

Starting them young

Nursery schools are the latest front-line in the Scandinavian integration debate

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Illustration by David



Simonds

IN SOFT, southern countries, snow is enough to close schools. In Sweden—a place that lives by the maxim that “There is no such thing as bad weather, just the wrong clothes”—fresh snow is a cue to send 18-month-olds into the playground, tottering around in snowsuits and bobble hats. It is an impressive sight at any time. But it is particularly striking in a Stockholm playground filled with Somali toddlers, squeaking as they queue for sledge-rides.

The playground belongs to Karin Danielsson, a headmistress in Tensta, a Stockholm suburb with a large immigrant population. Mrs Danielsson calls her municipal preschool “a school for democracy”. In keeping with Swedish mores, even young children may choose which activities to join or where to play. All pupils’ opinions are heard, but they are then taught that the group’s wishes must also be heeded.

Swedes take preschool seriously. Though education is not compulsory until seven, more than 80% of two-year-olds are enrolled in preschool, and many begin earlier. Among European countries only Denmark has higher enrolment rates at that age.

Just three of Mrs Danielsson’s 85 pupils, aged from one to five-and-a-half, speak Swedish as their mother tongue. Most come from Somali backgrounds, or other cultures where young children stay at home.

That may be their tradition, Mrs Danielsson says. But in Sweden "you need to learn Swedish rules and social behaviour." She prefers her pupils to enroll at 12- or 18-months-old, and to stay for six hours a day.

Swedish values can cause conflicts in immigrant families, she concedes. It can be hard for parents to cope with "strong" children taught to take decisions for themselves. Well, she says, "preschool teaches parents about Sweden, too."

Such self-confidence comes with a cost to individual liberty. Generous welfare payments (including heavy subsidies to keep preschool fees low) combine with high income taxes to shape Swedish childhoods into similar patterns. Sweden offers 14 months of parental leave (12 months for one parent, and two for the other, to encourage fathers to do their bit), during which an average earner may receive up to 80% of his or her salary, paid by the state. That means hardly any Swedish children under a year old go to day care. A few months later, most are at preschool.

A new integration policy, to take effect at the end of 2010, will pay immigrants to attend full-time language classes, "civic orientation" courses or job training for two years after they obtain residence permits. The benefits will be payable to individuals, not households. The stated aim is to push immigrant women into the labour market (duly propelling their children into day care).

Behind such policies lie a set of ideological beliefs, concedes a senior government official. Swedes are fiercely attached to gender equality. Economically, they think it good for women to work and pay taxes. They also believe "it is good for young children to be in preschool", so they can be educated by trained professionals. In a nice piece of circular reasoning, officials argue that children need to go to preschool to make friends, because that is where all the other children are.

Only one political party challenges this consensus: the small centre-right Christian Democrats. A junior member of the coalition government, the party last year secured a law offering monthly allowances of 3,000 kronor (about €300) to parents who keep under-threes at home. Party officials give the example of a rural family, living some distance from the nearest preschool, with a child born in the spring. Once statutory parental leave ends, the family might prefer to keep their toddler at home for a few months more, perhaps until after the summer. Yet the bigger point is to send a political signal, say the Christian Democrats: parents should have a choice about how to raise their families.

That argument has triggered a backlash among centre-left politicians and education professionals. A 3,000-kronor allowance will mean little to middle-class parents, but it is enough to persuade immigrant mothers to keep toddlers at home, they charge. Mrs Danielsson says 5% of children in her catchment area have vanished, thanks to the allowance. After years running waiting lists, last year she had to go on local television to fill her places.

School is good for you

In Denmark the debate has taken a harder edge. Pia Kjaersgaard, leader of the populist right-wing Danish People's Party, called last December for councils to force toddlers from "vulnerable families" into crèches on pain of losing benefits, before they grow up into "gang members". She was referring mostly to immigrant families, she explained.

In fact, Denmark already has such "parental orders". The debate is about lowering the threshold for withdrawing benefits. The centre-left Social Democrats reject such sanctions. But it should be "easier for the authorities to say a child should attend day care" when the child is at risk, says the party's social-affairs spokeswoman, Mette Frederiksen. Most under-threes who do not attend day care in Denmark are from minority backgrounds, she notes. That denies them opportunities other toddlers enjoy.

That the issue of compulsory day care is even on the agenda says something about Denmark's toxic immigration debate. Yet the Nordic experiment is mostly kinder than that. Mrs Danielsson's school is lovely, and her pupils seem happy. If Sweden is a nanny state, it is a Mary Poppins nanny state, emasculating parents, in part, by being good at what it does.

Few other countries are likely to try the experiment—Sweden and Denmark spend about €10,000 a year per preschool pupil. Expect to hear more, though, about clashes between parental freedom and integration. The Nordics may be an extreme case, but their debate has lessons for all Europe