

Toward a new pedagogical meeting place? Bringing early childhood into the education system

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The move to education

The major thematic review of early childhood education and care (ECEC) undertaken by OECD in 20 member states confirms two important international developments: the growth of services for young children and a “growing consensus in OECD countries that ‘care’ and ‘education’ are inseparable concepts and that quality services for children necessarily provide both” (OECD, 2001:14; OECD, 2006). A challenge facing countries is not just how to provide more services, but how to remedy a legacy of split services, one set of services providing childcare for working parents, the other set early education for children aged 3 up to compulsory school age.

The lead has been taken by the Nordic states. Decades ago, they brought together their ECEC services, placing them all in the welfare system. Today they have the most fully integrated ECEC services in the world, with a common framework covering access, funding, staffing and regulation. In the late 1980s, a new movement to integrate ECEC began – this time within the education system. New Zealand led the way in 1988. Since then other countries have followed suit, including Spain, Slovenia, England, Scotland and Brazil, while Iceland, Norway and Sweden have now moved their integrated ECEC services from welfare into education.

Rationale and conditions

Moves towards integration follow national recognition that the childcare/education split is redundant and an obstacle to development. But why into education? A number of reasons are given: the primary focus on children adopted by education; the importance of lifelong learning and a recognition that children are learners from birth, not just from 3; stronger infrastructure within education (e.g. for data collection; training and support; curriculum, evaluation and research); and a belief that education provides a better basis than welfare for developing a service based on universal entitlement.

There is, therefore, a strong case for moving all ECEC services into the education system. The first step is to make education ministries responsible for these services. But this is insufficient to ensure a fully integrated system. What else is needed? More research is needed in this area, but we would suggest the following conditions as a working hypothesis:

- First, *to extend the values and principles* of public education systems to all ECEC services, for example: access to high quality services seen as a universal entitlement; free or subsidised attendance with services recognised as a public good funded substantively by the state and not (as ‘childcare’ is still considered in some countries) as private commodities; equitable access and outcomes for all children.
- Second, *to organise a single structural framework*, replacing dual care/education structures. This framework might consist of several key parts including funding, workforce and regulation. New Zealand, Spain and Sweden, for example, followed up the movement of ECEC services into the education system by workforce reform based around a new profession, the early childhood teacher working with children under and over 3.

– Third, *to develop an integrative concept* that encompasses not only learning but also the care and well-being of young children, enabling policy and practice to move beyond ‘early education’ and ‘childcare’ as separate entities. The continental concept of ‘pedagogy’ is one such concept. Another, for English-speaking countries, is ‘education in its broadest sense’; New Zealand refers to all ECEC services as ‘early childhood education’, with ‘education’ understood to have a broad meaning.

Early childhood and compulsory schooling

Fully integrating ECEC services presents a great challenge, and countries that have moved these services into education are at different stages in the process. But it poses another major challenge: the relationship between an integrated ECEC service and compulsory schooling. Globally, there is a tendency to treat early childhood services as junior partners, preparing children for the demands of formal schooling; this threatens what the Swedes call ‘schoolification’, the school imposing its demands and practices on other services, making them school-like. By contrast, the OECD *Starting Strong* reports have argued for “a strong and equal partnership...[which] supports a lifelong learning approach from birth, encourages smooth transition for children and recognises ECEC as an important part of the education process...[and focuses] on the strengths of both approaches” (OECD, 2001: 11). This relationship has been the aim in Sweden: “Announcing the transfer to education, prime minister Göran Persson stated...that the pre-school should influence at least the early years of compulsory school. Initiatives taken since have sought to build closer links between pre-school, free-time services and school, treating all as equal parts of the education system...creating pedagogical ‘meeting places’ ” (Korpi, 2005: 10).

This vision of a meeting based on equal partnership has major implications for compulsory schooling, in terms of practice and rethinking the school as a place for education in its broadest sense. It also gives rise to two further research questions:

- How have education ministries with full responsibility for ECEC services envisioned the relationship between early childhood and compulsory schooling?
- How are they implementing their vision, for example what approaches have they adopted with respect to curricula, learning and workforce training?

Learning from and with other countries

Despite the potential significance of bringing ECEC into the education system, there is little up-to-date research evidence about the process or the consequences. The OECD reviews (OECD 2001, 2006) provide an unequalled source of information about ECEC services across many affluent countries. But they give only a partial view of the movement of ECEC services into the education system: some key countries (for example, New Zealand and Spain) were not included in the review; others (for example, Sweden and the UK) were visited early in the review process, more than five years ago. Cohen et al. (2004) provide an account of the early days of reform in England, Scotland and Sweden, showing for example how the Swedes had taken the process further and flagging up concerns in Sweden about the new integrated teacher training and schoolification. A recent national evaluation of Swedish pre-schools notes that “the child’s learning has been given greater importance in the pre-school after the reform”, but also expresses concern about the risks of “excessive emphasis placed on formal learning” and that some local authorities have implemented the curriculum by formulating targets for children (Skolverket, 2004). This recent Swedish report is an example of new national evaluations; another example is the interim evaluation of New Zealand ten year Strategic Plan, whose results become available next year.

More cross-national research is needed into the process of bringing early childhood into the education system, to study how the process has progressed, what

evaluations have been made and what lessons learnt; and what future developments are in prospect. In this way the countries involved in this process can learn from and with each other.

References

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