

**INTEGRATING EARLY CHILDHOOD INTO EDUCATION:
THE CASE OF SWEEDEN
Soo-Hyang Choi, 2002**

Overview

In 1996, the governmental responsibility for childcare in Sweden was transferred from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education and Science. This simple shift resulted in stronger policies designed to align early childhood education with primary school and to improve education in Sweden for generations to come.

The Specific Changes to the Swedish School System

- Pre-school classes were introduced for 6-year-olds as part of the compulsory school system, sharing the same curriculum with primary schools.
- Pre-school, which had catered to 1-6 year-olds before the transition, became the first level of the country's education system serving 1-5 year-olds, with its own national curriculum.
- Entitlement to pre-school education was also expanded, offering it to all children regardless of their parents' employment status.
- Pedagogical gaps among different categories of teachers were bridged by providing a uniform framework of training for pre-school teachers and school teachers.

The Outcome

- Integrating pre-schools with primary schools allowed the former to transform the latter. Learning has come to replace teaching and a shift in focus has occurred from teachers to students (or learners). Artistic expressions and play, central to pre-school activities, were recognized as important means of learning and communication for school-age children. By setting these as the pedagogical goals of school, the revised curriculum facilitated a seamless upward integration.
- In the past, students' behavioral, emotional, social and health problems were not considered the concern of teachers. But nowadays, teachers have begun to talk about students' developmental status and progress as well as their academic achievements and increasingly see the need for cooperating with parents more closely.
- This shift towards upward integration signals the beginning of changes in schools, which favor a lifelong learning framework that puts a great emphasis on learners.

Conclusion

Early childhood care and education is often seen as the last frontier to be conquered in completing the picture of lifelong learning, which must start from birth. From this point of view, early childhood is a missing link, since in most cases it is not part of a country's education system or lifelong learning vision. The Swedish system shows that this missing link has the potential to make schools more learner-centered and to bring about a paradigm shift in education in which care, development, and learning go hand in hand with education.