



Integrating Early Childhood Into Education: The Case of Sweden

In 1996, the government responsibility for Childcare¹ in Sweden was transferred from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education and Science. In the process, Pre-school Classes were introduced for 6-year-olds as part of the compulsory school system,² sharing the same curriculum with primary schools. Pre-school, which had catered for 1-6-year-olds before the transition, became the first level of the country's education system serving 1-5-year-olds,³ with its own national curriculum.⁴ The government also expanded the entitlement to pre-school education, offering it to all children regardless of their parents' employment status.⁵ Another reform bridged pedagogical gaps among different categories of teachers by providing a uniform framework of training for pre-school teachers, school teachers and leisure time pedagogues.⁶ The rules and regulations of childcare in Sweden are now legislated under the School Act.

The transition was relatively simple and went smoothly in its final stages.⁷ But the preliminary stages provoked debate and apprehension. One source of resistance was a fear that pre-school would become formalised, as has been the case in other countries. Academics worried that pre-school pedagogy would lose its emphasis on play, children's natural learning strategies and their holistic development. Those working in the care sector feared that the focus of pre-school activities might shift heavily

to education and interpreted the integration as a threat to their profession. It was also feared that childcare, which had enjoyed a high priority under the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs as a family support policy, would lose its primacy and become marginalised in the education sector.

Observations so far suggest a mixed result. Some formalisation did occur, but there are also signs that fears were exaggerated. As far as the pre-school class for 6-year-olds, set up in schools, is concerned, the influence of school pedagogy has been evident. A national evaluation study reveals that teachers organise their activities in a formal way, based on their notion of what formal schooling may or should look like. In some cases, their notion of formal schooling has been found to be more rigid than that of the primary school teachers. The national education authority is making recommendations to correct these problems, encouraging pre-school teachers to pay more attention to children's holistic development. However, such formalisation has not been observed in pre-schools for 1-5-year-olds. On the contrary, with the shift of 6-year-olds to pre-school classes, pre-schools, freed of responsibility for pre-primary education, have been able to concentrate on more development-based approaches in activities for 1-5-year-olds.⁸

On the investment front, in addition to the free pre-school class for 6-year-olds,⁹ the government recently announced two important measures to lower pre-school fees¹⁰ and to provide free pre-school education for all 4-5-year-olds starting in 2003, confirming its commitment to universalising pre-school education. These measures have allayed fears that pre-school education would be a low investment priority in the education sector. On the contrary, as pre-school education has become integrated into the education system, the argument that it should be available to all children, as a child's right rather than as a parents' right, has gained further legitimacy and resulted in increased public investment.

Moreover, primary schools are becoming more "pre-school-like," concerned with students' holistic development. Although the conventional concept of schooling still prevails, it is generally agreed that today's Swedish schools are increasingly seen as places where school-age children are being cared for in a holistic manner while their parents are working. More and more, schools are becoming a substitute home for school-age children, as pre-schools have been for younger children, where teachers and childcare workers collaborate to ensure the students' holistic

¹ Childcare in Sweden refers to both pre-school activities for children between 1 and 5 and childcare services for school-age children between 6 and 12.

² The decision was more a renaming of existing pre-primary education than a creation of a new programme. Under the 1975 National Pre-school Act, municipalities were required to provide all 6-year-olds with at least 525 hours per year of pre-schooling; most 6-year-olds in Sweden have attended this pre-primary education programme in pre-schools. With the decision, this programme became Pre-school Class and detached from pre-schools. Pre-school class is no longer part of pre-school education, a term which is now reserved for early childhood care and education for 1-5-year-olds only.

³ In Sweden, childcare services outside the home start with 1-year-olds; and the younger infants are taken care of at home by their own parents who benefit from the government's parental leave system.

⁴ Pre-school activities in Sweden are also provided in Family Day Care Homes and Open Pre-schools. But these services are not part of the education system and not guided by the National Pre-school Curriculum.

⁵ Since 2001, children of unemployed parents also have the right to three hours of pre-school education a day. Before, only the children of working or student parents had access to pre-school education. Children with special needs have always enjoyed priority entitlement.

⁶ Before, pre-school teachers and leisure time pedagogues received three years of training at the university, while the training period for school teachers was three and a half years. Now these different categories of teachers all receive the same length of three and a half years of training at the university.

⁷ At the central level, the transition involved the transfer of the early childhood department at the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education and Science, which took place without much conflict. At the local level, the change was even less dramatic, as the municipalities already had integrated administrative structures, such as joint councils for pre-schools and schools. The decentralisation process, under which the municipality became the employer of teachers at both pre-schools and schools, is also said to have facilitated the integration.

⁸ The new national pre-school curriculum puts emphasis on learning, which the pre-schools teachers find as something "new." But there are few signs that this emphasis on learning has overshadowed the pre-school's child-development-based approaches and pedagogical practices.

⁹ Participation in the pre-school classes is voluntary, but municipalities are obliged to provide a place, free of charge, for children who demand it. Children whose parents are working or studying or those who require care for special needs receive entitlement.

¹⁰ By setting the maximum fee that all municipalities can charge for pre-school schools for 1-5-year-olds, the government equalised fee differences among municipalities. The measure effectively lowered pre-school fees for all families.

development. In the past, students' behavioural, emotional, social and health problems were sidelined in schools and not considered the concern of teachers, whose main job was to look after "educational" matters. But nowadays, teachers have begun to talk about students' developmental status and progress as well as their academic achievements and increasingly see the need for cooperating with parents more closely.

Such upward integration – in which pre-schools are influencing schools – is surprising, at least to outsiders, since the opposite is normally what is expected. It is also significant in that it signals the beginning of long-awaited changes in schools in favour of a lifelong learning framework that puts a great emphasis on learners. As much as it is surprising and significant, it is also complex in terms of the manner in which it took place. It is the result of a host of policy measures stemming not only from the education sector but also from the social and economic sectors, not to mention financial and ideological factors. The reforms and their consequences must be understood in this broader context. But significantly, the upward integration was, after all, a *policy goal* set and pursued explicitly by the government, as illustrated below.

In the 1980s when the government tried to lower the school starting age, people objected, seeing the idea as an attempt to shorten early childhood, which Swedes regard as a golden time of life. This proposal was rejected, and the approach taken since has been to import pre-school pedagogy to schools rather than extend school education to young children. In 1991, when the Bill on Flexible School Starting Age was legislated, allowing 6-year-olds to start schooling if their parents wish them to, the then education minister emphasised that children's holistic development should be a concern for all teachers, stressing that holistic development was important for the youngest students as well as their older peers. In 1996 when the prime minister announced his vision of lifelong learning for Sweden, he stated that pre-school education should be a part of the country's lifelong learning vision and that it should influence school education, at least in the first years.

Such public statements were matched with concrete policy actions to bring pre-school pedagogy into primary schools. A national study conducted in 1994, "The Foundation of Lifelong Learning: A Child-Mature School," urged Swedish schools to become more responsive to children's individual learning needs and styles. It argued that integrating pre-schools with schools would allow the former to transform the latter. This point was duly taken into consideration in the revision of the school curriculum,¹¹ which took on many pedagogical practices of pre-schools. *Learning* came to replace *teaching*, shifting the focus from teachers to students or learners. Artistic expressions and play, central to pre-school activities, were recognised as important means of learning and communication for school-age children. By setting these as the pedagogical goals of school, the revised curriculum facilitated the upward integration.

Early childhood care and education is often seen as the last frontier to be conquered in order to complete the picture of an education system promoting lifelong learning,¹² which must start from birth. From this point of view, early childhood is a missing link, since in most cases it is not part of a country's education

system or lifelong learning vision. The Swedish experience shows that this missing link has a potential to galvanise a country's efforts to make schools more learner-centred, to bring about a paradigm shift in education, in which *care*, *development* and *learning* will no longer be foreign concepts alongside *education*. But integration need not be a matter of finding the missing link and fitting it into an existing framework or, of one sector absorbing another – notably, schools taking over pre-schools. It is possible for schools and pre-schools to build a common vision of childhood, care, development and learning.

More importantly, the Swedish reform of childcare challenges us to go beyond early childhood and develop a new, holistic approach to working with children that will embrace their development and learning according to a seamless concept of childhood, from birth to 18 years of age,¹³ in which early childhood is an integral, indispensable part.

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¹¹ The revision was necessitated to cover pre-school classes for 6-year-olds and the Leisure Time Centres, a major form of childcare service for school-age children integrated into schools in 1991.

¹² The (formal) education system is a subset of a lifelong learning system, which involves non only formal but also non-formal and informal learning.

¹³ Definition of a child as stated in the Convention of the Rights of the Child.