**A golden opportunity?**

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

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, Brenda Cohen, Peter Moss and Jennifer Wallace) has been studying the consequences of this reform, looking at what happened next in the three countries. The results raise some interesting questions about policy and provision in England and Scotland. The countries were at very different stages of development when ECEC was moved into education. Sweden had been a leader, 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 available to all children, with parental fees for employed or studying parents entitled to a pre-school place to cover first birthday. By contrast, at the time of transfer in England and Scotland had suffered long neglect and poor resourcing, with a system fragmented between a plethora of services: day nurseries, playgroups and childminders caring for children of health ministries, nursery classes and schools, and primary schools. Nursery classes, came under education.

This reflected a deep split between ‘education’ and ‘childcare’, reflected not only in types of provision but also in funding, regulation 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 under 12 months old, irrespective of family circumstances. A substantial period of free attendance was introduced for children up to five-years-old, with an increased cap put on parental fees for other attendance (approximately £110 a month). Other attendance (approximately £110 a month). Other attendance (approximately £110 a month).

Greater emphasis was placed on the educational role of pre-schools, a short, fixed curriculum was introduced, pre-schools were defined as a type of school and their heads accorded the same status as school head. Deep 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 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 in 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 more emphasis on preparing children for schooling 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.

**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 employed for relatively low qualifications.

**SAME POLICY, VERY DIFFERENT RESULTS**

The transfer of Scotland’s long-promised fully integrated ECEC into education was introduced, the education system having limited effects on the existing service. Scotland’s curriculum limited to older pre-school children. As in England, the workforce has remained split, most badly paid ‘childcare’ workers employed for relatively low qualifications.

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