READING BOOKS IN PRESCHOOL IS TAKEN FOR GRANTED – BUT IS IT TRUE?

Introduction

If reading to children, they often come to learn how stories are created, know what to expect from a text, and learn to tell stories themselves. Reading to children also gives them access to other expressions than they usually encounter. They learn that written language is important and desirable, but also that it can be debated and questioned (Snow, 2006, Svensson, 1994, 2005). If the readers involve the children in the text by discussing its contents, the children learn to read between the lines.

For a long time, reading to children has been a part of the family tradition in Sweden. Parents are supposed to read to their children every day, but do they actually do that? It is taken for granted that parents and preschool teachers read a lot to children. A survey (Barnbarometern, 2000/2001) shows that reading to children aged 3 to 8 years has declined over the last 15 years. In 1984, 85 percent of children aged 3-8 were read to by their parents’ for approximately 32 minutes a day. Fifteen years later, 70 percent of the children were only read to for 16 minutes a day. In 2000, two-thirds of children's media consumption consisted of TV and video. Book consumption constituted nine percent. During those 15 years, differences between social classes had grown, and that low-educated parents read less to their children than their more educated counterparts do.

As there seems to be no doubt that children are read to in preschool, no studies have been shown if this is what actually happens. The decline in reading has happened at the same time as society’s need for advanced reading competence has increased. Clearly, this is a threat, especially to children who are language delayed or at risk of being poor readers because of little stimulation at home. Immigrant children from countries where reading is not a part of the tradition, or where parents read but not involve the child in the text, are also vulnerable. Therefore, it is critical that children whose parents do not read to them, are read to by teachers in preschool.

We know that discussions about literature have an impact on the students’ understanding of a text, and that their critical thinking can be enhanced by dialogues about the contents of stories. Hickman points out the importance of sharing reading experiences with others and of being inspired by others while dealing with literature (Hepler & Hickman, 2001). Another factor that is essential in order to become a good reader is being able to verbally express knowledge, as to show an understanding of the text. Children who are used to talking about a text have an advantage over children who not have been exposed to literature in the same way. The way children use the language and their experiences within school situations depends on their earlier experiences of verbal and written language, literature, and other media. Therefore, it is very important for children to get this sort of training in school, especially if they do not get it at home (Lundberg, 2006; Simonsson, 2006; Svensson, 1998; Wells, 2000).

The vocabulary is essential for the development of reading comprehension. Stanovich (1986, in Myrberg, 2005) found that 80 percent of the words that are read almost never occur in vernacular language. Schoolbooks for children ages 9-10 years had more advanced vocabulary than in an ordinary entertaining TV-program for adults (a. a). In consequence, reading is very important activity for helping children to gain the vocabulary that is needed for a successful start in school. Myrberg (2005) has found that the books that students read silent in the classroom do not help them to develop their reading comprehension. According to Myrberg, there are more students with
reading problems related to comprehension problems than there are students with phonological problems. There is no doubt that reading to children is a critical way to enhance their vocabulary.

Teachers play a special and important role in this, since they occupy a key position in leading and guiding the discussions that influence the children’s experience immensely. The teachers are the ones who can give children time to express themselves while talking about the contents and the language of texts. It is the teacher that can create the joint references in the group.

Preschool is the naturalized context for Swedish children between 1 and 5 years of age. 75 percent of children 1–3 years old go to preschool at least 4–5 hours a day (for babies’ first year, it requires that one of their parents is on parental leave). 97 percent of children aged 4-5 years go to preschool, often for 7-8 hours a day. The ratio child-teacher is 5:1. Almost all children in Sweden go to preschool, which would be a useful link between home and society when it comes to influencing parents to read to their children. However, no studies have so far showed that children in preschool actually are read to.

AIM

This survey study was intended to find out how much preschool teachers read to preschool children, experienced by university students undertaking teacher education. It is a pilot study for a more comprehensive survey that will investigate how language development is stimulated in preschool.

Questions

- How often do preschool teachers, as reported by the student teachers, read to their students as a class?
- How often do preschool teachers, as reported by the student teachers, read to their students divided into small groups or individually?
- Does the number of children within the group affect the reading?
- Does the number of children at risk, such as immigrant children or language-delayed children, affect the reading?

METHOD

Student teachers were asked to observe and take notes during their on-site training in preschool when teachers read to their students. Two groups of student teachers, one in the spring of 2006 and one in the spring 2007, observed teachers reading to children. The student teachers were not allowed to influence the statistics by taking notes when they read to the children.

Premises when students made observations in preschool

The student teachers had six weeks of training in the preschool. These days included Easter break, so they spent a total of 28 days in the preschool. Each student teacher is trained by one preschool teacher for 30 hours/week.

In Swedish preschools, the most common way to divide children in groups is by age: 1–3 years, 3–5 years, or 1–5 years. The student teachers in the 1–5 age group remained in that group throughout the six weeks. Those in the 1–3 or 3–5 age groups switched groups after three weeks to experience children in both age groups.

Preschools in Sweden are known to have good, uniform quality. The groups the student teachers were in varied with the number of children within the group, children with special needs, number of children with Swedish as second language, children at risk, or the age of the children. Moreover, preschools varied by location (urban or rural) and socio-economic level of the parents of the
children of the group. Data on these factors have been collected, either by student teachers or gathered from municipal authorities.

**The observation form**

The observation form consists of seven questions. The first question, if the preschool teacher read to all children in the group, would indicate if the preschool teachers made an effort to reach all children in the group when reading.

The second question, if the preschool teacher read to small or large groups of children, would indicate if the preschool teachers tried to individualise them by dividing the children into groups.

The third question, if the preschool teacher read to the children individually, would indicate whether the teachers made an effort to adjust to children who wanted to listen to a book or who needed to sit alone with an adult to be able to concentrate on the text. This third question, however, could be influenced by circumstances surrounding the situation (such as number of students in the group).

Tables 2–4 (below) show how many times the student teachers, while at the preschool, recorded teachers reading to the children. The following classifications were made so that a number of reading occurrences could be tracked:

- more than once a day (29 times or more)
- every day (28 times)
- once or twice a week (7–16 times)
- rarely (1–6 times)
- not at all

This observation form also contained questions about the number of children in the group, the age of the children, and whether reading was used to calm the children instead of actively involving them in the text of the book.

The study was carried out twice: At first in 2006 with 91 student teachers, and then again in 2007 with a number of 104 student teachers. Observations were continuously made during the time the student teachers were present at the preschool.

Table 1 (below) shows the number of observation forms distributed to student teachers and the number of returned observation forms.

**Table 1.** Numbers of distributed observation forms and missing forms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of observation</th>
<th>Student teachers n</th>
<th>Observation forms n</th>
<th>Missing n</th>
<th>Missing %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In total</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Attrition**

Of 195 students in the study, 158 returned observation forms, leaving 19 percent attrition.
RESULTS

Student teachers’ reports about reading in preschool by teachers

The student teachers were instructed to record every time the teacher read to the children. If the students were read to as an entire class every day, this would be 28 marks since the student teachers spent 28 days in the preschool.

Table 2. Numbers of occasions’ teachers read to children as a class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of reading occasions</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1–6</th>
<th>7–16</th>
<th>17–27</th>
<th>28</th>
<th>29 or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006, n=71, missing: 0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007, n=86, missing: 1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In total</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The student teachers’ experiences varied greatly in how much they observed reading to the entire class. Most of the student teachers reported that reading to students as a class occurred once or twice a week. 15 percent (24 student teachers) reported that the preschool teachers read to the class on a daily basis and often several times a day. 42 percent (66 student teachers) reported that reading to the entire class rarely occurred (once a week or less).

Data from observations of the teachers reading to a small group of students is recorded below in Table 3.

Table 3. Numbers of reading occasions to small groups of children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of reading occasions</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1–6</th>
<th>7–16</th>
<th>17–27</th>
<th>28</th>
<th>29 or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006, n=71</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007, n=87</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

39 percent (62 student teachers) reported daily reading to small groups of children, most of them having observed several occurrences per day. Four percent (6 student teachers) did not see any reading to small groups at all during the six weeks in the preschool. 4 percent (7 student teachers) reported that reading to small groups occurred rarely, once a week or less. Altogether 8 percent (13 student teachers) reported little or no reading to small groups during their 28 days in the preschool.

Table 4. Numbers of reading occasions to children individually.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of reading occasions</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1–6</th>
<th>7–16</th>
<th>17–27</th>
<th>28</th>
<th>29 or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006, n=71</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007, n=87</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In total</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
49 percent (78 student teachers) reported that the children were read to individually a few times a week. Two student teachers reported daily individual reading. 2.5 percent (4 student teachers) reported no occurrences of individual reading, and another 31 percent (49 students) reported that individual teacher-to-child reading occurred rarely.

It seems that there are no noticeable differences between preschools concerning reading to children individually when compared to reading for a class or a small group.

In total, preschool teachers prefer reading to small groups of students. Six percent (9 student teachers) reported an overall frequent reading, for groups of children as well as individually.

Two percent (3 student teachers) did not observe any reading at all during their six weeks. 2.5 percent (4 students) teachers reported that the preschool teacher read once a week or less for his/her class.

Altogether, the student teachers reported that most children were read to several times a week, although not on a daily basis.

**Reading depending on preschool group**
The 158 student teachers had made observations of a total of 209 groups during their practice, as some of them had changed groups after three weeks (see Table 5).

**Table 5. Numbers of groups where student teachers made observations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year for data collection</th>
<th>number of preschool groups</th>
<th>number of student teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>In total</strong></td>
<td><strong>209</strong></td>
<td><strong>158</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As is shown in Table 5, there were 23 more preschool groups than student teachers in 2006, and in 2007 there were 28 more preschool groups than student teachers. We might as well follow to what frequency reading to children occurred in each of the groups.

**Reading for the children as a class or to small groups**
In 12 percent of the preschool groups (26 groups), teachers read to the children as a class on a daily basis. In 30 percent of the preschool groups, the teachers read to small groups daily, often several times a day. Altogether, they read in 43 percent of the preschool groups (89 groups) daily.

In 13 percent of the groups (27 groups), teachers never read to the students as a class. 4 percent never read to small groups, and another 4 percent of the teachers in the groups rarely read to small groups.

**Reading individually**
In two groups, teachers daily read to the children individually. These preschool teachers daily read to small groups as well as the entire class. In one group the teachers never read individually.

Finally, when we look across all groups there is a great variability in reading among groups. There were groups where the preschool teachers rarely or never read books to children, and there were other groups where there was frequent reading. Most of the preschool teachers read to small groups of children as well as to individuals.
**Does reading in preschool depend on the groups of children?**

Factors influencing differences in the frequency of reading to children include the number of children within the group, their age, their socioeconomic background, and the number of children with special needs or at risk. To determine this, an analysis has been made:

- **Are there differences depending on the number of children in the group?**
  No, there were no differences in reading depending on the number of children in the group. But in groups with many children (more than 16), the children were more often divided in two or three smaller groups and read to.

- **Are there differences due to age?**
  Slightly more individual reading occurred in groups with children aged 1-3 years, as reading for a whole class is not very common.

- **Are there differences due to the socioeconomic background of the children?**
  There were no differences in reading depending on the background of the children in the groups.

- **Are there differences due to the number of special needs or ‘at risk’ children of a group?**
  There were no differences in reading depending on the number of students with special needs or at risk.

So why does the reading frequency differ between groups?

**Reading books to children an ordinary day**

As a complement to the study above, and to get an idea of how much reading in general there is an ordinary day, 287 teachers representing as many preschool groups have filled out a questionnaire in June 11, 2008. The teachers of 9 preschool groups (5%) did not read that very day. Some did not read because they had outdoor play that day (4 groups), and others were short of teachers because of illness (2 groups).

The teachers should also tell how many children's books they had in the group that specific day. Most groups had 21-50 books. Four groups had more than 150 books and nine groups (5%) had 0-10 books. The groups that had no books reported that they had returned the books to the library since no books were need during the summer. The groups that had few books commented that they though they had enough books, or they wanted to have few books since they change them every week.

**In what situations did the teachers read to the children?**

Most teachers read to the children after lunch since the children are to be at rest. Others read frequently just before lunchtime to make the children calm down before lunch. Other reading occasions were early in the morning when the children arrived. Some teachers read during free play if the children asked them. Seven groups (4%) reported frequent and daily reading to children in small groups.

It is relaxing, nice, and cozy to read to children that are going to sleep or calming down. Besides this, the children get time to reflect on their own. But if teachers merely read on occasions when children should be silent and calm, they probably do not start discussing the explicit meaning or what is understood between the lines. In other words, they miss the chance to engage and involve the children in the text. As a result of this, teachers could miss making children feel that they are a part of a reading community.
DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to investigate how common it is with reading to children in preschool. The study may not give absolute figures about book reading in preschool in Sweden, but it indicates what student teachers might experience during their teacher training in preschool. The results indicate that many preschool teachers read a lot and yet that others read very little. These big differences are worrying because reading books could be seen as a strong quality indicator when talking about quality of preschools.

Reading to students is not a daily activity in all preschools, as might be taken for granted. 15 percent of the student teachers reported daily reading to children as a class; most common was reading to small groups (39%).

Fortunately enough, reading to children in small groups was the most common way of handling the issue. Reading to children in small groups make it easier to respond in a personal way to the children’s reactions, to involve the children in the text, give explanations to things that are told between the lines, and to let the children start discussions of interest to them.

Preschool is a place where the majority of children in Sweden spend a lot of time. We should start to face the differences between what we believe happens in preschool and what actually happens. Reading to children is particularly important since not all parents read to their children. Since educators take for granted that reading is common in preschool, they have to realise it is not always the case.

Educational researchers and theorists keeps emphasizing that authentic discussions about literary texts are highly desirable as a way of helping children to become members of a reading community. Teachers’ attitudes when reading to children define the options the children get to discuss a text and to share ideas about literary texts. Teachers who invite children to comment and start discussions about the text also teach them to become active and critical as they read. If the teacher shares the attitude that reading entails getting involved in the text, the teacher sends the message that a literary text is something that should be discussed with others. Teachers are important for helping children understand that literary texts are not a set of truths but ideas that should be discussed. If children do not get this chance, they are likely to fall behind in compulsory school. It is considered highly critical for all children to get several chances to debate literary texts during their preschool years.

Children at risk or with special needs because of delayed language development, different socioeconomic or cultural background are the ones who need the experience of book reading the most. They need time to practice how to get involved in discussions about the contents of books and how to talk about texts. Also, they need a lot of experience of reading books in order to be able to use a decontextualised language.

9 student teachers (6 percent) reported frequent reading to children, whether to students as a class, small groups or to individuals. Several student teachers also made comments about observing a lot of reading to the children. They emphasised that the teachers worked very consciously to arrange a language-stimulating and literate environment.

Elise:
The teachers read a book to all the children every day after having lunch. In the mornings at circle time the children were told a fairy tail [sic]. They had rhymes and songs every day. They read to the children both in groups and individual very often. The books were arranged so the children easily could look in them and the
books were changed often. They made book loans from the library bus. They just loved fairy tales and the teachers had a lot of fairy tale boxes.

There were also student teachers who were disappointed about the lack of reading. They had imagined there would be much more reading than they experienced during their six weeks in preschool.

But why be a pessimist – maybe there were a lot of discussions about thoughts, dreams and fantasy? Maybe they sang a lot or played with language in different ways, or maybe they were told a lot of rhymes? Maybe they had a lot of free play where language-delayed children and children with Swedish as a second language could practice their language skills? Maybe they played games that supported their interest in written language? Maybe they were telling a lot of stories orally? Maybe they had a lot of drama, skits and other kinds of creative activities that enhance competence for expressions in Swedish? All of these are possible options, and there were students who witnessed it.

Anna:
In my group of 1-3 years old there was not much reading but a lot of singing, nursery rhymes and story telling. They read at least one rhyme before every meal (breakfast, lunch and snacks). Very often they had some kind of story telling at circle time. Going in from outdoor play, they had rhymes and songs while waiting for their turn to go in.

Moa:
During these weeks the children have been rehearsing a musical, and besides I had my days with the theme, which took a lot of time. Because of this we sometimes did not have time for reading even though it was planned.

To be a good example
Reading books in preschool is important, not only in order to stimulate children's emergent literacy but also to work as a role model for parents. Parents who not are used to reading to children need to be inspired by their preschool and get ideas about suitable literature. If parents get the impression that preschool teachers do not read to children, they get the signal that reading is not important.

It is not just parents who need good examples; so do incipient teachers-in-training. During their teacher training, the student teachers meet several teachers while they are training in preschool, and they need to learn from well-qualified teachers.

Method discussion
The student teachers were told to make a note only when the actual preschool teachers read to the children. They were not to take notes when a substitute preschool teacher or one of the student teachers read a book. As a consequence of these instructions, much more reading than this study indicates might have taken place.

Furthermore, the student teachers were at the preschool 30 hours per week, usually during the time most of the children were there. Of course, book reading might have occurred when they were absent, for instance early in the morning or late in the afternoon, but at those times there are generally only a few children in the groups.

According to this study, not all children are used to a reading community in preschool. There is lot of variation in how much reading there are in preschool groups. Reading to children does not seem to be related to the number of children in the group, the education of the teachers, the number of children with special needs, or their social background. However, reading frequency might be
related to the teacher’s attitudes, knowledge, and interest in reading. The lack of standardisation almost creates a lottery whether children will get used to discuss literary texts or not.

REFERENCES


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