

Towards the marketization of early childhood education and care? Recent developments in Sweden and the United Kingdom ^[1]

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Abstract:

Extensive public debate is being waged across mature welfare states as to whether social services are best provided by the state or the market. This article examines developments in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) policy in Sweden and the United Kingdom, identifying trends towards marketization and universalization of ECEC that suggest a complex picture of competing policy logics and goals in the restructuring of welfare states. This article first discusses two models of early-years provision, the market model, and the universal model, outlining underlying assumptions, tensions, and implications of market and state provision of ECEC. A comparison of recent reforms in Sweden and the UK highlights how similar ideas and trends play out differently in different national contexts. In Sweden an integrated public 'educare' programme gradually developed over time, and market mechanisms introduced in the 1990s have so far had limited effect on the system overall. In the UK ideas about universal early childhood education became influential as part of a new social-investment agenda in the 1990s but have, owing to their restricted implementation, not fundamentally altered the existing childcare market. Historical policy trajectories continue to matter, yet tensions and incoherencies between policies can open spaces for change.

Region: Europe ^[3]

Tags: privatization ^[4]

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