

# Mind the gap!

## Children's transition from preschool to school: the Swedish example.

*Paper presented at the EECERA conference in Tallin aug. 28-31, 2013.*

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### Abstract

This paper explores children's transition from preschool to school in the Swedish context. Continuity in transition between school forms has often been stressed by for example national and international policy makers. But what is continuity? This concept is seldom defined. The paper is based on results from my forthcoming thesis, which explores children's perspectives on the Swedish preschool class and children's transition from preschool to school. When re-analyzing the empirical data in search for indications of continuity, I found that children in transition to school enhances that this process includes gaps and discontinuities – discontinuities that children put forward as positive.

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### The educational context in Sweden

In Sweden, children begin compulsory school at seven years of age. Prior to this, most 1-5 year old children participate in preschool activities. The year children turn six, they have the opportunity to participate in the voluntary preschool class during one year, which most children do (96% during the academic year of 2011/2012 according to Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013).

Being a teacher in the *preschool class* involves in many ways to be located in a practice caught between two tradition-bound institutions. The descriptions of the preschool class' mission are not as clear as for the preschool and school. This school form is also given different (maybe contradictive?) focus in these different descriptions:

- The preschool class shall offer children a "smooth" transition from preschool to school (Agency for School Improvement, 2006).
- According to SOU 2008:109, the preschool class shall offer children "smooth, playful and joyful encounters with school's requirements" (s. 244).
- Swedish National Agency for Education (2012a) describes the preschool class as an arena for encounters with both preschool's and compulsory school's approach and methodology.
- Swedish National Agency for Education (2011) emphasizes that the activities in preschool class should be based on free play but are also, at the same time, to be regarded as teaching.
- In the Swedish School Law (2010:800) it is described that no requirements can be placed in children, since the preschool class is a voluntary school form.

- In school's curriculum (where the preschool class is included) there are no actual descriptions about the content in preschool class. However, the core content and knowledge requirements for higher grades can be adapted and adjusted for the six year old children by the teachers themselves.
- Above this, Swedish National Agency for Education (2012b) also states that there are not going to be any lessons, subject teaching or assessments of children's skills in preschool class.

For these reasons, it may be appropriate to consider the preschool class as a borderland practice (Ackesjö, 2010); an arena in between two knowledge-oriented school forms. Anzaldúa (1987) describes the borderland as a vague and indefinite place where there are tensions and borders that overlap, since it is here the different contexts or arenas meet. The borderland dilemmas that arises in preschool class has an impact on both teachers and children. Both preschool and compulsory education has, with their new curricula's, received expanded responsibilities for children's learning, teaching and assessments of children's skills. Both school forms have policies with clear objectives for teachers to follow. The preschool curriculum has objectives for children to strive for, and the school curriculum places knowledge requirements on the pupils. In what is often referred to as the renewed or clarified mission for the *Swedish preschool* (Swedish School's Inspectorate, 2102) the preschool also is put forward as a school form that increasingly will be about teaching in different school related subjects. In addition, assessment of children's skills has become focus in preschool. The preschool class is however still loosely regulated in terms of both content and form.

## Two curriculum traditions

In international comparisons of organization and steering of preschools in different countries, different curriculum approaches or traditions are often used (Folke-Fichtelius, 2013):

- Academic, pre-primary, early education approach, or *Readiness for school Approach*
- Comprehensive approach, or *Social Pedagogy Approach*

(OECD 2006; 2011)

The two curriculum approaches can be linked to different approaches towards children's learning. Many countries use a mixed model, with elements of both curriculum traditions (OECD, 2011). Countries that organizes a clear educational preparative and knowledge-oriented preschool with goals for children to achieve and use standardized tests to measure children's knowledge, are for example, the U.S., France and England. Countries that can be placed within the social pedagogical tradition with objectives oriented more towards the content and quality of practice than to children's individual knowledge building, are for example the Nordic countries and New Zealand (OECD, 2011). Sweden has been described as a country that is a big opponent against knowledge assessment of preschool children based on pre-determined and set standards (OECD, 2006), and this new goal- and result oriented school system places new demands on both preschools and schools (see for example Bjervås, 2011). However, these processes have met resistance not only in Sweden but in many countries, a resistance that has been described in terms of concerns about an increased "schoolification" of preschool and concerns about if the preschool practice is developing to be all too similar to the school's way of organizing teaching (OECD, 2006).

The revised curriculum for Swedish preschool is indicating a shift towards a more knowledge-oriented curriculum tradition. However, both the Swedish School law (2010:800) and the preschool curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010) also contains visible traces of a social oriented curriculum tradition (Folke-Fichtelius, 2013). One example given in the curriculum is that preschool both shall stimulate children's development and learning and offer children care. At the same time the preschool also must to prepare children for further education. Jönsson, Sandell and Tallberg-Broman (2012) argue for a paradigm shift as the revised curriculum places more emphasis on learning. In their study they show clear tendencies of preschool teachers using more and more school-like activities in preschool. One interpretation Jönsson et al (2012) makes in their study is that the Swedish preschool are closing in to the academic knowledge orientation that exist in the U.S., France and England, where the focus of the practice is largely to work with school oriented areas such as reading, writing and mathematics. However, Jonsson (2011) argues that the Swedish preschool is in a process of both change and preservation and Doverborg, Pramling & Pramling Samuelsson (2013) argues that for example the concept of teaching is a question of definition. Teaching in preschool should according to them be about making the learning visible and to challenge children's learning using a dialogic approach and work based on children's questions and interests. By this, the activities in preschool can be directed towards the objectives set out in the curriculum without using "school like" teaching methods.

In which curriculum tradition may the preschool class be placed? Some studies (eg Peréz Prieto, Sahlström & Melander 2003; Karlsson, Melander, Peréz Prieto & Sahlström, 2006; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2001) has indicated that the preschool class has been schoolified, and has become a school form in which school's focus on subjects and teaching methods are used to organize the content in the practice. These research results could place the preschool class in a knowledge-oriented curriculum tradition. But there are also other studies that emphasize other aspects of the preschool class. In a study of Ackesjö (2010) preschool teachers emphasizes a clear socially oriented curriculum tradition, as they stresses that the preschool class activities must be based on focus with children's care, comfort and security through play as a tool for social development. The preschool class teachers describe how they, during children's first year on school premises, focus on working with children's safety and relationships before the acquisition of knowledge. They describe how children enters the preschool class from many different preschools, and for that reason the focus in preschool class' preparatory mission is to "bring the group together"; to get the children to feel a sense of belonging and create relationships with each other in the new group composition. They also describe how they disagree with and reject the school's ways of teaching and focus on teaching and learning, and position themselves as a "different kind of teacher" as they also in a sense are protecting the early childhood education traditions from preschool. A study of Garpelin, Hellblom-Thibblin, Sandberg & Andersson (2009) have also shown that the vast majority of the 15 hours a week as the children participate in preschool class activities are set aside for children's free play, which could further enhance a socially oriented curriculum tradition in preschool class.

My thesis is based on an ethnographic data construction where I have followed children in the transitions from preschool to preschool class and on to school. The study has the overall objective to gain knowledge of and understand the Swedish preschool class from different perspectives. The study is a longitudinal case study and the empirical construction extends over 18 months in three different school forms. In re-analyzing the three studies (Ackesjö, 2013a;

2013b; Ackesjö & Persson, 2013) it may be suggested that the preschool class could be organized after a Mixed Model of curriculum traditions, as play and learning are interwoven in both adult and child-controlled activities. The mixed model becomes visible both as children in preschool class get much time for their own play, but also since the teaching in preschool class often is based on play and uses a child-centered approach.

The studies however indicate that in the preschool class there is a tension between the two curriculum traditions, something that further reinforces the preschool class placement in the borderland. Given that the majority of Swedish children nowadays are covered in preschool education, continuity between institutions seems to be an important aspect of the transition between them. But what is continuity, of what does continuity consist and how can continuity be created?

## Continuities

In policy documents, the preschool class often has described as a bridge between preschool and school. On this bridge, the children can meet school requirements in a smooth way and at their own pace (cf. Agency for School Improvement, 2006). When talking about transition from preschool to school, via this bridge, aspirations of continuity between schools reoccur. Continuity in children's education has also been stressed by the OECD (2006; 2011), but this concept is seldom defined. My studies have shown that there are a number of different forms of (dis)continuity between preschool and primary school. Therefore an analysis has been made on the basis of Fabian's (2002) concept of *social, physical and philosophical discontinuity* and in my analysis I use the philosophical discontinuity as a form of *cultural discontinuity*<sup>1</sup>.

### *Cultural (dis)continuity*

In one of my studies (Ackesjö 2013b) it becomes obvious that some children express a lack of a more knowledge orientation in the preschool class. This also becomes clear when the children are going to work with the weekly reoccurring activity "The letter of the week". The teachers conduct the activities based on a playful, practical and aesthetic approach. The children are playing with the letters, coloring them and so on. Especially a child, Elsa, is resisting the activities and asks: *Why does this feel like preschool?* She enhance that these activities belongs to preschool and not to school. During the first three months in the preschool class she continues to resist the preschool class tuition. Elsa, and a few other children along with her, stresses that the teaching in preschool class has too little knowledge orientation and is all too similar to preschool activities. They had expected that it would be "more like school" in the preschool class. Elsa gives clear expression that they, in preschool class, in many aspects have to "redo" preschool.

The practice and tuition in preschool class also appears to be conditioned by external factors and in some instances "forced" by other teachers. The teachers are aware that most children already are readers and writers when they enter the preschool class, but they feel prevented to continue to develop these skills. The preschool class teacher Sue says:

*They [the teachers in grade 1] do not want us to learn children how to read and write and such... No, they want to do that themselves in first grade. Instead they want us to attend to*

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<sup>1</sup> Cultural continuity is in this paper narrowly defined to only deal with teaching and education culture.

*children's social development, and to learn them how to cut with scissors and how to tie their shoes.... and such.*

Although some children in the preschool class express that they want to move forward in their development and learning, the teacher Sue is experiencing hindrances. This may partly be due to the fact that the preschool class' mission and goals not are regulated by any governing documents, and therefore it is hard for the teachers themselves to construct and identify their assignments and their profession in relation to other teachers in other school forms. However, the preschool class teachers describe how children of today are so much more competent than children in the past. They therefore believe that the levels for children's knowledge in the preschool class should be increased.

Teachers in preschool, preschool class and school often have pretty poor contact and / or collaboration, which results in that they have quite small insight into what children have done or will do in past or future school forms. There is a lack of both time and common venues for these teachers to meet (Ackesjö, 2010; Sandberg, 2012). This also becomes clear in my study (Ackesjö, 2013b), as the children have to start over again with the same things in first grade that they have already done both in preschool and in preschool class. Thus, *there seems to be a cultural discontinuity in the preschool class*, which in my meaning could impact both children's learning trajectories but also their lust for learning.

### *Physical (dis)continuity*

In my third study (Ackesjö & Persson, 2013) it is described how the physical discontinuity, ie. the break between the old arena and entry into new and untreaded ground, can be energizing and inspiring for children. One example of this is Simon's and Charlie's descriptions:

Simon: *...it can always be fun to move on to something new.*

H: *What is it that is fun about moving to something new?*

Simon: *Well, you get new teachers and new toys... and you get new space to play on and so...*

Charlie: *And you also get new friends. And you can do new funny things. And you get a new and bigger yard.*

Simon and Charlie describes that transitions can be a source of joy and opportunities to create new relationships and to meet new challenges. An analysis of the boys' story shows that they emphasize the benefits of a physical discontinuity: they emphasize meeting with new facilities and materials almost as inspiring and energizing. In their narratives, they express for example that the transition from preschool to preschool class has meant that they now have access to new toys and fun activities on a large schoolyard.

The results in this study indicate that the *physical discontinuity is something that can be associated with anticipation and excitement embedded in the process of "starting something new"*. In the transition to preschool class, the preschool environment is replaced with school environment and several of the children expressed that this means new opportunities and challenges. Thus, the physical discontinuity could be regarded as something positive by the children, and this discontinuity can also be a "visible" marking of the exit from the old context and the border crossing into a new context. Only one child in the study (Peter) expressed concerns about the transition from preschool to preschool class, and this concern seemed more have to do with the meeting with new friends than with the physical entry into a new environment. Thus, the social continuity seems to be important for children.

## *Social (dis)continuity*

The study (Ackesjö & Persson, 2013) shows that transitions between school forms involve relational stress for some children, as their sense of belonging to a social community is tested. For other children, the transition seems to go easier and they are prepared to enter into and create new social communities. My first study also shows that transitions are a process with a two-way-direction; children enters into new social contexts while they are still separating from old contexts and relationships (Ackesjö, 2013a). Several of the children describes that almost every spring semester in preschool has meant separations and breakups and the beginning of the autumn term has been characterized by new entries and adjustment to new children and new teachers in new groups - breakups has become a part of children's everyday lives in preschool (Ackesjö & Persson, 2013).<sup>2</sup>

Children describe social discontinuity as problematic. Children from many different preschools enter the preschool classes. The transition is no obvious simple task for those who comes alone from a preschool and enters into a new community in the preschool class. Children seem convinced that the best transition is when the whole group does the transition at the same time, with the group intact:

H: *Is it better to change groups a few children at the time or all together?*

Simon: *All together at the same time! The whole group! Because, if you have a really good friend, and half the group is moving, then you cannot play with your friend as often!*

Ebba: *Only four in our group [at preschool] were six years old, the rest of the children were only five years old....* [shows with her body that she is sad because she had to leave her younger friends behind in transition to school]

Children's utterances seem to be based on relational aspects; they want to be close to their friends so that they can continue to play and socialize together. Stephanie says:

H: *Who is you best friend here [in the preschool class]?*

Stephanie: *I don't have one.*

H: *Don't you have a best friend here?*

Stephanie: *No... I try to find one but it is so hard....* [talks very quiet and looks down in the table]

Stephanie is a child who experience that she has left her closest friends at the preschool and she has found it difficult to get into the new group community in preschool class. We had this conversation when the year in preschool class was almost over, and she had then still not found her way into any social community. For children, every transition and entry into a new context and a new group of children involves being forced to a re-orientation and a re-definition of both themselves and their affiliations (cf. Chick & Meleis, 1986). For many of the children this does not seem to be a major problem. They know how to enter a new social community. Other children, such as Stephanie, however disclose that in the transitions they risk to lose their reference points. Children may have left a perceived belonging and sense of community in preschool and find it difficult to enter new communities in school. The study therefore shows

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<sup>2</sup> The aspiration to have age homogenous groups for the older children in preschool is common in Sweden. For example, children from different preschool units often gather in a "five-year-old-group" during their last year in preschool, to prepare for the transition to preschool class. However, in my study the children in the five-year-old-group were separated into new group compositions after the transition to preschool class. The preschool classes were also divided into new classes after the transition to first grade.

that *transitions that are characterized by social discontinuity can be embedded in feelings of social exclusion.*

The study (Ackesjö & Persson, 2013) show that children's relationships are important in transitions, and that children states that they enter into a new school forms easier if they do it with peers. In the transitions to and from preschool class children are searching for new roles and identities in the new social communities, while striving to maintain old communities that they feel affiliation to. The present study therefore confirms what previous research has shown (eg, Dockett & Perry, 2006; Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006; Reichmann, 2011), namely that the continuity of friendships and relationships are important and can give children stability in transition processes.

## Final conclusions

Continuity between school forms has for a long time been emphasized in education policy (see OECD 2006; 2011). Argument in the discussions about children's transitions has often been based on perceptions of transitions as problematic, and therefore must be handled carefully. Transitions tend to be described as difficult and threatening for children and as a process where children need extra support and help. For this reason, discussions about building bridges and soften transitions between different school forms has come to take place in education debates, with the objective of simplifying these passages for children (Ecclestone, 2009). However, results of some studies (e.g. Ackesjö, 2010; Sandberg, 2012) shows that the "soft" och "smooth" transition that preschool class to offer can cause confusion among both children and teachers. For example, in my study (Ackesjö, 2013b) the children asked "*is the preschool class school or not?*"

What is preferable, a soft and "seamless" transitions where the borders between school forms is unclear, or transitions that are clearly marked and in which children, parents and teachers perceive and experience the changes taking place? The results in my thesis indicates that children prefer clear breaks and borders, a clarity that something is over and that something new awaits. Would it be preferable if the transition between preschool and preschool class was more clearly marked to illustrate the differences between the practices? This model of thinking would imply that children can benefit if the border crossing and the transition was clarified.

Transitions should promote both continuity and change. Many of children in the preschool class are ready, willing and curious to learn. Other children need more time to settle in their new context and in the new community. In my results children are presenting different patterns of (dis)continuity in the transitions between the three school forms. Children are no homogeneous group, and general conclusions cannot be drawn. However, some tendencies of continuities could be presented out from my empirical material.

If the ambitions are that there should be continuity between school forms, it is important to consider what type of continuity that is sought. In this paper, I have only discussed the physical, social and cultural continuity; there may be more types of continuities. One question that must be asked is whether discontinuity between school forms in some cases actually can stimulate the children in transition; stimulate learning and development and mark that something new is imminent. Transitions and changes in contexts could be regarded as a time for opportunities to create creative challenges and changes, and also a process of encounters with positive risks and challenges that may be stimulating for children (cf. Dockett, 2011). A question for further research could also be if it is easier to handle a physical discontinuity if one experiences a social

continuity. The children in my study who experience social continuity (who were making the transition along with several of their peers) seem to regard the physical *discontinuity* (to enter a new school environment) in a more positively way. Children who were making the transition alone, without peers from preschool, were more anxious about the physical changes.

Based on results from my thesis, one can argue that it is important to develop a social continuity in transitions. The exit from preschool and entering into the world of school may in many ways be regarded as a critical event in children's lives, and international research suggests that disruptions in children's relationships and social communities is a negative factor for children in transition (see Reichmann , 2011). For children who are in transition, relationships to friends are extremely important. To be and to have a friend is a way to create meaning in life. My results shows that children in Sweden change groups several times in preschool, and in the transition to preschool class, many of the children are new to each other. Having time to build new relationships and social communities in the preschool class must be of great importance for the children. A good socio-emotional basis may also benefit children's continued learning in compulsory education (see Bulkley & Fabian, 2006).

Is it possible to create both (contextual) continuity *and* clear borders between different school forms? My studies show that there may be a negative perceived cultural discontinuity between preschool, preschool class and compulsory school. The preschool class risk to be placed in a *cultural gap* between preschool and school. One challenge is to make children recognize both context and activities, but at the same time experience progression and a clear common thread between school forms. For these reasons, it is problematic that the preschool class is so weakly regulated in policy documents, since this leads to a lack of clarity in the assignments for the preschool class and preschool class teachers. While Swedish School's Inspectorate (2012) criticizes the preschools to focus too little on teaching, learning and assessment of children's skills - and while the compulsory schooling has received clearer regulations on objectives and results - the preschool class is surrounded of documents that stresses that for example subject teaching, lessons or assessments should not take place on this arena (see Swedish National Agency for Education, 2012). Thus, the gap between preschool and compulsory school seems to be maintained by the low level of institutional framework and the low level of investment in the preschool class.



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