

Rethinking school: a review of three national experiences

France, the USA and Sweden all provide examples of how the role of the school is being extended to incorporate childcare and other services. Comparing policies within the three countries gives a basis for understanding developments in the UK. An important feature of policy is how it manifests different national understandings of and attitudes towards children and parents. A review by Peter Moss and Pat Petrie of the Thomas Coram Institute found:

f USA: There are wide variations in the development of the school in its relation to other services for children and families with respect to type, organisation and level of provision. This diversity arises partly from a multiplicity of government initiatives which target 'needy' populations. Policy is driven by fears as to the educational standard of the workforce and concerns regarding 'high risk' children and families. The focus is on the child as 'needy'.

f Sweden: Structural reforms have brought early years services and day-care for school-age children cohesively within a universal and decentralised education system. A newly integrated day for school children co-ordinates education, care, recreation and other activities. Children and parents are seen as positive contributors to society and to the school.

f France: As in Sweden, a more integrated day for school children is under development, incorporating school-based care and recreation. The new school-day is built around conceptions of children's physical and psychological well-being. These developments occur within a more coherent and universal family support system than to be found in the USA. There are also special school-based programmes targeted at disadvantaged areas. All policies are seen as means of inducting the child into French citizenship and culture.

f Staffing: In Sweden, staff with different professional backgrounds (childcare, play and teaching) work together in schools, sometimes totally integrating their work. Children, parents and staff are seen as partners in learning. In both France and the US, however, staffing remains more fragmented, with differing levels of training and status and no apparent rethinking of roles and structures to meet the new developments.

Three case studies of policy in France, Sweden and the United States examine the different ways in which schools have extended their function beyond the purely educational. Examples of the new roles schools are taking on include:

- collaboration with other agencies;
- the integration of new services within the school's traditional remit; and
- the involvement of parents and pupils in decision-making.

These developments reflect cultural attitudes to the relationships between school, family and community. These relationships may be influenced by different understandings of childhood and parenthood, as well as different social, economic and political contexts. These understandings have an important influence on policy development.

Developments in the USA

In the United States, educational reforms and recent developments in the field of school, family and community relations are driven by two main concerns: the educational needs of the workforce in a competitive global economy, and strong concerns regarding 'high risk' children and families, poverty, youth crime, poor health and unstable families. Many commentators have raised anxieties that the situation is deteriorating; these concerns inform much public discourse and policy on children and on parental support.

There has been a new and unprecedented development in school-community initiatives in the last decade, partly stimulated by the federal government. These initiatives have various titles - school-linked services, community schools, extended-services schools, full-service (community) schools - and there are many different models and arrangements. Much attention is paid to different types of collaboration between services and agencies, less to any structural changes in staffing which new arrangements might require.

In general, it is too early to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of these initiatives. Problems identified by research include: lack of adequate training for staff, insufficient and short-term funding,

and shortage of time both as this affects collaborating partners and as it affects working parents.

In many ways the American situation resembles that of the UK - in its discourses, aspirations, targeting mechanisms and the problems which arise.

Developments in Sweden

In Sweden there is a rich and developing debate on children and childhood. Children are seen as active participants in their own learning. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is given much consideration, including as it affects school. There are developments to facilitate children's participation in matters which concern them at school, extending to the content of education. The part to be played by parents is seen in a similar vein. They are collaborators in children's education, supporting teachers and receiving support from them. There is also a stress on facilitating reciprocal support between parents and parents' participation in decision-making.

Issues of social exclusion appear to be less prominent in Sweden, perhaps because of the impact of other policies.

Influence over the processes of education in Sweden is devolved from central government to the municipalities and the schools and thence, in part, to parents and children.

Recent policy developments include the integration of administrative responsibility for pre-school services, school-age childcare and the school. All of these are provided as of right for all families. Integration has occurred nationally, within the Ministry of Education, within local authorities and, increasingly, within schools themselves. The different staff working with children in schools - teachers, play and care workers - are professionally trained and educated. Integration has led to growing collaboration in daily practice, often within the classroom. It has also led to development of a national curriculum to underpin such collaboration.

Evaluations of the integration policy have examined the processes involved, rather than the outcomes. Commentators have highlighted issues such as the possibilities for a broader education for children. They have also identified a necessity for forward planning, good team work, energetic leadership and suitable premises.

Developments in France

Policy statements in France concentrate on the child's importance as a French citizen. A focus on students' academic achievement is seen as promoting future equality and securing the child's future civic status. Measures to promote achievement among children living in Educational Priority Zones (ZEPs) include home visits by health workers, parental education and liaison workers for parents for whom French is an additional language. A major objective of ZEPs is to increase the number of two-year-olds in nursery education. More recent policy developments also relate to children as members of the local society in their own right, who should be able to access community resources. There is also an emphasis on children's physical and psychological needs, and how these should be recognised and accommodated by the school.

Initiatives over the last decade have sought to extend the role of the school by incorporating childcare and recreation within the school-day. There is a strong emphasis on how the structure of the school-day may best reflect the child's physical and psychological rhythms. Government circulars and funding programmes promote a lengthy break (e.g. three hours) between morning and afternoon lessons when all children take part in leisure and cultural activities, on site and off, led by non-teaching staff (often not trained) and using the resources of outside agencies, such as museums and leisure centres. These activities remain, however, under the auspices of the school. Afternoon lessons recommence at around 3pm and end at around 5 to 5.30pm. Schools may also offer additional childcare facilities before and after the formal school day.

Such co-operation between schools and outside agencies, during the middle of the school-day, is funded by the state. This system reveals some tension between centralism and the movement towards decentralisation, including the promotion of decision-making about the school-day at local level. There is also evidence that different ministries involved in policy development towards children find collaboration difficult. Since 1998, the Ministry of National Education has expressed a desire to regain control of the organisation of the school timetable.

Evaluations of these policies find that they are

only partially successful in meeting their aims. One difficulty is that schools do not collaborate easily with other agencies. In addition, they are not sufficiently open to parental participation - although at a formal level this is encouraged through local, regional and national councils. In Educational Priority Zones, however, schools have been more prepared to be open to parents than is customary.

International comparisons

Overall, there are major differences between France, Sweden and the USA in the development of relationships between school, children, families and community:

- Differences in government and welfare provision produce more uniform national systems of services for children in France and Sweden, compared with the diversity at state and local levels in the USA.
- Swedish educational policy stresses the social competence of children as partners in their own education and this emphasis plays through into practice (whilst concerns with a future workforce are not ignored, neither are they to the fore).
- The French child is seen both as a citizen today, with a right to access civic amenities, and a potential worker to be educated for tomorrow; both these concerns are contributing to how schools are organised.
- In the US, the focus is on the child as a cause for concern today and as a member of the labour force tomorrow. These concerns, too, feed into the developing role of the school.
- Only in Sweden has there been any development of the role of non-teaching staff who work with children within school.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the researchers pose questions arising from the review about the nature of the school as it takes on more functions and therefore plays a larger part in children's lives.

- If schools become centres for integrating or even merely co-ordinating a wide range of services, how should we conceptualise them - as schools or another sort of 'children's service'? Is the empire

of the school merely expanded or is the school transformed into something new and different?

- What are the effects of schools organising and overseeing many aspects of children's lives: e.g. their 'free time', their personal problems, their relationship with the wider civic community? What is the effect of increasing control of children's use of time and space by professional adults? Do there need to be more 'children's spaces', to counter increasing adult control of children's lives?
- Do new relationships between schools and other services require new administrative and staffing structures? Is there a need to develop new ways of working with children and new professions to do so?
- What do the developing fields of childhood studies and children's rights have to say which might be of value in our considerations of the school and of other children's services?
- Finally, what are the implications of changes in employment for school inclusion? Will working parents have the time for greater involvement in schools and other community institutions?

About the study

The review is derived from reports and documentation provided by national experts and electronic database searches.

How to get further information

The full report, **Rethinking school: Some international perspectives** by Peter Moss, Pat Petrie and Gill Poland, is published for the Foundation by the National Youth Agency (ISBN 0 86155 212 1, price £12.95).

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