

Closing Remarks by Wanja Lundby-Wedin,
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Dear conference delegates,

First of all I would like to thank you for the extensive work you have made within this important project, both here during the conference and also during the years the project has lasted. My hope is that this work can lead to improvements and changes, necessary to achieve the best possible childcare, since only the best is good enough for our children.

As the President of LO Sweden, I represent an organisation, with several members working within the childcare sector and even more members being themselves parents of small children. Among the 2 million LO- members there is an everyday experience of the issues discussed here at the conference. Many among them who work in childcare have experienced the substantial cuts during the measures of economy in the 1990s, trying to provide love, attention and care, the basis of all childcare, in spite of decreasing resources and an increasing number of children in the groups. Many of them also know how it feels to be split up between the increasing demands of working life and the children's needs.

In other words, they are aware of the importance of quality childcare - for the children, for the parents and for the entire society.

In Sweden, almost everybody, at least from my age and younger, have a special relation to childcare. Almost everyone has received childcare themselves or had children in the childcare system. One could say that childcare is a symbol for the Swedish welfare policy, a symbol which I am very proud of.

Since the development of daycare centres in the 70s, they have been characterized by an environment putting children in the centre of the activities. This environment was non-authoritarian and democratic - an inheritance to be proud of in Sweden.

Of course, deficiencies have existed and in the beginning of the 90s, substantial cuts were made. In spite of this, the daycare centres have been upholding a high quality of the activities. And an increasing number of parents want their children to attend a daycare centre before starting school. Childcare is more and more becoming a natural part of everyday life for parents of small children.

For a long time, the expansion of childcare facilities was a controversial issue. The purpose that mothers should be able to have a gainful employment was contested mainly by conservative interests of the society. Childcare, along with the development of parental insurance and a transformed taxation of married women, made it financially more favourable to work, when having small children. However, the result was of course also, that it was relatively less advantageous to stay at home with small children.

The system of childcare facilities came out of the struggle victorious. Today, the predominating opinion is that childcare is good, not only for parents and for society, but for the children themselves - provided that we demand a high quality childcare.

During the 90s, childcare was increasingly regarded as an integral part of schooling. Nowadays, the Ministry of Education and not the Ministry of Social Affairs, is responsible for childcare activities. Preschool is becoming part of the process of lifelong learning.

The question is if this is good or bad? Has anything been lost in this process or is it actually a natural process ?

Let me start with the positive part of this development:

Nowadays, practically all children attend a daycare centre before starting school. In this situation, it is actually reasonable to consider childcare as being part of the educational system. It is no longer an activity with the only aim of making gainful employment possible for parents. It is no longer a matter of only looking after children. Childcare is also there for the sake of the children.

While childcare was still controversial, there were always groups of people, claiming that it was harmful to attend daycare centers. We who had small children in the 70s and the 80s, remember the research reports published regularly, pointing out one or other negative effect, resulting from the care at a daycare centre. Now, when the daycare centres are a natural part of society, it is much easier to integrate childcare and schooling. No group is seriously interested in describing childcare as something harmful any more.

However it is important that preschool does not turn into a school for small children, it is important that it keeps its special character. Recently an analysis of the Swedish preschool class for six-year-olds has been presented. It appears that when six-year-olds were placed in the school, school activities were predominating and there was not enough time for play, creative activities, experimentation and exploration. The risk is that the rest of the preschool will be transformed in the same way. Certain parents might put pressure on preschool, demanding that it should be more similar to school and prepare the children for future school activities.

Besides, preschool teachers might want to be more similar to teachers and less like daycare attendants with the view of strengthening their own profession. The increasing number of private preschools could reinforce this trend. If parents and staff in the preschools believe that children in other preschools are better prepared for school, then everybody might be involved in some sort of escalation of the level of ambition in preschool, resulting in a reduction of the time for play and creative activities. It is extremely important for us to pay attention to such a development.

The second important issue to think about is that we mustn't forget that it is also childcare, not only preschool. Parents must feel that it is possible to combine work and children. In the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s, a kind of model was established that children should absolutely not stay at the daycare centre until late. A researcher called it the "We parents"-model. "We parents" is a Swedish magazine for

parents of small children, and when they said that children should be left at the daycare centre at nine a.m. and picked up at three p.m., many parents felt that they must live up to this standard in order to feel as good parents.

This phenomenon has been further intensified by hour-based fees introduced in almost all municipalities. There is a strong pressure upon parents to have their children at the daycare centre for as short time as possible. This is something that obviously creates a great deal of stress and the result of it is that women feel forced to work part-time.

When maximum fee for childcare is introduced, a part of this problem will be solved. The financial incentives to hurry to the daycare centre will be reduced a little bit. But it is important that childcare services see to it that parents don't have to feel stressed in connection with leaving and picking up their children and that they know that they have childcare of good quality all day long, not only during a part of the day.

The third vital thing to point out is that the development mustn't lead to less and less qualified tasks for daycare attendants. During the 1990s we have seen at many workplaces that preschool teachers took over many tasks which previously were done by daycare attendants.

An important reason for that is of course high unemployment. With many applicants for all jobs, educational requirements can be increased.

In the Swedish growth areas, however, this time is over. It will be more difficult to recruit personnel for the jobs within the care sector. In this situation, it is particularly important to concentrate on the development of tasks for daycare attendants, so that they won't become some B-team at the workplace that can only change diapers and blow children's noses. We must really make an effort to find important and fulfilling tasks for all categories of personnel in childcare.

The fourth important thing is that the development mustn't lead to less quality of the childcare. The coming report from the Swedish government gives after all a rather positive picture. The rapid cuts, which took place in the early 1990s, have been curbed. In the late 1990s, increased financial resources were allocated to childcare. It is obvious, however, that changes in birth-rate are of great importance for the resource allocation to childcare. When birth-rate rose, and when it at the same time was a great pressure on the municipalities to provide childcare for all children requiring it, this was done at the expense of the quality of the activities.

Birth-rate is most probably going to rise. The number of births began to grow already last year and the increase will probably be even greater this year. This is why the demand for childcare is going to intensify again. In this situation, it is enormously important that resources in childcare increase as well.

At the same time, the wage situation in childcare has developed poorly during the second half of the 1990s. But now, when the situation in the Swedish labour market has been significantly improved, it will probably not be possible any more to keep qualified personnel unless their wages increase. This is going to put demands for further resource contribution in childcare.

Unless childcare continues to be good enough, and unless parents feel that politicians listen to and satisfy their quality requirements, this will cause the flight of well-off parents from municipal childcare to seek for their own solutions. Increased private grants in childcare have opened the way for such a development. In most municipalities, it is not difficult to leave the municipal childcare and start non-municipal undertakings providing the quality that parents are willing to pay for.

Then we run the risk to have a childcare for the rich and another for the poor. The segregation is going to increase further more. And – of course – the most qualified personnel is going to turn to the preschools with the highest quality of activities.

The tendencies of increased segregation in childcare are not alarming. But we must be aware of the fact that it exists. Unless we concentrate on childcare, we might quickly get into a dangerous development.

Conference delegates.

A good family policy, providing childcare of good quality, is a necessary basis for a fair and modern society. It gives parents a possibility to combine work and family life, it allocates resources so that all children are guaranteed a good school, childcare and health care. And it gives all of us the freedom to have children and family life.

Therefore, I hope that we now, when we go home after this conference, will continue this important job, launched by this important project, and try to make the good ideas come true.

Thank you.