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Towards a unified and unifying ECEC system from birth to 6 years

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The need for transformative change

From policy neglect ...

The Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) at the UCL Institute of Education, University College London (IOE) was established in 1973, as a government-funded centre led by an inspirational social researcher, Jack Tizard. Among his previous work, Jack had demonstrated the necessity and feasibility of transformational change in the lives of children with severe learning disabilities (termed, in those days, ‘mentally subnormal’) who needed residential care. Rather than continuing incarceration in large impersonal institutions, so-called ‘subnormality hospitals’, under an impoverished medical regime, the Brooklands Project showed conclusively, with a controlled trial, that these children could not only survive but thrive if treated like any other children unable to live with their families, and if placed in a small children’s home with staff trained to take a developmental rather than a custodial approach (Tizard 1964).

Now with his new research centre, the TCRU, which as a young researcher I was fortunate to be part of, Jack turned his attention to what he considered another blatant failure of public policy towards children: early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. His analysis of this failure was forceful and wide-ranging. There was insufficient provision: ‘the shortfall of places for employed mothers … is enormous’ (Tizard et al. 1976, 137), Jack taking the view that ‘working mothers’ (TCRU only later changed to talking about ‘working parents’) should be actively supported by public policy, not criticised or cold-shouldered.
But the problems went far deeper. The whole system, if it merited such a term, was rotten. Existing services were fragmented and divisive:

The present hotch-potch of pre-school provision (day nurseries, factory nurseries [today we would say ‘workplace nurseries’], nursery schools, nursery classes, reception classes, playgroups, minders) and the distribution of children among them, reflect a mixture of historical accident – the needs (of parents especially) for particular hours of care, the local availability of services and the criteria of admission. The needs of the child rarely figure. Each type of service has its own set of hours, not normally adjusted to the needs of parents and child … Social segregation occurs when services are neither locally based nor multi-purpose. (Tizard et al. 1976, 215)

Fragmented provision was grafted on to a flawed structure, with government responsibility for services split between welfare and education, both nationally and locally. ‘The present division of responsibility between social services and education authorities makes little sense. Not only is the division difficult to justify, but it perpetuates anomalies of payment, availability and placement … The present situation makes coordinated planning virtually impossible’ (Tizard et al. 1976, 214).

Last, but not least, Jack asked ‘why five?’, questioning the early age of compulsory schooling in England compared with most other European countries, and why so many children actually started primary school even earlier.

A system so flawed needed root-and-branch change; nothing else would do. Jack wanted a more integrated service, which would in turn ‘bring the question of “why five?” into even sharper focus’. Integration meant ‘the education and care of young children [should be] the responsibility of one authority at national and local levels … [covering] education and care throughout the day and year – not just during school hours and terms’ (Tizard et al. 1976, 214). Jack also emphasised the centrality of health to an integrated early years service: ‘if nursery centres are to provide really adequate care for young children, they must have easy access to specialist health and psychological services which must be closely involved in what goes on in the centres’ (Tizard et al. 1976, 217).

At the heart of an integrated service, replacing the existing dysfunctional ‘hotch-potch’ of provision, was to be a new form of provision, the children’s centre: ‘Our criteria [for a transformed service] suggest that the basic form of service should be through multi-purpose children’s
centres offering part- and full-time care with medical and other services, to a very local catchment area, but there is much room for experimentation’ (Tizard et al. 1976, 220). As well as being local (Jack wanted a children’s centre within ‘pram-pushing distance’ for all families) and multi-purpose, this new form of service should be inclusive – open to all in its catchment area, responsive to family needs and free:

For a society that provides free education ... and a free child health service, a free pre-school service is a logical corollary ... The main aim of an integrated pre-school centre should be to offer high quality care for young children in its catchment area, at the age and, within reason, for the hours that their parents want. The service must therefore be available to all families, and not selective in its intake, and must be based on demand, not need. (Tizard et al. 1976, 214, 216)

This idea of the children’s centre was more than a utopian vision. Working with local authorities and voluntary organisations, Jack Tizard initiated and developed two prototypes in London: the Thomas Coram Children’s Centre in Camden and the Dorothy Gardner Children’s Centre in Westminster. Sadly, though, governments of the day and subsequently, of both right and left, continued to pay little attention to children’s centres in particular and to ECEC in general. At a time when, as we shall see, Sweden was starting on the long road to developing a fully integrated, universal early childhood service, England lacked the foresight to set out on a similar journey whose direction had so clearly been mapped out.

This scene of dysfunction and policy neglect lasted for many years after the end of the Second World War (when the need of wartime industries for women workers had led to a brief expansion of nursery provision), despite the efforts of reformers to set out alternatives. The rest of the chapter will examine what happened once ECEC belatedly became a policy priority and how movement to a fully integrated system stalled; show what a fully integrated ECEC system looks like in practice, taking the case of Sweden; and, finally, discuss steps that need to be taken if England is to grasp the nettle of transformative change and move at last to a unified and unifying system.

... to policy mainstream

The years passed by and little changed for ECEC in England. Come 1997, the system was still split between ‘day care’ or ‘childcare’ (nurseries, childminders, playgroups) and ‘education’ (school-based provision),
services were still fragmented and most children still started at primary school before the age of 5 years. The result was inconsistency, incoherence and inequality between services; unnecessary discontinuity for many children and inconvenience for many parents; services that were socially divisive, different types providing for different purposes and for different families; and a start to primary schooling that pitched children into formal education at an early age and left the early childhood sector truncated and weak. But that year held out the prospect of transformational change. Under a ‘New Labour’ government, ECEC moved out from the policy backwaters, where it had stagnated for so many years, into the policy mainstream, carried along on a surge of new-found political commitment, an outpouring of numerous policy initiatives and a surge of increased resources.

Yet despite this attention, the major problems, so clearly documented by Jack Tizard and others back in the 1970s, remained largely unresolved (for a detailed account and assessment of post-1997 reforms, see Cohen, Moss, Petrie and Wallace 2004, 2018). A study for UNESCO (Kaga et al. 2010) has argued that full integration requires action on seven structural dimensions. ‘New Labour’ began promisingly, taking action on three of these dimensions: moving responsibility for all early childhood services into one department – Education; and introducing an integrated regulatory system (led by Ofsted, the national schools inspectorate) and an early years curriculum, both covering all services and the whole early childhood period. But further progress towards a fully integrated early childhood system eradicating the early education/childcare divide stalled before tackling the remaining dimensions. These are the ‘wicked’ structural issues of access, funding, workforce and type of provision – ‘wicked’ because of the major and costly changes required to transform the deeply entrenched status quo.

In some key respects, the systemic problems of division and fragmentation deepened. Three- and four-year-old children gained an entitlement to part-time ‘early education’, while the needs of working parents for ‘childcare’ were acknowledged and supported. But the childcare/education division was accentuated by introducing different forms of public funding; services providing ‘early education’ were fully funded via direct government grants, ‘childcare’ was part funded by tax- or benefit-based subsidies paid to parents. A market in services, which had developed de facto before 1997 as private day nursery and childminder provision and grew rapidly from the late 1980s (DoH 1997), now became an explicit government goal; for example, the 2006 Childcare Act placed a duty on local authorities to manage their local ‘childcare market’. Competition
between individual services became the order of the day, taking fragment-
tation to a new level.

Last but not least, children’s centres were finally adopted as govern-
ment policy, with 3,500 opened in a few years. But instead of marking
the introduction of a universal system of integrated services, with chil-
dren’s centres becoming ‘the basic form of service’ in England, this new
provision was simply added to the existing ‘hotch-potch’ of services, aug-
menting not reducing fragmentation. Moreover, not all provided educa-
tion and care; only those centres serving the 30 per cent most deprived
communities had to offer integrated early education and childcare places
for a minimum of five days a week, 10 hours a day, 48 weeks a year. Jack
Tizard’s vision of a free, integrated and comprehensive service of chil-
dren’s centres available locally to all families, and responsive to demand,
remained unfulfilled.

Today, more than two decades after the policy sea change of 1997,
England still has a system that is only partly integrated, remaining deeply
split between ‘childcare’ and ‘education’, with a continuing plethora of
fragmented services. As already noted, successive governments have
been unwilling or unable to tackle the structural divisions in access,
funding, workforce and provision that leave ‘childcare’ services the poor
relations of school-based provision (see Chapter 5, for example, for the
inequalities between ‘ childcare workers’ and school-based ‘teachers’).

Underlying this has been an inability to confront the conceptual
divide, a way of thinking that underpins more structural divisions.
Despite some lip service paid to the idea that ‘education’ and ‘care’ are
inseparable, in practice policymakers, the media and the general public
in England have clung to ‘childcare’ as a distinct concept defining one part
of early childhood provision, expressed in a persistent public discourse of
‘childcare services’, ‘childcare workers’ and ‘childcare costs’. It has proved
impossible to get beyond childcare, to adopt and embody a genuinely
integrative way of thinking and talking about all ECEC provision.

What might this integrative way involve? It would mean recognising
that:

• ‘Care’, understood as an ‘ethic of care’ defining how children and
adults should relate to each other in all services (Moss 2017), is
an intrinsic part of all services for all children, irrespective of their
parents’ employment status.
• All early childhood services should as a matter of course recognise
the needs of employed parents.
Overall, to echo the goals of the Swedish preschool curriculum, early childhood services should be equally concerned with enhancing children’s care and security, self-esteem and well-being, and development and learning (Skolverket 2018).

Under this formulation, a broad and integrative concept of education (‘education-in-its-broadest-sense’) would become the basis for a unified and unifying early childhood system; while ‘childcare for working parents’ would be reduced to a necessary but not very interesting matter of opening hours, a detail of how early childhood education is organised.

Rather than moving towards the adoption of this broad and integrative concept of early childhood education, the divisive language of ‘childcare’, with its focus on ‘working parents’, has become increasingly prominent in England since 2010. Thus, for example, the titles of two major government policy papers from 2013 are *More Great Childcare* and *More Affordable Childcare* (DfE 2013a, 2013b). Or, to take an even more telling example, the government in England has recently amended its universal entitlement of 570 hours per year (approximately 15 hours per week) of free ‘early education’ for 3- and 4-year-olds. Now, this age group is offered 30 hours per week of free provision – but only for children whose parents are employed – and the offer is presented as ‘childcare’. A right to education for all children has, thus, morphed into ‘childcare’ for some children, a benefit dependent on parental employment status. ‘Childcare’ has, once again, been put forward as a defining feature of early childhood services, in contrast to ‘education’.

The whole of ECEC provision may have been placed under the Department for Education, for purposes of policymaking and administration. But a large part of it remains, both structurally and conceptually, apart from education, in a separate domain of ‘care’ services, a domain where ‘care’ is seen mainly as a commodity that some adults need to obtain to enable their working lives.

**Towards transformative change**

What it looks like in practice: The case of Sweden

The need for transformative change to create integrated early childhood services, in a unified and unifying system, remains as pressing today as it was when Jack Tizard was urging the need for such change in the 1970s. Indeed, it has arguably become more pressing, given the pre-1997

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neglect of policy and the post-1997 exacerbation of existing problems as early childhood services became a policy priority. Finding itself in a hole, England has responded by digging deeper.

England is not alone in its failure to address such systemic problems and bring about transformative change. Based on a study of the ECEC workforce in the 28 member states of the European Union, plus Russia and Ukraine, Oberhuemer (2019) concludes that the most common ECEC system, in 12 countries, is a totally split one. Close behind, 11 countries have a partially integrated system; the ‘UK’ as a whole is included in this group (though, in fact, each of the four nations making up the UK has responsibility for its own ECEC system). That leaves seven countries described as having ‘unitary systems (0–6/7)’ – in other words, having fully integrated ECEC systems. These are Croatia, Estonia, Lithuania and Slovenia, as well as three Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland and Sweden. The other two Nordic countries (Iceland and Norway) have unitary systems but are not included, since they are not EU member states.

The unresolved situation in England would be brought into sharp relief by comparison with any of these countries with ‘unitary systems’, but for the purposes of this chapter I will take Sweden, which today has a fully integrated ECEC system, with responsibility residing in education, both locally and nationally. All children, irrespective of their parents’ employment status, are entitled to a place in a publicly funded early childhood service from 12 months of age; before then, all children are at home being cared for by their parents taking well-paid parental leave (discussed further in Chapter 13). Swedish children do not enter primary school until the age of 6 years, and compulsory school age is 7 years; between the ages of 6 and 7, nearly all children attend a ‘preschool class’ in school on a voluntary basis.

While a few preschool children in Sweden attend family day care (referred to as ‘childminding’ in England), the great majority go to förskolor (literally, ‘preschools’). These centres for children aged from 1 to 6 years are open for 10 hours a day throughout the year, and still mostly run by kommuner (local authorities). These integrated centres are funded directly by government, from taxation; attendance for 3- to 6-year-olds is free for 525 hours per year; and parental fees for remaining attendance, whether for longer hours or for younger children, is capped (the so-called ‘maxtaxisa’) at 1,260 Swedish kroner per month (approximately £107) for a first child at preschool, 840 kroner (approximately £71) for a second child and 420 kroner (approximately £36) for a third child. Preschools are staffed by an integrated workforce, based on
förskollärare, graduate teachers specialising in work with 1- to 7-year-olds, who account for over half of the workforce. There is a short, framework curriculum for preschools, which, as already noted, emphasises an integrative approach that encompasses care, security, well-being, learning and development. Most Swedish parents are employed, so it is obvious that preschools, like schools, must reflect this in their opening hours – but this is just taken for granted; Swedish preschools are defined as a type of school not a ‘childcare’ service.

Overall, therefore, Sweden has a fully unified early childhood system, a basically educational service that takes account of parents’ employment, offering seamless provision over a five-year period, integrated structurally and underpinned by an integrative concept. The system is also unifying if we look at attendance. With England and Sweden providing a free entitlement, it is unsurprising that both countries show high attendance rates for 3- to 5-year-olds, at around 94 per cent (the figures here, referring to 2016, are for the UK as a whole). The picture, however, is very different for children under 3 years old, with the UK lagging far behind Sweden, 32 per cent of UK children attending formal early childhood services compared with 47 per cent of Swedish children; but as virtually all Swedish children under 12 months are cared for at home by parents on parental leave, this means that in practice more than two-thirds of 1- and 2-year-olds attend preschool. The gap between the UK and Sweden is even greater when taking into account average weekly hours of attendance for children under 3 years old: 18 against 30 (OECD 2019, Charts PF3.2.A and PF3.2.D).

But the most striking difference between the UK and Sweden is equality of access. On measures of socio-economic background (mother’s education and household income), Sweden shows no statistically significant difference in levels of attendance for children under 3 years old. By contrast, differences in attendance are large and statistically significant for the UK, favouring children from more advantaged families (OECD 2019, Charts PF3.2B and PF3.2.C).

Towards an integrated system

The case of Sweden is not presented as a model that could be readily exported to and adopted in England; the national contexts are too different to permit a simple process of ‘policy borrowing’. I have used it, instead, for three reasons. First, to illustrate what a unified and unifying early childhood service can actually look like, and to show it is perfectly
feasible; it is a contribution to raising understanding and expectations – and poverty of both is a major impediment to transformative change. Second, to provoke critical questioning about the state we are in in England today. Since there are alternatives, why do we have what we have? For example, why start school at 5 or younger? Why don’t or can’t we do things differently? Third, because ECEC in Sweden was not always like it is today. The country made a political decision to take a new direction for early childhood services, and remained politically committed to seeing that decision through.

Let me explain. Back in the 1970s, Jack Tizard was aware that something was afoot in Sweden, driven by an economic boom in the 1960s, by increasing demand for women’s employment and by the work of a national commission established in 1968, reporting in 1972. Sweden, Tizard et al. (1976, 118, 119) wrote, was:

working towards an integrated system of child centres where care and education are combined under the same ministerial responsibility … In 1968 a Commission on Child Centres was set up with a very wide remit to consider the form and content of pre-school facilities, and how they should expand … Day nurseries and nursery schools were all to be regarded as pre-school centres; all staff should have educational duties.

What had filtered through to Jack, as reflected in this quote, was the start in Sweden of a process of transformative change, including the expansion and integration of early childhood services. The National Commission referred to, on Nursery Provision (Barnstugeutredning), which worked from 1968 to 1972, ‘mobilised expertise from every corner of the country to assist them in their work’ (Korpi 2007, 24) of charting the future direction for early childhood services.

Like other countries in Europe, Sweden at that time had an early childhood system split between full-time day care institutions for children with working parents and kindergartens (later ‘play schools’) for children over 3 years old, offering half-day ‘educational’ services. The former had begun in the 1850s for the children of poor working mothers, the latter in the 1890s for children of middle-class families (Korpi 2007). The Commission recommended merging these services to create one institution – to be known as the förskola (‘preschool’). This had major implications, not least for the divided early childhood workforce that would now need to merge into a single new profession, a process creating new tensions:
Half day and full day services differed greatly in staff training and working practices. The integration of the two would be rather painful for many teachers in half-day services, since their professional experience was not valued equally with that of the preschool teachers trained in the approaches recommended by the Commission. (Lenz Taguchi and Munkammar 2003, 12)

However, the reform proceeded, resulting in the present-day staffing structure of the preschool teacher as the core worker in the preschool, supported by assistants or barnskötare.

An integrated early childhood system and workforce began taking shape in the 1970s, though initially services were integrated within welfare rather than education. Over time, services expanded (from 1970 to 1995, the number of children in early childhood centres rose more than tenfold, from 33,000 to 365,000 (Korpi 2007)); entitlements to provision were introduced (initially confined to children with employed or studying parents); and the integrated service was moved from welfare to education, first locally and then, in 1996, nationally. All this was underpinned by sustained and rising public funding, until today Sweden has the second-highest public spend on ECEC services of OECD member states: 1.6 per cent of GDP, compared with the UK’s 0.6 per cent and the OECD average of 0.7 per cent (OECD 2019, Chart PF3.1.A).

The contrast is stark. Both England and Sweden had inadequate and divided early childhood services in the late 1960s. The Swedes, through a process of public deliberation backed by political commitment, decided to act; 40 years later they had achieved an impressive integrated system. The English, by contrast, neglected the need for state-led expansion and reform, wasting decades when gradual evolution could have transformed the situation and created a functional system. By the time neglect suddenly turned to urgency, the flaws in the English system had worsened and become further embedded, there was a perceived need for more places quickly, and also an ideological but unquestioned sympathy for private and market solutions. Rather than a period of public deliberation to decide what course to take, in 1997, the government in England opted for more of the same (with the addition of a targeted early intervention programme, Sure Start), leaving systemic flaws untouched.

The point of this tale of two countries is obvious, though none the less important. Transformative change needs to start at some point; it needs to be guided by a clear answer to the question ‘where to?’, offering a widely understood and agreed goal; and it needs to be sustained by steady, incremental movement towards that goal. The alternative is a
constant struggle to make the best of a bad job, endless hole-digging with each fresh excavation dimming the prospects for transformative change.

So what might be done in England, more than 40 years after Jack Tizard’s arguments for transformation and after 20 years of government activity on early childhood? A pessimist might say it is now too late; the hole is too deep to get out of and too many vested interests and ingrained attitudes are too deeply dug in. But let me play the optimist, and consider what steps might be necessary to achieve transformative change at long last. On this basis, I suggest eight steps, which I set out below in broad brush strokes. I recognise there is much detail to be added (some of which is discussed in Chapter 14), but at this stage it is more important to see the big picture – where we want to get to:

1. Start by agreeing a political commitment to a fully integrated ECEC system, with services provided as an entitlement for all children from birth to 6 years and their carers, and the service to be local, inclusive, responsive and democratic.

2. This commitment to include: recognition of birth to 6 years as the first stage of the education system and the span of the early childhood service (that is, put back compulsory school age and admission to primary school); clear statements on the meaning given to ‘education’ and ‘care’; and services to be multi-purpose, with education as a central purpose alongside a variety of other purposes evolving in response to local needs and demands – services to be understood as ‘public forums situated in civil society in which children and adults participate together in projects of social, cultural, political and economic significance’ (Dahlberg et al. 2013, 78).

3. This commitment to be implemented over a specified transition period, say 10 to 15 years, and sustained across changes of government.

4. Integration to be based on the seven structural dimensions outlined earlier in the chapter, and on a clear conceptual understanding that education and care are inseparable and required for all children.

5. The integrated service to be based on children’s centres, which will become ‘the basic form of service’ nationally, over the course of the transition period – a universal basic service just as primary and secondary schools are. As well as those children’s centres that have survived recent austerity, some other existing services could convert into centres, while other centres will need to be built up from scratch.
6. Current fragmented and diverse forms of early childhood funding to be consolidated into a single ‘Transformation Fund’, which will increasingly be allocated to the direct funding of the growing number of children’s centres. Existing, separate funding streams (for example, the early education grant; and tax credit and other ‘childcare’ subsidies paid to parents) will be gradually phased out.

7. Democratically accountable local bodies (for example, local authorities) to regain a major role in the integrated early childhood service, overseeing and supporting the evolution of a unified and unifying system in their areas and the build-up of networks of children’s centres, including a duty to promote cooperation and experimentation. Such local bodies will also resume a provider role, alongside non-profit private organisations such as cooperatives.

8. Children’s centres to be available free of charge for a core period of children’s attendance (that is, a defined period of hours per year), and for other child, carer and community activities. A fee will be charged for additional attendance, but capped at a low level and not paid by lower-income families.

These eight steps would form the basis for transformative change towards a unified and unifying early childhood system for children from birth to 6 years and their carers. Central to achieving this goal, and a key structural reform, would be the creation of a unified workforce, commensurate in qualification and status to the new system. Chapter 5 considers why the present divided and devalued early childhood workforce, a ‘poor’ workforce in several meanings of the word, simply will not do, and how it might be re-conceptualised and re-formed as a ‘rich’ workforce for a ‘rich’ child and a ‘rich’ early childhood system.

Further reading

A report by Yoshie Kaga, John Bennett and Peter Moss, *Caring and Learning Together: A cross-national study on the integration of early childhood care and education within education* (UNESCO 2010, available free at https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000187818), examines the meaning of an integrated ECEC service and provides examples from countries that have achieved full or partial integration.

Barbara Martin Korpi, who worked for several decades in government on issues concerning ECEC and out-of-school services, provides a short and clear account of how Swedish ECEC evolved from a split to an
integrated system, and much else besides about early childhood services in that country (see Korpi 2017, available free at https://tinyurl.com/y4udpe4b).


References