

Ingegerd Wärnersson
Opening of Conference



Before I start, I would like to thank the children and musicians for that wonderful introduction.

It is a great honour for me to open this OECD conference. Its subject is one that lies close to my heart: Early Childhood Education And Care. We took the name from the OECD, who very rightly say: "no education without care, no care without education".

I would like to welcome you all to this conference – and to Sweden, which is usually at its very best at this time of year. I am delighted that the conference has attracted so many participants from so many different countries to discuss such an important subject. Your knowledge in this area is quite unique; in fact I seldom get the chance to address such an accomplished audience. Present here today are researchers, educationalists and decision-makers. You represent some 40 countries from all over the world. Which adds up to a very large body of expertise.

I am also pleased that almost everyone here was willing and able to join yesterday's study visit to pre-schools and after-school centres in Stockholm. I hope it was a rewarding experience and that it gave you some idea of our approach to early childhood education and care in Sweden.

I would like to add to this picture by telling you bit more about ECEC in the country that has the privilege of being your host at this conference. Nowadays early childhood education and care are a natural part of everyday reality for more than half a million families with children. 76 per cent of all children aged between 1 and 5 and 68 per cent of schoolchildren aged between 6 and 9 take part. This is in sharp contrast to conditions in the 1970s when my own children were at pre-school age. In those days, most working mothers had to manage as best they could. I was a primary school teacher then, and for a time things were so difficult that I had to take my little son with me to school. And while I was busy teaching, it was my pupils who took it in turns to keep him amused.

Today all municipalities can provide full coverage for children whose parents work or study or for children in need of special support. The City of Stockholm is a good example of a municipality that has always done more than the law requires in this regard. Virtually all children are entitled to a pre-school place, regardless of the family situation. In some districts in Stockholm, the level of coverage is as high as 90 percent of all children.

Until a few years ago, child care was the ultimate responsibility of the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. In 1996 however, responsibility was transferred to the Ministry of Education and Science. This was done so that we could focus on the pedagogical aspects of child care and build on the close links between child care and schools.

A number of reforms have taken place since then. The most important is the national pre-school curriculum, which covers goals and guidelines for activities for pre-school children aged between 1 and 5. The curriculum has allowed pre-schools to take a first step into the educational system.

However, I must stress that this reform does not mean that pre-schools will in fact become "school". On the contrary, traditional pre-school pedagogical approaches – such as concern for the child's entire well-being, the importance of play, etc. – are emphasised in the curriculum.

Issues to do with quality, accessibility and affordability for the individual are some of the main concerns of current Swedish early childhood education and care policy, as indeed they are in many other countries.

The last major reform approved by the Swedish Parliament was the introduction of a maximum fee for parents. This will considerably lower the costs of child care for all families. A special state grant will compensate municipalities for loss of income due to the fee ceiling. Furthermore, children of unemployed parents and parents on parental leave will also be entitled to childcare. Universal pre-school, free of charge, will be introduced for every child from the age of four.

Now, it would not be fair to say that the Swedish model for child care has not been questioned or debated from time to time. Still, very few people today would argue that public child care is not an integral part of the modern welfare society. The Swedish model for child care has been around for a long time now. It has grown increasingly stable over the years and enjoys the trust and confidence of a vast majority of parents. So much so that any radical change to the system is unlikely to be accepted.

I am well aware that different countries have different traditions, and that not all countries are equipped to meet children's needs in the same way. But whether children are secure and cared for or not, they always have questions to ask. And it is our job as adults to ensure that they are answered, and that we do everything we can to give them the security they need and the chance to develop as human beings. The sooner children can meet and interact with one another in the company of adults, the easier it is for them to learn consideration, respect and tolerance for others.

Right now, I am looking forward to reading the findings of the large comparative study of pre-school systems in twelve different countries – including Sweden – begun three years ago. The final report, *Starting Strong*, will give the conference an exciting point of departure. I believe that the growing interest in this area is a sign that ECEC will before long be recognised as an equal partner in our education system.

I would like to thank the OECD for carrying out the ECEC project and making it a “strong and equal part of lifelong learning”. I am delighted that ECEC is now seen as the first step in the lifelong learning process. And I am sure I am not alone. Speaking for myself, I believe that the first step is a very important one – perhaps the most important of all. It is then that children must be met with respect, listened to, and in the process learn to behave in accordance with democratic values and principles. By respect I mean recognition that childhood must be valued for its own sake; it is not just a preparation for adult life. We must allow children to live in the present. We must focus on the whole child – on its integral development and well-being.

Finally, I want to wish all of you – conference delegates and others taking part – a very successful conference. I trust the next few days – as you focus on the welfare of our youngest children – will be interesting and highly rewarding.

Together we will round up today's work with a buffet dinner. You are all warmly welcome to Restaurant Rosenbad at 7 o'clock.

I would like to end by quoting Olof Palme, who often expressed his concern for children and their rights in society. He once said: "children are our only concrete link with the future".

I believe our future will be the better for keeping his words in mind.