

Inspiring change:

an early childhood education and care study visit to Sweden and Poland

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Foreword

A key focus for the King Baudouin Foundation over the next 2 years will be to explore policies and projects that can improve the health, and the social, emotional and cognitive development of disadvantaged children in Belgium, including children of immigrant families.

There is a growing body of evidence to show that investment in services for society's youngest children can help improve children's lives now, and also help prevent more costly intervention later on.

Our overall aim in this area is therefore to develop a shared vision throughout Belgium on the importance of investing in early childhood, and to support projects that will help shape the development and delivery of high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services at local level.

The ECEC study visit on which this report is based is part of the Foundation's commitment to learn and take inspiration from other countries. We visited Sweden, which has one of the most developed ECEC systems in Europe, and Poland, where a campaign to improve both the quantity and quality of ECEC services has made impressive strides in a relatively short space of time. There is much to learn from both.

This study is a small part of a much bigger journey for us, and hopefully for ECEC in Belgium. We want to share what we saw and learnt on this study visit. This report therefore will hopefully act as a springboard for debate, for generating ideas and for taking steps that will lead to an even better system of early childhood education and care for Belgium's youngest citizens.

King Baudouin Foundation

Introduction

There is growing consensus that public investment in early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems, not only from age 3 but encompassing support for children and families from birth, is one of the most effective ways of addressing poverty and inequality.

The European Commission's 2011 Communication *Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow* advocates an integrated approach to education and care from birth to the start of compulsory schooling, and highlights the role these services can play in helping to combat disadvantage, particularly among those from migrant and low-income backgrounds. It is a new and significant marker for member states on how to move forward.

A key focus for the King Baudouin Foundation over the next 2 years will be to explore policies and projects that can improve the health, and the social, emotional and cognitive development of disadvantaged children, including children of immigrant families. The overall aim is to develop a shared vision throughout Belgium on the importance of investing in early childhood, and to support projects that will help shape the development of delivering high quality services at local level.

As part of its research, the King Baudouin Foundation will explore and take inspiration from other countries.

This study visit to Sweden and Poland has provided examples of two very different countries, at very different stages of developing early childhood services. Sweden has one of the most highly developed public ECEC systems in Europe. High levels of taxation support universal access to services from the age of 12 months until formal schooling begins at age 6, with an integrated framework for supporting those with additional needs. The high level of support has been linked to the country's low levels of inequality and child poverty.

It may not be possible to adopt the Swedish model per se, but there is a lot to be gained from exploring what benefits universal access can bring and how resources are invested to shape practice on the ground.

Poland's journey to improve access to ECEC services is still in its infancy. It has not had the level of government support that Sweden has had, but provides examples of other funding avenues such as the EU Structural Funds. The question of how to sustain and develop the improved service provision that has been achieved using targeted funding will make Poland a fascinating case study to focus on in the future.

Every country is unique. We cannot lift a system from one country and reproduce it in another. However, study visits like this one enable us to identify some of the policies and practices that work or don't work, and to reflect on how our own country may make use of others' experience to improve our own.

Early childhood education and childcare study visit to Sweden and Poland

Organised by Children in Scotland for the King Baudouin Foundation (1 May – 6 May 2011)

Children in Scotland hosted the study visit for the King Baudouin Foundation to Vallentuna and Stockholm in Sweden, and Gmina Rawa Mazowiecka and Warsaw in Poland. The group visited a range of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and other services and met with key officials and academics. The purpose of the visit was to examine different models for supporting families with young children through formal and informal services and the role that this can play in improving their lives, addressing child poverty and promoting a more equal and inclusive society.

Sweden

The group visited a preschool centre for children aged 1-6, an open preschool service for children accompanied by a parent, a preschool class located within a primary school and an out-of-school service, all in Vallentuna, on the outskirts of Stockholm. In Stockholm the group met representatives of the Swedish Ministry for Education (Skolvekit).

ECEC in Vallentuna

The population of Vallentuna is expected to increase from

30,000 to 50,000 over the next 20 years. The growth will be driven primarily by Vallentuna's desirability as a commuter town serving Stockholm.

ECEC places are provided in either *förskola* (preschool) or *daghem* (family daycare) centres for children from the age of 1-5 years within 4 months of a parent's request. The services are open from 6.30 am to 6pm.

Attendance is free for 3, 4, and 5-year-olds for 15 hours per week, or 525 hours per year. If parents want full-time care they pay for this to a maximum of £74 per week, or less for second and subsequent children. Over 90% of children from 3-6 years attend preschool or family daycare and over 90% of 6-9-year-olds attend their school's *fritidshem*: overall the attendance rate in Vallentuna for the *fritidshem* is 54%, as children often go home from about the age of 10.

Parents can also start their own preschool with another family and take care of each other's children. According to Eva Lod, the Kommun's director of quality and development, no parents have indicated any wish to do so in Vallentuna but there are examples of this model elsewhere.

Sweden at a glance

Sweden is a unitary state, with three main levels of government: national, county (*Län*) and municipal (*kommun*). There are 21 counties and 290 *kommuns*; the latter vary greatly in size.

Population: 9.2 million; Density: 22 inhabitants per km²; Total fertility rate: 1.85; Children in lone parent households: 19%

Employment rate Q3 2010: 79.7%; Part-time employed as % all employed: 40% (women), 12% (men); maternal employment: 72% (child under 3 years), 81% (child 3-6 years)

GDP per capita at PPP as % EU27 average: 122%; Children 'at risk of poverty': 9% (all) (below EU average), 20% (lone parent); Ratio of income of top 20% to income of bottom 20%: 3.5

Tax receipts as % GDP: 48.5%; public expenditure on education as % GDP: 6.2%; public expenditure on social protection as % GDP: 32%, of which 3% on family/children.

Period of leave after birth: 240 days per parent; 390 days paid at 80% of previous earnings (60 days for fathers; 60 days for mothers; remainder to be divided as parents choose) + 90 days at low flat rate.

Swedish is the mother language for a large part of the population. There are five formally declared minority languages: Finnish, Sami, Romani, Yiddish and Meänkieli (Tornedal Finnish). 12% of the population are foreign born and 17% of children in pre-schools in 2008 had a mother tongue other than Swedish.

Ranked 2nd among EU member states for child wellbeing.

Source: Children in Scotland 2010 a



Early childhood education and childcare study visit to Sweden and Poland

Poland

The group visited a number of 'alternative' preschools and playgroups financed by EU funds in rural Rawa Mazowiecka, and Warsaw. The group also met with local government representatives and NGO representatives who have been instrumental in securing and investing the EU funds.

ECEC in Gmina Rawa Mazowiecka

Gmina Rawa Mazowiecka is a rural area in central Poland with 8,500 inhabitants living in 54 different villages. Farming has been the main occupation for decades although the rapid economic growth in Poland is seeing new employment opportunities arise. A new recycling facility has opened, a water treatment centre is being refurbished with European subsidy and new businesses are being created to serve the surge in demand for building materials. With support from the European Union's LEADER Programme, the area is also looking to develop tourism and promote conservation and rural heritage projects.

Prior to intervention from the Comenius Foundation, there were no preschool facilities in the area. A very small minority of the

area's 300 children aged between 3 and 5 attended preschool in the nearest town of Rawa Mazowiecka, which caters primarily for those children whose parents work.

Five preschool centres were created in 2009 and 2010 as a result the EU-funded project run by the Preschool Education Foundation providing 77 children aged 3-5 with at least 15 hours of alternative preschool per week, at no more than 5 hours per day. Parent can request more than 5 hours per day and this is considered on a case-by-case basis. A further three playgroups were also created in the area, for children aged between 6 months and 3 years to attend with their parents. The groups meet once per week for 3 hours.

ECEC in Warsaw

Warsaw is the capital and largest city of Poland. It is located on the Vistula River roughly 260 kilometers from the Baltic Sea and 300 kilometers from the Carpathian Mountains. Its population as of June 2010 was estimated at 1,716,855.

In Warsaw 2% of children under 3 have access to nurseries. 80% of children aged 3-6 have access preschool services.

Poland at a glance

Poland is a unitary state, with four levels of government: regional (*województwo*), district (*powiat*) and municipal (*gmina*). There are 16 regions, 379 districts and 2,478 *gminas*; most of the latter are in rural areas. There was strong decentralisation to democratically-elected municipalities after the Communist regime in 1989.

Population: 38.1 million; Density: 122 inhabitants per km²; Total fertility rate: 1.27; Children in lone parent households: 5%

Employment rate Q3 2010: 63.3%; Part-time employed as % all employed: 13% (women), 7% (men); maternal employment (women with child aged 0-3/3-6): No information

GDP per capita at PPP as % EU27 average: 53%; Children 'at risk of poverty': 25% (all) (above EU average), 46% (lone parent); Ratio of income of top 20% to income of bottom 20%: 5.6

Tax receipts as % GDP: 34.5%; public expenditure on education as % GDP: 5.4%; public expenditure on social protection as % GDP: 19.6%, of which 0.8% on family/children

Period of leave after birth: 20 weeks maternity leave and

parental leave until 36 months after birth per family. Maternity leave is paid at 100% of previous earnings; a means-tested flat-rate parental allowance (€115 per month) is paid for 24 months (36 months if more than one child) to all parents whose child does not attend crèche or kindergarten.

Poland has nine officially recognised national minority languages (Byelorussian, Czech, Lithuanian, German, Armenian, Russian, Slovak, Ukrainian and Jewish); four ethnic minority languages (Karaim, Lemko, Romany, Tatar); and one community using the regional language of Kashubian. Only 2% of the Polish population is foreign born.

Ranked 20th among EU member states for child wellbeing.

Source: Children in Scotland 2010 b



Inspiring change

Sweden and Poland provide two very different examples of countries that have unleashed the energy required to fundamentally change – for the better – the way that society supports its youngest citizens.

Both examples uphold the expression ‘Revolution does not happen overnight’. As Raimo Vuojärvi, Chairman of Vallentuna Kommun, reminded us: “It has taken Sweden over 30 years to get the early education and care system that we have today” – a system which, although not perfect, is internationally renowned for the high quality of its services and high levels of access.

Poland is at a very different stage. Its early childhood education and care revolution is still a seedling, and only time will tell whether it is allowed to flourish. However, there is no doubt that Poland has made significant and positive changes in a relatively short period of time.

Both countries provide valuable insight into how the process of change can begin.

Sweden

It was demand that kick-started the first dramatic rise in the number of child care places, fuelled by the 1960’s economic boom and increasing number of educated women entering the labour market. However, the prevailing view throughout this decade was that children start to become social beings at the age of 4, and day care was regarded by many as a necessary evil.

In 1968, the government appointed the National Commission on Child Care, whose remit was broadened in 1970 to examine educational issues. It mobilised expertise from across the country. Influenced by 19th century psychologist Jean Piaget’s theories of developmental psychology and 20th century psychologist Erik Erikson’s theories of social development, the Commission put forward recommendations for a system that met not only a child’s care needs, but their social and educational needs too.

The recommendations included a two-way relationship between pedagogues and children based on respect for the child as an individual, and belief in the child’s ability, curiosity and desire to learn. Another proposal that was accepted was mixed-aged groups, based on the belief that children (including those with physical and learning disabilities) could make friends with others irrespective of their age. Finally, the Commission determined its views on the need for expansion – for a universal preschool.

The 1975 Preschool Act was a critical stage of reform – 525 hours of free preschooling per year for 6-year-olds, with a plan for expansion from every municipality. There were few, if any international comparisons or research to look to and so quality

recommendations were cautious – groups of 10 – 12 children with an adult to child ratio of 2 : 5.

Around this time the Family Aid Commission published research which suggested that small children could, in fact, have close relationships with people other than their mother, and that the primary relationship with their parents could be maintained even though the child was in a day care centre. The important role of fathers and the importance of high quality services was also highlighted.

Stable financing conditions during these early years played a role in not only the quantitative expansion of preschools but in their qualitative development. In the late 1970s the state grant was about 45% of operating costs, on the basis that the centre had to be open 7 hours a day. Municipalities contributed a further 45% and parental contributions accounted for 10%. This did not change radically until 1992.

Poland

The changes in early childhood provision that have taken place in Poland over the past decade have largely been the result of campaigning by representatives of non-governmental organisations who identified a need. They have been supported by funding from the European Union, rather than national government.

Prior to 1989, Communist state-run institutions were the only type of institutions for preschool children. They had a poor reputation but were used, primarily by working parents because the prevailing ethos was – and still is – that young children are best cared for by their mother at home. When the regime ended, responsibility for the institutions was transferred to municipalities, but most of those outside the urban centres were closed on the basis that demand was low and they were too expensive to run. Since then attendance rates for children 0-6 have been among the lowest in Europe.

One of the legacies of the communist system in Poland is the enduring stereotype that preschools are the gloomy waiting rooms where heartless mothers leave their vulnerable children in the care of sadistic teachers to pursue their sick ambitions in the labour market. It is time to undo this myth

Joanna Olech, ‘Cinderellas. The Children Who Don’t Go to Preschool’, Tygodnik; Powszechny, 21 November 2004.

Inspiring change

The Polish Children and Youth Foundation (PCYF), which created the Comenius Foundation for Child Development in 2003, recognised early on that attendance was low, particularly in sparsely-populated, rural areas where there were few, if any, services. Monika Rościszewska-Woźniak, a former preschool teacher, felt she could not ignore the injustice that a generation of children were growing up without access to any kind of educational service until the age of 7 when formal schooling starts.

In the year 2000, the Bernard van Leer Foundation awarded PCYF its first grant to take forward the 'Where there are no preschools programme' - a new, flexible model of early education for children aged 3-5 in rural areas. The programme included a new curriculum and training for teachers inspired by good practice in other European countries such as Sweden and Italy.

The Foundation was forced to develop an 'alternative model' because the stringent state laws governing, for example, the buildings that preschools can be housed in and a ban on mixed age groups, would have made it impossible to create sustainable services in such low populated areas. In addition the national curriculum did not cover preschool, nor did it have the holistic approach to education that was required.

A second grant the following year led to 23 'alternative' preschool centres in eight rural communities. Over the next 8 years, with a substantial grant from the European Social Fund, hundreds more were opened, providing thousands of rural children with an 'alternative preschool education'.

Rościszewska-Woźniak views the success of the 'Where there are no preschools programme' through two windows. The first is its success on the ground - its ability to engage the local communities it was designed to serve and the impact it has on children and their families. Evaluation so far suggests that children are benefitting in terms of their self-confidence, self-esteem and readiness for school. During our short study visit it was certainly evident that the preschools were valued by the local communities.

The second is the programme's success in bringing about bigger changes at national level - influencing the direction of future early education and care policy so that *all* children in Poland might one day benefit. One of the early goals was to incorporate a reference to alternative preschool provision in Polish education law, to help municipalities receive subsidies for that purpose.

Maintaining high profile public debate was important. The programme had some notable successes. Presentations at national conferences, a high profile debate defending alternative preschool when the Polish Teachers Union publicly opposed it, a feature story in Poland's largest daily on preschool education, publication of a manual for communities on how to set up an alternative preschool which has been translated into English by UNICEF, and a televised pre-election debate questioning candidates on how they plan to solve problems related to early education and care.

"Apart from the constant nudging of various ministry officials, almost since the beginning we have been using our personal contacts to reach politicians of ruling parties and opposition parties alike." Terese Ogrodzińska, president of the Comenius Foundation

In 2007, the Polish Government recognised the alternative preschool model by agreeing to incorporate 'other forms of preschool provision' into the Education Act. It was considered a breakthrough but one that did not go far enough in terms of creating flexibility for those wanting to open new alternative forms of preschool.

In February 2011, the Polish Government signed a new Act on Early Childhood Education and Care services for children under 3, introducing a broader and more child and family centred approach to services.

The Comenius Foundation and other NGO's will continue to campaign for further improvements to early childhood policy.



What to work towards ...

An integrated early childhood education and care system

The European Commission's 2011 Communication *Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow* advocates an integrated approach to education and care - from birth to the start of compulsory schooling. It can be viewed as a new and significant marker for member states on how to move forward and comparisons of countries with, and without, integrated systems provides valuable insight into why integration is a worthwhile aspiration.

The cross-European programme 'Working for Inclusion' (Working for Inclusion 2007 - 2013) found that those countries with fully integrated systems of early childhood education and care (ECEC), with other important interconnected policies such as strong income redistribution, generous entitlement systems and a commitment to delivering universal services have higher qualified, better paid staff, lower levels of child poverty and higher levels of child wellbeing.

Sweden

Sweden is one of only five countries in the European Union (plus Norway) to have a fully integrated system of early education and care, delivered on a universal basis for all of its citizens. It is also one of five member states where child poverty is below average and it is ranked second among member states for overall child well-being.

Sweden has been a trailblazer. The report from the National Commission on Child Care, which was so influential in the early 1970s recognised that childcare for the sole purpose of enabling women to work was not sufficient (Swedish National Agency for Education 2000). Sweden has remained committed to the underpinning principle of the system that it proposed ever since. There has been no conceptual split between childcare and education in Sweden for many years - it refers to a "pedagogical approach, where care, nurturing and learning form a coherent whole". Even the new preschool curriculum, due to be introduced in July 2011 states in its publicity material for parents: "Preschool is primarily here for the benefit of your child, even if it also makes it possible for you as a parent to work or study" (Swedish National Agency for Education 2008a).

In the late 1990s Sweden went a step further and achieved 'structural integration' too. It moved responsibility for early childhood services from welfare to the education sector to create a completely integrated early childhood education and care system for all children from 12 months to 6 years covering access, funding, workforce, provision, regulation and curriculum.

The impact of Sweden's commitment to integration has been far reaching.

The view of the child

The conceptual integration of ECEC can open up new ways of understanding very young children.

Children cease to be passive beings only in need of care and instead can be viewed as competent and active learners who are curious about discovering the world. In this, Sweden has been deeply influenced by the pioneering work of the late Loris Malaguzzi in Reggio Emilia, Italy.

Reggio Emilia, Italy

Sweden has been influenced by the work of the late Loris Malaguzzi (1920 - 1994) whose starting point was always 'What is your image of the child?' and his answer was always clear: '*Our image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and, most of all, connected to adults and other children*'. This image or construction contrasts with a view of the child as lacking, passive, acted upon, and following a predetermined path set out by adults and/or innate development. (Children in Scotland, 2009)

Likewise the 'care' element brings a nurturing dynamic to education, recognising that issues ranging from a child's self-confidence to good nutrition are just as important as learning to read and write.

An holistic approach

This holistic approach to working with children, which recognises their intellectual, social, emotional, physical, moral and aesthetic development, is visible in many different aspects of Swedish early childhood education and care services.

An holistic approach to the curriculum...

The Swedish preschool curriculum requires: "good pedagogical activities, where care, nurturing and learning together form a coherent whole". A new curriculum is due to be introduced in July when a new Education Act comes into force. There have been concerns that since integration a decade ago, preschool has gained increased importance as a preparation for school, resulting in a narrowing of the curriculum that jeopardises its holistic nature. An evaluation of the curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2008) remarked that there seems to be a larger focus on language development, and that "children's development, performance and proficiencies are being identified and assessed to an increasing extent." The government has indicated that it wants to resist this and the holistic focus will be maintained as a cornerstone of the new curriculum.

What to work towards ... An integrated early childhood education and care system

The Swedish preschool curriculum serving the whole child

The preschool should try to ensure that children:

- Develop their identity and feel secure in themselves
- Develop their curiosity and enjoyment at the same time as the ability to play and learn
- Develop self-autonomy and confidence in their own ability
- Feel a sense of participation in their own culture and develop a feeling and respect for other cultures
- Develop their ability to listen, narrate, reflect and express their own views
- Develop their ability to function individually and in a group, to handle conflicts and understand rights and obligations as well as take responsibility for common rules
- Develop their motor skills, ability to co-ordinate, awareness of their own body, as well as an understanding of the importance of maintaining their own health and well-being
- Acquire and be able to differentiate shades of meaning in concepts, see interconnections and discover new ways of understanding the surrounding world
- Develop a rich and varied spoken language and the ability to communicate with others and to express their thoughts
- Develop their vocabulary and concepts, the ability to play with words, an interest in the written language and an understanding of symbols as well as their communicative functions
- Develop creative abilities and the ability to convey thoughts and experiences in many different forms of expression, such as play, pictures, song and music, dance and drama
- Develop their ability to build, create and design using different materials and techniques
- Develop the ability to discover and use mathematics in meaningful contexts and situations
- Develop their appreciation of the basic characteristics of the concept of number, measurement and form, as well as the ability to orient themselves in time and space
- Develop an understanding of their own involvement in the processes of nature and in simple scientific phenomena, such as knowledge of plants and animals and
- Whose first language is not Swedish, develop their cultural identity as well as their ability to communicate in both Swedish and their first language.

Source: Swedish National Agency for Education 2008b

An holistic approach visible in day-to-day activities

The holistic approach was visible in some of the day-to-day activities witnessed in preschools as part of this study visit. Mealtimes at Granåsa preschool, take on greater significance

than satiating hunger pangs. They become opportunities for children to learn about healthy foods and to develop their social skills, and a 'fairy tale room' has been designed specifically for storytelling as a means for children to open up and explore their feelings and emotions.

Granåsa preschool, Vallentuna, Sweden

Mealtimes and fairytales

Granåsa preschool has an in-house cook who prepares daily breakfasts and lunches. At the time of our visit, a hot lunch of sausage stew with rice and vegetables is being served. As in many Swedish preschools, food has central role in pedagogy, with a focus on providing healthy, balanced meals and on the opportunities that mealtimes provide for developing strong social bonds. The preschool is also considering giving children the opportunity to work in the kitchen with cook to help prepare food.

The tables are set as they might be set at home, complete with cutlery, glass tumblers, a basket of bread and table decoration. Staff always eat with the children – one adult per

table. The tables are of a standard height so that they can do this comfortably and chairs have been designed with longer legs to bring the children up to table height. The atmosphere is calm, with the sound of relaxed children's chatter and cutlery scraping on plates.



What to work towards ... An integrated early childhood education and care system

Free play is an important part of the day, with a range of more structured activities designed to nurture children's social, emotional and intellectual development. For example, Granåsa has created a 'Fairy Tale Room' where magical stories are told and where children are encouraged to explore their feelings and emotions. It also has a strong outdoors ethos, demonstrated by the importance placed on outdoor play in the preschool grounds and by the fact that children take their daily nap outside, sleeping on loungers lined up under a wooden shelter. There are also weekly visits into the community, to a local farm or library for example.



Healthy food and meal times play a central role in the pedagogy of Swedish preschools. Many have their own cook, lay the table as it would be set in a family home, and staff and children eat together.

The loungers where children sleep outside

At Ekebyskolan (Ekeby School) a teacher highlights the importance of play as a means of not only developing literacy, numeracy and other skills but also of developing strong social bonds between children. She believes the latter is more

important at preschool stage. She also discusses her interpretation of the preschool class as, not a separate entity, but a "bridge" into school – helping to ensure a seamless transition.

Ekebyskolan (Ekeby School), Vallentuna, Sweden

A focus on play

Ekebyskolan is a primary school with an on-site preschool class, and a *Fritidshem* (leisure time) after-school service.

Children attend the Ekebyskolan preschool class from the age of 6 to help ensure a smooth transition into formal schooling at the age of 7.

"We work to the concept of 'La Fil Rouge' – a continuous red thread through preschool into primary. We are like a bridge. We have one leg in preschool and one leg in school. We pick

What to work towards ... An integrated early childhood education and care system

the best of both”, says the preschool manager Kerstin Hedtors.

Tables and chairs do not dominate the room. At the time of our visit children are making use of the space, sitting on the floor in small groups and as individuals playing with jigsaws, construction toys, dolls and marbles. A boy and girl are absorbed in role play and a teacher and child are sitting at a table working one-to-one with a sewing project.

“I believe in a lot of time for play. I have learned over the years not to become too preoccupied with reading and writing at this stage. The children will learn how to do this. They have come to us from a number of different preschools so it is more important that they are given the opportunity this year to form strong bonds with each other”, says preschool manager Kerstin Hedtors.

When preschools were integrated with education, there were



Children make the most of the open floor space to learn through 'free play' at Ekebyskolan preschool class.

concerns throughout Sweden about 'schoolification' – with preschools beginning to take on the formality of school. Kersten says she has tried to resist this, and believes that in some cases the vice versa is true. “It depends very much on the individual headteachers and teachers. There are examples of schools changing as a result of working more closely with preschool. For example, children in the first year of Ekebyskolan sit on the floor more and work more with broad themes as we do in preschool.”

The children arrive at 8am and start the day sitting in a circle talking and singing. They have uninterrupted free play, with the opportunity for one-to-one with a teacher if required, and following a snack are split into smaller groups. Each group has a mentor who is the contact person for the children's parents. The groups work on more structured, yet “play-oriented” activities to develop the children's creativity, literacy and numeracy skills.



A teacher and child work one-to-one on a sewing project during 'free play'.

An holistic approach that acknowledges the importance of family

As in Reggio Emilia (page 10) and San Miniato (page 16), high value is placed on family participation. Parents are viewed as a child's first educator. Publicity material for the new preschool curriculum in Sweden speaks directly to parents: “You as the parent are the person that is closest to your child, which is why your views are important in preschool. If you speak your mind, it is easier for the staff to give your child exactly what he/she needs.”

Kerstin Hedtors, Preschool Manager at Ekebyskolan (page 12), feels staff have a good relationship with parents. “We speak to

them every day, send a letter home each fortnight with details of activity plans and are open to them dropping in or spending the day with us if they can. We give our home numbers but they're very rarely used.”

The holistic approach is also evident in Sweden's 'whole-day' approach to education and care, which acknowledges that many parents require high quality care out of school hours. In the new preschool curriculum, its first promise is to the child. But there is also an historic promise to families where parents want to work. The long opening hours of Swedish preschools (Granåsa Preschool on page 11 opens from 6:30am until 5pm) and the seamless after-school care that is co-located in most schools reflects this.

What to work towards ... An integrated early childhood education and care system

Ekebyskolan Fritidshem (Ekeby School Leisure Time Service), Vallentuna, Sweden

The 'Whole day' approach

Many of the preschool class children at Ekeby School (page 12) also attend the after-school service, which provides a range of structured activities and free play out of school hours until 6pm. It is staffed by degree-qualified pedagogues, who also work alongside teachers in the classroom during the school day. Christer, a pedagogue who has been working at Ekebyskolan since 2003, is responsible for physical education in his class and works with small groups of children. Many of his projects involve the outdoors. For example, environmental and wildlife projects that require trips to the forest.

(Opposite) Christer, a pedagogue, working in the classroom with a small group of pupils.



An holistic approach that acknowledges the importance of the outdoors and the wider community

For many schools in Sweden, giving children opportunities to go beyond the school gates and out into their local community is considered important. Ekeby School (page 12) runs three school trips per term, even if the trip is just to a local farm. The journey is considered to be an educational experience in itself – the children use the local bus service and so are learning how to use public transport.

Access to the outdoors in general is also important – for example, making use of local woodland to bring environmental projects to life (see Ekebyskolan Fritidshem, above).

An holistic approach that acknowledges the importance of architecture and design

Inspired by Reggio Emilia is the knowledge that the design of a preschool goes way beyond a structurally sound building. Soft

qualities such as light, colour, touch, smell, sound and micro-climate have the power to enhance or diminish children's overall sense of well-being and thus enhance or diminish their learning experience. The way that space is organised can encourage or hinder opportunities for relationship building or individual reflection. (Children in Scotland, 2011) This attention to design detail was evident at Granåsa preschool (page 11), where dining chairs have been designed specifically to enable staff and young children to eat meals together sitting at a dining table.

An holistic approach that brings in 'other services'

Conceptually, if not structurally, other services such as health and social work are viewed as an important part of the ECEC system.

Co-location of services is quite common in order to improve access. In Familjens Hus, a popular 'open preschool' where parents drop in and stay with their children, they have ease of access to other community services that are based there.

Familjens Hus (Open preschool), Vallentuna, Sweden

A community hub

Familjens Hus is considered a community hub by local parents, and on the afternoon of our visit had already seen 39 children and their parents through its doors. Manager,

Yvonne Pergman, is on hand to offer general support to parents on any issues they may have such as difficulties with sleeping or behaviour, and to help initiate creative activities for parents and children to enjoy together. She works closely with social services and the health centre, both of which have a member of staff who use the service location as a base. They work together to identify parents and children who

What to work towards ... An integrated early childhood education and care system

could benefit from the service.

Familjens Hus houses additional community services such as a visiting dentist, family counseling, Active Gym, classes for

parents who have just arrived in Sweden and parenting classes using the Active Parenting model (Active Parenting, 2011).

From birth until the start of formal schooling, children are covered by the National Preventative Child Health Care Programme (CHC), which offers routine screening in order to aid early identification of problems such as speech and language delay. For speech and language, screenings are offered at 18 months, 3 and 4-years-old. Take up is high.

From the age of 6 when a child starts formal schooling, their health details are transferred to the school nurse, who will

oversee their health and wellbeing in an holistic way for the duration of their school career. The new Education Act, due to be introduced in July 2011, strengthens school pupils' access to health services, by giving them the right to access a school doctor, psychologist and social worker as well as the school nurse. The difference in preschool and school relationship with health services is becoming a more pressing point of discussion as recognition of the importance of early intervention increases.

The Swedish school nurse

The Swedish school system has a particularly strong relationship with health. Sweden's national programme of school nursing is internationally renowned. Although the number of pupils a Swedish school nurse has varies greatly between 300 and 1,100, every pupil does have access to one, whom they first meet when they start formal schooling at the age of 6.

Gunilla Fagerholt, a school nurse in Lund, Sweden, describes the initial consultation: "The parents fill in a questionnaire

about their child. I obtain information from the child welfare clinic and make up a new case record... I check the child's vision and examine his/her back for scoliosis. As the child is dressed in underwear when I do this check, this gives me a chance to see his/her body, and observe if the child has unusual bruises and marks... I ask how the child finds it in school, if he/she enjoys learning and how he/she gets on with classmates." (British Journal of School Nursing, 2009)

From there on the school nurse is responsible in an holistic way for monitoring the health and wellbeing of pupils. This includes their mental health as well as physical health and vaccinations.

An holistic approach to wider policy development

Beyond service provision, Sweden's strong family policies also form part of the 'whole package' mentality.

Strong leave entitlements for both mothers and fathers combined with universal access to services has helped Swedish

citizens view services like preschool and open preschools as an integral part of their children's upbringing. Dads like Gisleher, who attends the Familjens Hus (page 14) most week days with his young son may be a rare breed in many European countries, but he does not consider his daily routine extraordinary. He is however, aware of how he has benefitted from access to the service.

A father's place

Gisleher, father of 21-month-old Wilhelm, says he comes to the Familjens Hus almost every day from 9am and stays playing with his son and socialising with other parents until 2pm. The direct translation of Familjens Hus is 'Family House', perhaps a more apt description of what is officially known in Sweden as an 'open preschool', where parents can bring their children to make use of the facilities but must stay with them for the duration.

Familjens Hus houses additional community services (see page 14) including parenting classes (Active Parenting, 2011), which Gisleher himself has found particularly beneficial. "It has opened my eyes to how I am as a parent. I reflect on my actions as a father and have become much more aware of how to communicate clearly with young children and of the importance of setting consistent boundaries. I think I am a more confident father."

His confidence has also come from the strong friendships formed with others who attend, and he describes himself as

Inspiring change ...

What to work towards ... An integrated early childhood education and care system

being part of the 'Dad's gang' at Familjens Hus. "Staying at home with my son has been a huge lifestyle change for me and that connection with others in the same situation as myself is so incredibly important."



Gilshleher, father to 21-month-old Wilhelm, comes to the Familjens Hus almost every day.

Gilshleher is taking advantage of Sweden's comparatively generous parental leave entitlement of 490 days after the birth of a child (390 of which are paid at 80% of earnings). Portions of the leave can be taken by either the mother or father.



Poland

Poland does not have a fully integrated system. The Polish Government signed a new Act on Early Childhood Education and Care services for children under 3 in February 2011, which transfers responsibility from the Health Ministry to the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare. It introduces a broader and more child and family-centred approach to services, and crucially, recognises the educational aspect of these services. Services for 3–6-year-olds are the sole responsibility of the Ministry of National Education, and an important driver for their existence is to accommodate the needs of working parents.

Work over the past decade by NGOs such as the Comenius Foundation has made great strides in innovating to improve

early childhood services in Poland. The primary focus has been on increasing access to preschool education in sparsely populated and disadvantaged areas, but a more integrated approach to ECEC has been an important influence in the qualitative development of these services.

The view of the child

As part of Monika Rościszewska-Woźniak's campaign to raise the profile of the importance of services for children under 3, she used San Miniato, Italy, as an example of good practice (Children in Scotland, 2008). Like Reggio Emilia, San Miniato has been pivotal in supporting the view of young children as active agents and protagonists of their own learning, rather than passive beings awaiting instruction.

San Miniato, Italy

In the Tuscan town of San Miniato in Italy, the image of the child is of a citizen who, from the very beginning, is a competent person and holder of rights. In this context, children are producers of their own experience. They seek their own experiences, and construct their own knowledge... Children are rich, strong and full of potential.

Source: *Children in Europe, 2011*

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An holistic approach

An holistic approach to ECEC which recognises children's intellectual, social, emotional, physical, moral and aesthetic development, is not embedded in Polish services in the same way that it is in Sweden. However, the 'Where there is no preschools programme' (WTANP) has made a notable contribution in this area.

An holistic approach to the curriculum

The alternative curriculum that Monika Rościszewska-Woźniak developed for the 'WTANP programme' appreciates that a child's future success in society will depend on softer skills such as social maturity, self-confidence, curiosity and persistence. A key part of staff training focuses on how to develop children's creativity and help raise their self-esteem.

"Respect for children" and "child-led learning" are both

underpinning principles. The former reflects an appreciation of the concept of child as citizen and the latter a belief in the child as constructors of knowledge.

Interviews with school teachers who teach children who have graduated from the programme revealed that they noticed various social skills, higher levels of self-confidence and better dispositions in class, compared to those children who had not had access to any preschool. Anecdotal evidence from the study visit suggests that parents notice a difference too. A mother whose 3-year-old son and 1-year-old daughter attend a WTANP playgroup believes her son is far more advanced in certain areas than his two older siblings were at the same stage. They did not have access to a preschool service from such a young age.

A new core curriculum, developed for mainstream preschools in 2008 does combine learning and play through 15 curriculum areas.

Kurzeszyn preschool centre and playgroup, Gmina Rawa Mazowiecka, Poland

Making a difference

The building is not state-of-the-art, and yet inside Kurzeszyn preschool and playgroup the furniture is new and brightly coloured, and the craftwork on display shows that imagination and creativity are in plentiful supply.

In the mornings, the building houses alternative preschool for children aged 3 - 5 who attend 15 hours per week. At the time of our visit the afternoon playgroup is in full swing. Ten children aged 6 months to 3 years and their parents meet once a week. It has been set up using European Funding as part of the WTANP programme.

Dawid, 3, attends with his mum Anetta and his younger sister. It is an experience that 3-year-old Dawid's older siblings, aged 5 and 6, never had and Anetta has noticed a difference.

"I have noticed a big difference between my two youngest children who attend the group and my older two", said Dawid's mum, Anetta. "They are more self-confident, more sociable and have better motor skills than my older children had at the same stage."



Anetta (front) with her son, who she believes has more self-confidence as a result of attending playgroup.

Teacher, Maggie, said: "My role is to help foster good, strong relationships between parents and their children. I show them how to do interesting things with their children. Sometimes it is the only time in the week when the parent can devote their undivided attention to their child."

Parents bring food with them and they eat together. They share the food they have brought and encourage children try new things.

An holistic approach that acknowledges the importance of family

The main beneficiaries of the 'Where there are no preschools

programme' are families where at least one parent, usually the mother, is at home. This provides for a completely different dynamic of family participation to the one witnessed in most Swedish services.

What to work towards ... An integrated early childhood education and care system

Kurzeszyn preschool centre and playgroup, Gmina Rawa Mazowiecka, Poland

Communicating with parents

Parental involvement has always been a priority for the programme. Maggie, a teacher at Kurzeszynie preschool and playgroup (page 17) describes how her role is to “help foster good, strong relationships between parents and their

children. I show them how to do interesting things with their children. Sometimes it is the only time in the week when the parent can devote their undivided attention to their child”.

In Swedish preschool services, parents are valued as their child’s first educator, however in many disadvantaged areas parents do not have the confidence to embrace such a title. It has been the work of the WTANP programme that has helped to nurture this confidence.

Due to the financial constraints of the WTANP programme, it has had to rely on parent volunteers to help staff the services. This is discussed on page 24, but in the context of parental

involvement in children’s education, their presence has shed light on the potential riches that they can bring.

Parents as experts

Teresa Ogrodzińska, president of the Comenius Foundation, said: “Open-minded teachers help parents to open up, to take part in activities, to learn new skills and new ways of solving problems. Family members are encouraged to draw pictures with (rather than for) the child and to make puppets for theatrical performances. A mother who recognised that the children had caught a tree frog, a protected species in

Poland, suddenly proved an expert in the field, and the children went out to release the amphibian from captivity... We often use parents as experts. Fathers, uncles and neighbours feel privileged and proud if they are asked to come to the centre to talk about something they know very well. They have never been asked to share what they know, and now, thanks to the children’s questions, they feel like experts for the first time in their lives.” (Comenius Foundation for Child Development, 2009)

Discussions with preschool staff on the study visit suggest that involving parents is not common practice in municipality-run preschools. Dorota Piotrkowicz is one of the many WTANP employees who also work for the municipality. She believes a legacy of the programme may be that some of its principles will change standard teaching practices. “I’ve noticed that I have more contact with the parents of children attending preschool through the programme. Parents are encouraged to stay, and this has had an effect on how comfortable and open they are

with me. I would like to think that this experience will impact in a positive way on the way that I teach in the future.”

An holistic approach that acknowledges the importance of the wider community

A key part of the WTANP programme is to show children and parents alike that their immediate surroundings are a rich oasis, full of opportunities for learning.

Place-based learning

On a visit to a WTANP preschool, Teresa Ogrodzińska, President of the Comenius Foundation, saw a teacher reading a story of the thrifty ant and reckless grasshopper. She broke off to ask the children if they knew what a grasshopper looks like and the response was a resounding ‘No’. She replied: ‘Then we’ll go out into the fields and find one tomorrow’. “These children came from a very poor, underprivileged and disadvantaged community, and the teacher showed a stroke of genius – who else would have thought that rural children might not have seen a grasshopper if they lived so close to nature?”



Working towards ... Improved access to services for all children

Sweden is one example of a European country which has high levels of access to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services from the age of 12 months and low levels of child poverty. Poland has comparatively low levels of access to ECEC services and high levels of child poverty. The examples support the European Commission's 2011 Communication (European Commission, 2011) which states that ECEC can help lift children out of poverty.

Sweden

Sweden's family policy, like its social policy generally, stresses universalism as a principle rather than targeting. Every citizen has the same right to access services. Within this is a framework for supporting those who have additional needs.

Extensive and universal support both for ECEC and for an

extended paid and job-protected parental leave following childbirth or adoption are key.

Since the transfer of early childhood services to education, all children are now entitled to a place in a Förskola (preschool) from 12 months old until formal schooling starts at age 6, and the costs to parents have been sharply reduced. No family pays more than SEK 2,280 (€206) a month. The results have been striking, with previous inequalities in access (rural/urban, ethnic groups and social class) greatly narrowed.

In 1998, the proportion of children aged between 1 and 5 attending ECEC varied from under 50% in small and rural kommuns to 65-70% in large cities and metropolitan areas. By 2004 this gap had closed markedly, to around 70% for the former and just under 80% for the latter.

Overall access levels to ECEC services in Sweden are relatively high:

Attendance at formal ECEC services (EC, 2006):

Birth to 3 years: 44% (27% attend 30 hours a week or more)
3 to 6 years: 92% (58% attend 30 hours a week or more)

Source: Children in Scotland 2010 a

Supporting children whose mother tongue is not Swedish

Universal service provision is by nature inclusive because it does not stigmatise individuals or groups. Every citizen has the same entitlement to basic services. However, within the services Sweden also demands an inclusive ethos and this is evident in its approach to supporting children whose first language is not Swedish.

Sweden is changing the way that it supports preschool children for whom Swedish is a second language.

A right to receive tuition in their mother tongue from a native speaker was considered to be too costly and ineffective. Under the new preschool curriculum, due to be introduced in July 2011, the development of Swedish and each child's mother tongue language is expected to be an integral part of preschool daily routine. It attempts to move away from a narrow focus on language education towards the development of communication through a variety of different forms of expression. This may include pictures, song, music, drama, rhythm, dance and movement, as well as spoken and written language. The new curriculum also specifies development of a child's cultural identity.

Development of mother tongue languages in Vallentuna

Vallentuna has a relatively small number of children with minority languages compared to Stockholm and other cities. However, it is preparing for a significant increase as economic migrants move to Vallentuna in order to commute into Stockholm.

It is changing practice in preschools to reflect the new curriculum in which development of children's mother tongue languages should be part of day-to-day routine.

Brigitta Tallryd, a preschool inspector in Vallentuna, with special responsibility for the development of minority languages, said: "In practice, this means that you should feel the ethnic, cultural and linguistic mix of a preschool when you walk in. For example, there should be books available in a variety of languages that reflect those spoken by the children, visuals around the room to promote cultural diversity and open discussion about different languages and cultures. A child should be proud of their mother tongue –

Working towards ... Improved access to services for all children

preschools need to find a way to lift it up for everyone to see.

"There is now a website of resources to support staff in this area. Preschools are also encouraged to develop networks that will support the exchange of information and good practice.

"It is still possible to arrange mother tongue tuition from a native speaker if there are five or more children with the

same mother tongue in a group. But this method is used less and less."

The pre-school should try to ensure that children whose first language is not Swedish, develop their cultural identity as well as their ability to communicate in both Swedish and their first language.

Source: Swedish National Agency for Education, 1998

Sweden has a history of providing refuge for asylum seekers. It has one of the largest exile communities of Assyrians/Syriacs, who have fled Iraq. This high level of immigration is reflected in the statistic that 12% of the population are foreign born.

A substantial minority of children in ECEC services (17% in preschools in 2008) have a mother tongue other than Swedish. The biggest second languages in Sweden in 2010 were Spanish, Polish, English and Russian.

Like many European countries, Sweden is dealing with the problems associated with large concentrations of immigrants in one area – particularly in cities. Magdalena Karlsson, in the preschool unit of the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket), said: "I believe preschool and school are both an important part of the solution to this problem, but by no means

the whole solution."

Supporting children with additional needs

Children with additional support needs have special rights in the Swedish childcare system. They are entitled to a 3-hour session in a preschool, free of charge, throughout the whole of their early childhood, irrespective of their parents' occupations. What constitutes 'additional needs' is not closely defined and includes children with more diffuse problems such as difficulties concentrating or psychosocial disorders.

Children with disabilities or psychosocial challenges have a priority right for Swedish ECEC services and are well represented and integrated in services.

Vallentuna Language pre-school

In 1995 Vallentuna opened its own specialist preschool unit for children aged 3 - 5 displaying severe speech and language delay. The unit is located in a mainstream preschool but is run separately by a qualified speech and language therapist and the children are taught as a separate group. The children who attend have been referred by the State-run CHC - Sweden's Preventative Child Health Care programme, which offers all children speech and language screening at 18 months, 3, and 4-years-old.

The preschool is a big financial investment – staff ratio is high with a full-time speech and language therapist and three full-time pre-school teachers to eight children. It is funded primarily by Vallentuna Kommun, with contributions per child from the CHC. The staff appear highly motivated, primarily because the high staff to child ratio and the intensity of the treatment means they are able to see real improvements in the children they work with.

On the surface, this highly specialised unit appears at odds with Sweden's inclusive culture, which supports the integration of children with additional support needs into mainstream education wherever possible. However, the children who attend this unit are fully expected to progress

to mainstream formal schooling. They are considered to have a normal IQ and have not been diagnosed with other serious conditions such as Autism.



Working towards ... Improved access to services for all children

Poland

Access levels to Polish ECEC services for both the 0-3 and 3-6 age range are among the lowest in Europe, according to the European Commission's own statistics. The services are also distributed unequally, with fewer places in poorer regions most affected by unemployment and in rural areas.

The impact of targeted funding

What is interesting about Poland is the energy being put into improving access levels, particularly in rural areas, and the impact that this is having. Projects funded by European Structural Funds and run by non-government organisations like the Comenius Foundation for Child Development have established 900 alternative preschools for children over 3. Housed in schools, library facilities, community centres or fire stations, they are slowly raising the participation rates for preschool education in rural areas.

Young families who previously had no access to any kind of

ECEC services are now seeing the benefits that it can bring, not just for the children but for parents too. The popularity of these projects demonstrate that there is not only demand for the relatively basic levels of access they provide, but hunger for development.

The challenge for Poland now is how to ensure the sustainability of the centres that have been established using European Structural Funds, to ensure they can continue to benefit communities once the funding comes to an end (see page 26).

Some of the benefits on the ground are reflected in Anetta's comments on page 17 regarding the difference she can see in her youngest children who have had access to services and her older children who did not. It was also seen in Przedszkole Miejskie, (page 24), in the intensity of concentration and pleasure that a little girl, given the opportunity to attend preschool through the Chance programme, was showing in her healthy meal. And the benefits also extend to the parents who have grown in confidence.



Children of the 'Chance' programme in Warsaw, enjoying mealtime.

Overall access levels to ECEC services in Poland are relatively low:

Attendance at formal ECEC services (EC, 2007):
Birth to 3 years: 2% (2% attend 30 hours a week or more)
3 to 6 years: 31% (23 % attend 30 hours a week or more).

Source: *Children in Scotland b, 2010*

Working towards ... Improved access to services for all children

Nasze Przedszkolaki, Rawa Mazowiecka, Poland

The 'Circle of Women'

It is clear that Nasze Przedszkolaki is highly valued by the local mothers who are attending with their children.

Agnieszka Wolowicz whose child attends the preschool feels passionately about the need to preserve it. "Before the

creation of the service no local children attended preschool. Now that we have a preschool, parents really do appreciate its value and we want to keep it. Parents see the positive impact that the playgroup has on their children, but it is more than that. For example, some of the mothers who attend would like to establish a 'circle of women' - a network of support for local women and a tradition that dates back to the Communist era, particularly in rural areas."



A mother and son who have benefited from the Nasze Przedszkolaki, in Rawa Mazowiecka. It will now be taken over by an Association, founded by parents.

The Polish Government is also now working to address the low levels of access to ECEC services, with a particular focus on rural areas. In 2008, it introduced the 'Programme of Educational Development in Rural Areas for 2008-2013'. 'A nursery in every village' programme has also been announced, which will subsidise the services provided by municipalities to improve access levels for children under 3. The Ministry of Work and Social Policy has also prepared a 'family law' Bill in which nurseries are no longer health care centres and will be moved

from the Ministry of Health to the Ministry of Work and Social Policy control, offering new forms of early childhood education and care.

The Ministry of National Education has stated that one of the main objectives of the educational system in the near future will be extension of preschool education for all children aged 3-5 - beginning with the introduction of mandatory preschool education for 5-year-olds in 2012.

Working towards ... A high quality workforce

The cross-European research project Working for Inclusion asserted the centrality of a valued, well-qualified and appropriately remunerated workforce in achieving high quality early childhood education and care services.

Sweden

The Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) workforce in Sweden has been integrated in the same way that government responsibility has been integrated. There are two types of workers, both qualified to work with children from 0-6.

The preschool worker (Barnskötare) is educated to upper secondary level, with introductory training provided by most municipalities.

The preschool teacher (Förskollärare), is educated to degree level within the same framework as school teachers and freetime pedagogues. They all share the same 18 months of core studies and then specialise with particular age groups. On graduation, all students are qualified teachers, but each has a distinctive profile or professional orientation.

Granåsa preschool, Vallentuna, Sweden

Of the 12 staff (70 children), four are university qualified *Förskollärare* (preschool teachers) and the rest are *Barnskötare* (preschool workers), with 3 years upper secondary education.

The new Education Act, which comes into force in July 2011, will mark a change for preschool teachers in Sweden. From July, preschool teachers will have to be registered with the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolvekit). A 1-year probationary period can be followed by a further 4 years' working towards additional accreditation from the university which will result in a Masters. This means that preschools can be held accountable and disciplined in the same way as teachers. It also introduces a mechanism for enhancing the qualifications of staff.

The change is part of Government efforts to improve the quality and the status of preschool teachers. Municipalities are also looking to increase salaries in order to raise the attractiveness of the role. Raimo Vuojärvi, Chairman of Vallentuna Kommun, said there is a shortage of preschool teachers in Sweden, and a challenge for his locality over the next few years will be its ability to attract and retain enough staff to meet the growth in demand for services.

Poland

The ECEC workforce in Poland, like government responsibility

and provision for education and care, is split. There are separate groups of workers for children under and over the age of 3.

For children under the age of 3, the focus is on health - although this will change when the new 'family law' Bill moves services for this age group from the Ministry of Health to the Ministry of Work and Social Policy. The head of a service is currently required to have a degree in nursing or other university level qualification relating to healthcare. There are no qualification requirements for assistants.

Preschool staff are required to be educated to degree level, and have the same terms and conditions as primary school teachers. Preschool heads require a 5-year Masters Degree as well as a qualification in management and marketing. There is however, a severe shortage of preschool teachers in Poland, particularly in rural areas. Those who qualify easily find work in the cities where demand is high, and there is an estimated need for an additional 25,000 teachers if preschool education is to be extended to all 3-5-year-olds.

The shortage of qualified teachers in rural areas proved a challenge for projects like 'Where there are no preschools' (WTANP). In many cases, local preschool teachers already working for the municipality took on additional, separate contracts and worked two jobs in tandem. However, due to the shortage it was necessary for some services to take on unqualified staff willing to undergo on-the-job training.

The WTANP training programme had to be completed by every employee - including qualified teachers. This is because the curriculum content and ethos is so different from formal preschool, with a focus on multi-age settings, parental involvement, a 'project approach' to working with young children, and developing self-esteem and creativity. Some teachers have noted that their new knowledge will inform how they teach all children in the future, no matter who provides their contract.



Working towards ... A high quality workforce

Przedszkole Miejskie, Piastów, Poland

Given a 'Chance'

In 2008, after a long and "complicated" application process, the NGO 'Chance' was awarded 1 million Polish Zloty's (250,000 Euros) over 2 years from the EU Social Fund, to operate alternative preschools in areas surrounding Warsaw.

The preschool groups have all been based at existing municipality-run facilities, with funding used to employ and train staff, and to purchase equipment.

The 26 children who have formed a group within Przedszkole Miejskie, in Piastów, represent some of the most disadvantaged children in the area and who were not currently accessing preschool. They were identified by Social Services, working closely with Chance, as those that could benefit most from an alternative preschool place.

The children attend 3 days per week and have benefited from the support of a qualified preschool teacher, Dorota Piotrkowicz, who was already employed as a teacher at Przedszkole Miejskie. She accepted a separate contract from

Chance and is able to work both jobs in tandem.

Under her teaching contract with the Municipality of Piastów, she is bound by the 'Teacher's Agreement', closely guarded by the Poland's Teacher's Union, Związek Nauczycielstwa Polskiego, which determines her working hours, pay, pension rights and other terms and conditions.

Interestingly, the two separate contracts means she works to two different curricula. Alternative preschools work to a curriculum that has been developed specifically to accommodate the multi-age groups that its serves, and to reflect centres' stronger focus on child-led learning and parental participation.

"One very important impact of the Chance programme is that I look in a completely different way at working with mixed age groups. I've also noticed that I have more contact with the parents of children attending preschool through the programme. Parents are encouraged to stay for free time in the morning, and this has had an effect on how comfortable and open they are with me. I would like to think that this experience will impact in a positive way on the way that I teach in the future."

For Monika Rościszewska-Woźniak, the knowledge and commitment of staff are what makes projects successful. "In my experience there are some qualified preschool teachers who embrace the alternative curriculum, but there are many others who revert to type. I don't believe that we can truly innovate and change the way that preschool education is delivered unless the innovative ideas and practices are absorbed into initial teacher education.

The role of parents

It is important to note that parents make up a significant proportion of the preschool workforce in rural services run by projects such as WTANP. On one hand parental involvement is integral to the ethos of the project and is viewed as beneficial for their relationship with their child. However, parents are often required to assist the teacher on a voluntary basis because limited funds do not enable services to employ sufficient staff numbers. At Kurzeszyn preschool centre and playgroup (page 17), for example, parents have to stay if more than five children attend.

In effect the parents are assistants to teachers. They make sure that the children have the necessary materials, accompany children to the toilet and tidy up the classroom. There are questions over the appropriateness and sustainability of this, and it is an issue that will continue to be debated as preschool education in rural areas continues to develop.



Working towards ... Engaging communities and partners

Local governments generally follow social models adopted by national governments. If these are democratic and inclusive, local authorities have autonomy and funding to establish services to suit local traditions and needs, resulting in a wide variety of services that give childhood due importance and equal access of all groups – as in Nordic countries.

If the central model is highly controlling or based on economic criteria without social awareness, local authorities may be bypassed or given responsibility for local services without the necessary funding. The results can be disastrous for small communities, particularly in isolated regions where only essential infrastructure can be maintained. (Children in Scotland 2010 c).

Sweden

The stable flow of generous state grants has been fundamental to the successful expansion of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services across Sweden over the past 4 decades.

Local commitment to investing in children and families is a

reflection of a national commitment. Most Kommuns today have a department responsible for ECEC services and schools. They have a significant amount of freedom to set up and run services in a way that suits specific local needs - determining rates of pay, standards such as group size and adult:child ratios and interpretation of the curriculum. They are *required* to deliver services and there is a significant legislative, political and financial support to drive this.

The free school model is significant in Sweden, although more prevalent in the upper secondary school stage than in preschool and primary. 'Free schools' are publicly-funded and inspected, but provided by private organisations, and can operate on a for-profit basis.

Nationally, the issue of free schools is a matter of public debate, with concern that in some areas they are fuelling inequality. Free schools tend to be set up in socially privileged areas, often in cities and there is intense competition to 'win over' students. It is reported that some have been offering incentives such as computers to entice children to become pupils.

Free Schools in Vallentuna

Two of Vallentuna's 13 schools are free schools. One was established 13 years ago by two Kommun school teachers and has gained a reputation for its work with children who have additional support needs. The founders formed a limited

company that organises the education of 125 pupils from grades 6 to 9 (aged 12-16). The company employs around 10 teachers, some part time, and rents a building from the local community. Some facilities for lessons such as sport, handicrafts and domestic studies, are shared with a community school.

Poland

In Poland, municipalities are responsible for the opening and running of ECEC services. However, they do not receive specific financial support from national government in the same way that Swedish Kommun's do. Funding has to come from the municipality and from parents. This may account in part for the patchiness of provision across Poland and the inequality between supply in urban areas (where higher demand from parents means service delivery can be financially sustainable), and rural areas.

The absence of reliable state funding has posed a particular challenge for the future of alternative preschools provided by projects like 'Where there are no preschools' (WTANP). When European Structural Funding comes to an end, how do they continue?

The initial investment from the European Structural Fund is important because it has provided the basic infrastructure required to expand services. The municipalities that have taken part now have the equipment and trained staff in place, and some, like Piastów near Warsaw, have agreed to absorb the service into municipality-run provision once the EU funding comes to an end.



Working towards ... Engaging communities and partners

Przedszkole Miejskie, Piastów, Warsaw, Poland

From 'alternative' to municipality-run

For an overview of the programme, see page 24.

Funding for the programme will end this year. However, the municipality of Piastów, has agreed that all 26 children will be absorbed into existing municipality-run preschools. Their parents, unless they qualify for social support, will then be expected to pay a 10% contribution of approximately 140 Polish Zloty (25 Euros) per month, with an additional charge for meals.

It is unclear whether the most vulnerable children, who may have qualified for an alternative preschool place, will continue to be actively identified and offered a municipality-run preschool place now that the Chance programme has come

to an end. Services are stretched. Staff told us that there is currently a waiting list for preschools in Piastów with over 100 names on it. The criteria used to prioritise places include a child's age, whether both parents are working, those with additional support needs and those in single parent and foster families.

The project's legacy is that the infrastructure is now in place to aid an expansion of municipality-run pre-school places. Staff are better trained and existing preschools can benefit from the new equipment purchased through the programme. Piastów is currently drawing up plans to rebuild a facility that will accommodate more children and include two additional support needs groups.

The popularity of alternative preschool services among local families has been important in rural areas in Poland because it has demonstrated that, contrary to popular belief not so many years ago, there *is* demand for early childhood services.

Those rural areas that are making progress in securing a sustainable future for preschool provision are doing so with a combination of municipality support – both financially and ideologically – and continued support from non-governmental organisations in the form of 'Associations'. Rawa Mazowiecka is an example of this.

The municipality has demonstrated a long-term commitment to the expansion of services. When asked what about his vision for early childhood provision over the next 10 years, the Mayor

of Rawa Mazowiecka, Krzysztof Starczewski, said: "I would like to see full coverage in 10 years so that every preschool child has a place if they want one. We are also planning to extend preschool eligibility for children aged 3-5 to 8 hours per day. We know there will be challenges, but we're committed to finding solutions. For example, at local level we would be looking very carefully at charging policies."

Alongside this municipality commitment, local parents and staff involved in projects like those set up under the WTANP programme, have created 'Associations' – set up by not less than 15 people to solve a local problem. Once registered by the Courts, they can apply for and receive tax-free funding. Nasze Przedszkolaki in Rawa Mazowiecka is an example of this model.

Nasze Przedszkolaki, Rawa Mazowiecka, Poland

It is clear that Nasze Przedszkolaki is highly valued by the local mothers who are attending with their children.

Initially set up using EU Structural Funds, this playgroup will continue under the new 'Association of the Development of the Village and its surroundings', set up by 15 local parents and preschool teachers. The creation of the Association is the only way that Nasze Przedszkolaki can continue to operate now that the EU funding is coming to an end. Once registered by the local courts, it can apply for and receive funding tax-free. It has also signed an agreement with the Municipality of Rawa Mazowiecka to make use of existing premises rent-free and to claim a contribution for each child attending that equates to 40% of the cost of funding per child given to municipality-run preschools.

The name given to this Association reflects the wider impact that the creation of this preschool has had on its immediate

community. The Association will focus on issues much wider than early education and care, to include improving the lives of women and young people.

The Association is currently exploring additional funding possibilities that will enable it to run new programmes and employ more people.

Nasze Przedszkolaki is an example of how the EU funded projects can be catalysts for change in communities. In communities where services have in the recent past been lacking, or completely absent, it is clear that their presence is having an energising and empowering effect, particularly on mothers, who are much less likely to be working than fathers. Their flexibility and energy is a valuable resource.

It is also an example of how preschool centres can continue once EU funding comes to an end.

Moving forward

The experience of both Sweden and Poland show that effective structures and models are as important as financial resources in expanding early childhood services and there are valuable lessons in how they are accessed and used.

The Swedish Government invested both politically and financially very early on, responding to public demand and research that promoted the benefits of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). The high levels of ECEC provision that followed have long attracted intense interest from the rest of Europe and have been linked to low levels of inequality and child poverty. Sweden has achieved social inclusion at macro-level, reducing the need for targeted work at local level.

It may not be possible to replicate the Swedish system, but there are valuable lessons in looking more closely at *how* the resources have been invested. Sweden did not just invest quantitatively, it invested qualitatively. Sweden set out with a long-term and ambitious vision for what it wanted to achieve – a fully integrated and universal system of education and care that meets the needs of the ‘whole child’. The fundamental principles of the approach informed the structure of government departments, initial teacher training, development of the curriculum and ultimately day-to-day practice in early childhood services. It also informed their relationship with other services such as health, and related policies such as generous parental leave.

Sweden’s services and leave provision have developed over a period of time, suggesting the value of introducing step-by-step changes in support of an agreed long term goal – and targets for expanding services. For example, introducing an innovative new curriculum, developing an integrated workforce, trialing new ways of working with children and families, and facilitating the exchange of learning between countries could all help to facilitate ways of delivering an integrated model.

Poland had high levels of services in the Communist period. These were lost – but were also seen by many as being of doubtful quality. Poland has essentially had to start again without the same level of state investment seen in Sweden. However, it has found interesting alternative means to developing services with support from the EU structural funds. The process has demonstrated that with energy and high-level campaigning, the success of smaller projects can lead to bigger changes.

The EU Structural Funds have been fundamental for both increasing access to services in disadvantaged areas in Poland, and for introducing new and innovative ways of working with children and families. Prior to the ‘Where there are no preschools’ programme, it would have been impossible to set up a preschool in a community centre or library, and to work with mixed age groups. Nor would it have been possible to put into practice a new curriculum which has greater emphasis on the whole child, values parental participation and explores new

ways of communicating with children.

A combination of the success of alternative preschool projects and campaigning at national level has begun to influence government decision-making and shape Polish early childhood policy. Access to other forms of funding from both the Structural Funds and charitable funding has highlighted rigidities in the existing systems and driven the search for solutions - which other countries can learn from.

Both Sweden and Poland offer valuable insights that can be used to inform strategic approaches to funding in this area. Sweden provides a fully integrated early years system across education and care services, funding and workforce, and linked to the parental leave system.. It goes a long way to meeting the needs of young children and their families and has contributed to significantly lower levels of child poverty and inequality than in many other EU countries. Poland is embarked on a journey to develop appropriate levels of services, reforming legislation and finding ways of introducing flexibility into their systems in order to meet the very evident demand for services. Some of the parents encountered on the visits spoke movingly about why they needed better access to services. Poland offers valuable examples of ways in which, with funding assistance, the development of services can become a community project.

The new EC Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care (European Commission 2011) published in February 2011 and the Conclusions of the Council of Education Ministers subsequently published in May 2011 (Council of the European Union 2011), have highlighted the role that the Structural Funds might play in developing accessible infrastructure and staff training. There is however an important role for other funders in enabling this to happen - in terms of contributing to the matched funding required to access Structural Funds, and enabling cross-national learning and partnerships. One specific outcome of the study visit might be the creation of links between Belgian and Scottish organisations, with counterparts in Sweden and Poland, to establish a series of pilots for modelling relevant services and/or qualifications and training. For example, cross-national research and exchange could be used to identify and develop models for alternative types of services, qualification modules and training and guidance material for practitioners and to highlight integrative child-centred approaches to job roles. Relatively small amounts of funding are insufficient in themselves to fill the resource gap that exists in many EU countries for supporting our youngest citizens. However, independent funding does have an important role to play in exploring new models and practice and supporting access to other forms of funding which do exist for improving early years provision.

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Inspiring change ...

Notes

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