment, most evident in England, to marketisation and privatisation.

Is it too late for England and Scotland to change course, to benefit from the transfer of all ECEC into education? Twenty years has already been wasted. Worse, there seems to be no appreciation of the deep flaws in both countries' systems, or of the nature or scale of the challenge. I only hope I'm wrong. ^[2]

MORE INFORMATION

More details of the study reported in this article can be found in Cohen et al (2004) *A New Deal for Children?*, published by Policy Press, and in Cohen et al (2018) "'A New Deal for Children?' – what happened next', *Early Years*, DOI: 10.1080/09575146.2018.1504753

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