

Integration of childcare and early education services is long overdue ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Our early childhood system is fragmented, segregating, wasteful and riven by inequality says Peter Moss. Separate childcare and education sectors, with different access and funding, do not work.

To have one 'childcare commission' is depressing, to have two (one set up by the Government, the other by the Labour Party) is beyond belief, a sure sign that, as French diplomat Talleyrand once said of the Bourbon kings, we have learned nothing and forgotten nothing. Why am I so scathing? Because while these Tweedledum and Tweedledee commissions fiddle around with symptoms, they do nothing to address the basic problem: the need to reform a dysfunctional early childhood system still split between 'childcare' and 'early education'.

Despite some initial moves to rectify this under the last Labour government - integrating policy, regulation and curriculum - the process then stalled. The result? We continue to have separate childcare and education sectors, with different access, funding, types of provision and workforces.

But the split goes beyond structures. It infects the very way we think about early childhood, separating 'childcare' from 'early education'. 'Childcare' remains seen as something restricted to working parents, essentially a private responsibility involving businesses and parent consumers (albeit with some limited mediation by government to help the workings of the market). 'Early education', in contrast, is seen as a public good and a universal entitlement, funded by the state. Adding to the confused picture is yet another sector, represented by Sure Start Children's Centres, an attempt to provide a holistic and universal service, yet in practice a marginal player in a field dominated by private nurseries and schools.

The consequences, as in all those other countries that have failed to fix the split, are well understood: a system that is fragmented, confusing, segregating, wasteful and riven by inequality - in short dysfunctional. It is not as if all this is a big secret; the problem and its consequences have been exposed time and time again, in articles, books and international reports. The message is clear enough yet remains either unheard or misunderstood - 'childcare commissions' being but the latest manifestation.

FIDDLING ABOUT INEFFECTIVELY

We need to get beyond 'childcare' and 'education' to an integrated system of early childhood services, genuinely universal and multi-purpose. If the Labour Party is really serious, as it claims to be, about 'drawing on best practice in Scandinavia', it will recognise that Scandinavia got the message decades ago, and that while we have been fiddling about ineffectively, they have steadily progressed until today they have a fully integrated early childhood system, located within the education system. In the words of the Swedish pre-school curriculum, early childhood services 'should be characterised by a pedagogical approach, where care, nurturing and learning form a coherent whole'.

If the Government were really serious, it would look far beyond its obsession with 'unnecessary regulation', draw (as it says it will) on 'international evidence', and ask what can be learnt from countries with exemplary early childhood systems, which are both affordable and accessible and - no coincidence - fully integrated.

COMPONENTS OF FULL INTEGRATION

What do I mean by a fully integrated early childhood system? The components are spelt out in a UNESCO report, *Caring and Learning Together*. It identifies seven structural dimensions: policy, regulation, curriculum, access, funding, type of provision and workforce. In a fully integrated system, all seven present a seamless whole. For example, there is a universal entitlement to services for children from around 12 months of age, before which children are at home with parents taking well-paid parental leave. Or, to take another example, the workforce is built around an early years (birth to six) graduate profession, teacher or pedagogue, going well beyond just 'graduate leadership' to graduate participation in everyday work.

But full integration involves a further crucial dimension: conceptual integration. This means thinking about early childhood services in a way that gets beyond the care/education divide, to a point where it seems strange that anyone could think and talk about childcare and education as divisible. This is the integrative 'pedagogical approach' and the 'coherent whole' of the Swedish curriculum. Or it could be the concept of 'education-in-its-broadest-sense', which the UNESCO report says 'is understood as a broad, holistic concept, concerned with all aspects of well-being and development'.

Of course, in Sweden, as in the other Scandinavian countries, most children have parents who are employed, and they are at centres for most of the time their parents are at work, although parents often stagger their hours to get a good balance between centre and home. But early childhood services are an entitlement for children and for all children - not just for those whose parents are employed. Moreover, attending such services is seen as complementing, not supplanting family life, and as part of a good childhood in 21st century Scandinavia.

CHILDREN'S CENTRE MODEL OF PROVISION

Such reform of the system does not happen overnight - it takes time, lots of it. In the 1970s, I was part of a Children's Centre movement in England, which led to a number of pilot projects and advocacy for these centres as a future model of provision in an integrated early childhood system.

In a book published in 1976, *All Our Children*, Jack Tizard, Jane Perry and I wrote that 'the basic form of service should be through multi-purpose children's centres offering part and full-time care with medical and other services, to a very local catchment area'. Adding some modern-day hindsight, I would now replace 'care' with 'education in its broadest sense', and I would also say more about the image or construction of the children's centre.

Two images or constructions dominate our current thinking about early childhood services: as factories where prescribed technologies can be applied to young children to produce pre-determined and standardised outcomes; and as businesses selling products to parent consumers. I would contest both.

Instead, when I think of children's centres, my image is of a public institution which, like the school, is vital to the cohesion and well-being of its community. More than that, my image is that of the children's centre as a public forum and collective workshop, a place of encounter for citizens young and old, with the potential for an infinite range of possibilities - cultural, social, aesthetic, ethical, political and economic - some expected and pre-determined, but many that are not.

With these additions, the 1970s advocacy of children's centres still holds good for me today. But going back to read what I wrote over 35 years ago is also painful, because it reveals the depth of our failure compared to the Scandinavians.

In the 1960s and 1970s, they were beginning to build up their system of early childhood services, based on creating an integrated system - to replace the split systems that they had inherited. Over the decades, through sustained commitment and investment, they developed the world-leading fully integrated systems they have now.

Back in England, we did - nothing. Children's centres and an integrated approach were ignored by successive governments. Instead, the system was allowed to continue unreformed, getting more fragmented, unequal and dysfunctional, made worse when, from the late 1980s, there was an explosive growth of private day nurseries aimed at one group of families - children of better-off working parents.

So, we had our chance, and we blew it. Is it too late to make amends? I'm not certain, but I think it's worth one last go. What we need, which we did not have in the 1970s or in 1997 or in 2010, is a proper review of early childhood services tasked with recommending how to develop a universal, multi-purpose and integrated system of early childhood services. We need one inclusive 'early childhood commission', not two divisive 'childcare commissions'.

Into that framework, we could put issues like funding, workforce, type of provision, accessibility - but only after having determined that the way forward has to take us beyond 'childcare' and beyond the dysfunctional split system of which it is part. It is time we learnt some basics about the requirements of a good early childhood system, and forgot some of the things that make our current system so dysfunctional, not least our fixation on 'childcare'.

-reprinted from *Nursery World*

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