

Implementing a National Curriculum in Swedish Preschools

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published in International Journal of Early Childhood Education (2004), 10(2), 53-78.

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Abstract

This paper starts with a short presentation of the Swedish preschool, for children aged 1-6 years, and gives a background to the national policy on Early Childhood Education leading up to the first National Curriculum for the Preschool in 1998. Preschool education is considered to be the first important stage within the Educational system of Sweden. The structure of the curriculum is presented as well as the implementation in local municipalities and preschools. I will give some examples about how the concepts of the child, knowledge and learning are defined in the curriculum. Further more, I will illustrate how the curriculum has been implemented in some preschools.

A nation-wide evaluation of the reform was presented in spring 2004, showing a very positive attitude to the curriculum and an impressive local achievement. However, the National Agency of Education also points out some crucial challenges; the variations in quality between different preschools, the lack of awareness when allocating resources, the tendency to define local goals in addition to the goals in the national curriculum and the problems arising when assessing small children, thus directing the attention towards the individual child and her/his family instead of towards the educational programme and environment.

Keywords: National Curriculum; Swedish preschools

Preschools in Sweden

A short presentation²

Preschools in Sweden offer educational group activity for enrolled children between the ages 1-5 years. In 2003 for 75% of the children attended preschool, ranging from 40% for the 1-year olds to 89% for the 5-year olds.³ As a rule, preschools are open all year and for most of the day. Families are charged not more than 3, 2 or 1% of their income for their first, second and third child respectively. The group size usually varies between 12-25 children. Overall, 50% of the staff are trained preschool teachers (university level) and 42% are nursery nurses (secondary school level). In each preschool the number of educated preschool teachers can vary between 20-100%.

94% of the 6-year olds in Sweden attend a preparatory class called the preschool class, which is linked to the compulsory schools. The preschool class is free of charge for three hours a day. Parents usually combine the preschool class with after school centres, combining education and care. After schools centres are also a part of the educational system in Sweden with educated teachers. They are integrated within the schools and the teachers usually work in the preschool class or in the primary years as well. The curriculum for the compulsory school is adapted for the preschool class and the after school centres. 83% of the teachers have a university degree in teaching.

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²National Agency for Education, (2004a) The figures are taken from official presentations in English.

³National Agency for Education, (2004b)

The origins of the Swedish preschool

Preschools in Sweden have a long history.⁴ The first preschools were started in the middle of the 19th century in Stockholm and other larger cities. Industrialisation left great numbers of children unattended while their mothers/parents worked. Philanthropists and representatives from the church started day-care institutions. The inspiration came from Robert Owen and his Scottish Infant schools, from Friedrich Fröbel and his Kindergarten and of course from Rudolf Steiner and Maria Montessori.

The different traditions formed two different types of preschools, fulltime day-care centres for children aged between three months and seven years, while their mothers worked, and part-time kindergarten for the benefit of children aged three to seven years. The day-care centres combined the task of caring and nurturing for the children with play and learning. Preschool teachers were usually principals of the centres and they worked together with nursery nurses, apprentices and volunteers. Food was served and the daily routine included a rest/sleep after lunch. The kindergartens, also called play-schools, were organised in three hour sessions and there were sometimes two groups per day. The programme was educational, focusing on the children's need to play.⁵

These two traditions were unified by a national committee, appointed 1968 by the government to resolve the rapidly growing demand of good day-care for the numbers of women who now had left their lives as house-wives and joined the labour market. The committee's propositions⁶ resulted in 1975 in a Preschool Act introducing the overall concept PRESCHOOL, which could exist full-time or part-time. Both forms were to follow the same task EDUCARE.

The EDUCARE concept is a combination of education and caring stating that preschools should organise a good playful environment meeting the needs of the children and at the same time meet the needs from the parents taking good care of the children and from the society, enabling parents to go to work. Educare grew in Sweden during the 1960's and 1970's and manifests a period in Sweden when welfare systems were built and the common solutions were highly appreciated.⁷

The educationally motivated reform was followed by huge quantitative efforts to build new preschools. The percentage of children attending preschool raised from less than 25% in 1975 to 75% in 2003. During the same period the parliament has implemented a number of changes. A child allowance to all children was introduced in 1944 and has been increased over the years. Parents have the right by law to take parental leave from their work. All employers in Sweden have to pay social insurance for their employed. When you are on parental leave, or if you turn ill, you get approximately 80% of your salary (normal incomes) from this insurance. This is not paid directly by your own employer. The money is distributed by the national insurance company. In Sweden today, parents can share as many as 480 days with an insurance covering 80% of their income. Fathers have to use some of the days. These reforms are general and open for all citizens. They are parts of the Swedish Welfare System, where the Welfare reforms are directed to every one. Thus, welfare in Sweden does not mean aid to underprivileged groups.⁸

Characteristics of the Swedish preschool

⁴ Simmons Christensen, G. (1997).

⁵ Johansson, G. & Åstedt, I-B. (1996).

⁶ SOU, (1972).

⁷ Walch, J. (1993).

⁸ National Social Insurance Board, (2004).

I will now try to give you some characteristics of Swedish preschool education. Sweden was very active in establishing the UN Convention on the rights of the child and we try to organise preschools with the best interest of the children in focus.⁹

- We have a comprehensive view of the children. We talk about the whole child, referring to all aspects of the child, we plan for the whole day, matching the demands from the parents in one place all day, and we work always, in the meaning we use all possibilities for education as we consider all hours of the day to be equally important. According to this holistic approach we work with EDUCARE, with a combination of education and care.
- We recognise children to be individuals with their own rights. Children of today are active and competent and they influence their surroundings right from the start as well as being influenced by it.¹⁰
- Learning and development are processes happening any time, not just when we, the adults, have planned for them, and the learning is not always corresponding to what we had in mind. Learning and development are best promoted when children have fun and may concentrate on the things they are interested in.¹¹
- This is normally called PLAY and we believe children learn through play.¹²
- The role of a teacher is to recognise each child individually as well as in groups, their interests, wishes and needs. The teachers relate, guide, and follow the children but we also arrange the programme and the setting. We work in teams of educated teachers with joint responsibilities, and we try to keep the numbers of children in each group small.¹³

These factors were also recognised in 1999 when Sweden was inspected by a group of international experts, appointed by the OECD. The group concluded in their report of December 1999 that Early Childhood Education and Care in Sweden is of high quality, in many areas the very best.¹⁴ One of the researchers in the OECD investigation group went so far in his conclusions that he declared in an interview:

-If I were to be a child again, I would like to be raised in Sweden!

Transition from the Social sector to Education

As shown earlier, preschool development in Sweden has been strongly linked to the construction of the general welfare society. By tradition, preschools were supervised by the National Board of Health and Welfare and locally by the authorities for Social Services. When the expansion of preschools had reached a good majority of the preschool children, the government introduced the next initiative at the national level. The whole section of preschools, family day-care and after school centres was to be moved into the field of Education. In this way, everything becoming education, the question about when to start school was neutralised.¹⁵

In 1996, preschool affairs in general were moved from the Ministry of Health and Social affairs to the Ministry of Education and Science. The minister of Education appointed a committee in order to create a national curriculum for the 6-year olds and link it to the compulsory school. In a

⁹ UN Convention. (1989).

¹⁰ Stern, Daniel N. (1991).

¹¹ Rogoff, B., Goodman Turkkanis, C. & Bartlett, L. (2001).

¹² Olofsson, B. Knutsdotter. (1996).

¹³ Johansson, G. & Åstedt, I-B. (1996).

¹⁴ OECD. (2001).

¹⁵ Johansson, I. (2003).

year the committee proposed a reformed National curriculum for the compulsory schools. This included a new school form for 6-year olds called “preschool class” and was also adapted for the after school centres.¹⁶ Each district council was obliged to offer three hours of preschools, free of charge, to all 6-year olds. Attendance is not compulsory, but almost all children participate. Compulsory school still starts at the age of seven in Sweden. The committee was then given the task to consider a National curriculum also for the preschool, which in Sweden means education for children between 1 and 5 years. The official report *Capturing the surrounding world* was finished in six months!¹⁷

A national curriculum strengthens the Educational Task for preschools

The government acted quickly. The Education Act was changed in January 1998 to contain paragraphs about preschool, family day-care and after school activities. The very first National curriculum for the Preschool was put into force in August 1998.¹⁸ At the same time the reformed National curriculum for the compulsory schools was introduced.¹⁹ The two curricula are clearly linked. They follow the same structure and some parts are actually identical. The Swedish curriculum for the voluntary secondary school and adult learning²⁰ also follows the same structure. The curricula have the legal status of ordinances with binding provisions. They are written for a decentralised school system, where the local municipalities are responsible for the education provisions.

The curricula are very short, around 20 pages. They set out the fundamental values as well as the goals and guidelines for the activities. The financial resources and priorities are decided in the local municipalities. The curricula do not stipulate how these goals are to be attained. The actual education and the question of how to teach are decided at the level of individual schools, by the teachers and head teachers in co-operation with children and parents. This has led to many fruitful discussions locally, putting educational issues in focus. Teachers have to put down their planning in local work-plans but, first they have to welcome parents and children into discussions about the programme, schedule and methods.

Preschools are considered to be the first stage in the Swedish educational system. The task is stated to be: “*The preschool should lay the foundation for lifelong learning. The preschool should be enjoyable, secure and rich in learning for all children.*”²¹

All children aged 1-5 years have a right to preschool education. Preschools are now first of all motivated by the children’s best interest. The parents’ need for good day-care to enable them to take up positions on the labour market is still a very important factor, but not the dominating. Preschools are an important link in the Swedish system of Education. This is shown for instance in the regulation, introduced in 2003, that children whose parents are out of work or on parental leave with a sibling nevertheless have the right to attend preschool three hours a day. The child’s need to stay in preschool is recognised. A maximum fee for the preschool education has been introduced. For children aged four and five, this is a free option three hours daily.²²

The Structure of the Curricula

The similarities between the curricula for preschool, compulsory school and non-compulsory school make it easier for teachers, parents, children and politicians to see the continuity within

¹⁶ SOU. (1997a).

¹⁷ SOU. (1997b).

¹⁸ Ministry of Education and Science. (1998a).

¹⁹ Ministry of Education and Science. (1998b).

²⁰ Ministry of Education and Science. (1994c).

²¹ Ministry of Education and Science. (1998a). p. 8.

²² Pramling Samuelsson, I. & Sheridan, S. (2004).

the school system. All three curricula start with a chapter on *Fundamental values*, the *Task* for preschools and schools and definitions of the concepts of knowledge and learning. As a democratic country, Sweden considers education to be an important part, if not the most important, in raising children into democratic citizens. The following fundamental values provide the democratic foundation of the Swedish society:

“Each and everyone working in preschool should promote respect for the intrinsic value of each person as well as respect for our shared environment. ...

The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between the genders as well as solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are all values that the school shall actively promote in its work with children.”²³

All who work in preschool and school should uphold these values and take action when they are challenged. Sweden has over the last 25 years become a multicultural society. In the Stockholm region, 25% of the preschool children have one or two parents with a foreign background. We have people living in our country from all parts of the world. The official policy promotes integration and co-existence, multiculturalism is an asset and variation and multiplicity have become normality. *“All residents should be offered equal opportunities to participate in the Swedish society, with all that this means in terms of rights, obligations and opportunities.”²⁴*

On the other hand 25 years is a short period for such radical changes. Integration cannot be created for others, it is about interplay. Out of this interplay a societal development that is characterised by mutual respect and tolerance can grow. As yet, we have not fulfilled our political ideas leaving many immigrants, refugees, new and old Swedes in segregated settings. We have preschools and schools where the teachers are the only native Swedes! This is one more reason why the curricula so clearly state the primary goal to be fostering for democracy.

The second chapter in the three curricula is called *Goals and guidelines*. The goals in the preschool curriculum are set up as goals to be aimed at. They set out directions for the work of the preschool and contain targets for quality development in the preschool. The goals also stipulate what preschools should aim at in terms of the individual development and learning of the child. There are five sections in this Goal-chapter; the very first section deals with *Norms and values*, again stressing the importance of early childhood education for bringing up democratic children. The next section is called *Development and learning*. Here, a clear educational responsibility is put on preschools, thus stressing the pedagogical task, which was one of the major political ideas in the reform. The other sections are called *Influence of the child*, *Preschool and home* and *Co-operation with the preschool class, the school and the after school centre*.

Differences between the National Curricula

There are also differences between the three curricula. One difference has to do with the fact that children are of different ages and thus the goals are defined with different structure. The curricula provide goals to strive towards, goals which give the direction for the work in preschools and schools and for necessary quality development. The two school curricula also define goals to achieve, with which follows the responsibility to assess each child in terms of grades and evaluation. In preschools, the outcome of the individual child will not be formally assessed. One reason for this is that children attend preschool differently. Some start preschool when they turn 1 and spend 6-8 hours in the preschool most week-days until they turn 6. Other children just spend 1-2 years, three hours daily, in preschool. And, the Preschool curriculum guides the educational work for all children. With this flexibility only goals to strive towards are found to be helpful.

²³ Ministry of Education and Science. (1998a). p.7.

²⁴ Swedish Integration Board. (2004).

In Sweden, official grades are not given until the 8th grade, when children are 14. In the primary years, teachers invite the parents and the children to developmental talks every term about everyday life and performance in school and at home. Children are developing and learning in a continuous process and their identity and self esteem grow over the years. Using official grades too early is considered detrimental since some children can be categorised and stigmatised. Young children are not yet fully aware of the difference between 'I am' and 'I do', and this can have a negative effect on the modelling of their selves.

Another major difference between the curricula has to do with leadership and teachers. The preschool curriculum does not contain binding directions for the heads of the preschools, where this is found in the other two curricula. The running of preschools is organised and decided by local politicians, not by an ordinance from the government. The responsibility for the education is given to *teams of teachers* in preschools, whereas *the single teacher* is responsible in the school curricula. There were plans to strengthen the concept of working in teams in schools too, but this was not accepted by the Teacher Unions.

Implementing the curriculum in local preschools

In-service training and discussions

The first national curriculum for preschools has been very appreciated among all different parts of the society, including preschool teachers. According to research on curriculum implementation, major effects are usually not found within the first 10 – 15 years, but the preschool curriculum has had an effect already after five years.²⁵ The teachers like the fact that the curricula clearly describes established traditions in Early Childhood Education in Sweden as well as points out challenges based on recent research. Thus, a professional language for Early Childhood Education has been established which has improved the status to the preschools. During the first five years, most municipalities have repeatedly organised in-service training in order to discuss and to implement the curriculum. Sometimes, this has been in collaboration with school teachers to ensure the continuity for the children when they start school. The formation has enhanced the teachers ability to express what they do and why.²⁶

In my own town, Lidingö outside of Stockholm, the in-service training was organised in different steps. The heads of the preschools formed one group of selected representatives of teachers from different preschools formed other groups. Discussions were introduced on all parts of the curriculum. What is new? What is old, good, hard to understand etc? How does each one of us understand the task for preschools – laying the foundations for life-long learning and ensuring each child an education which is secure, enjoyable and rich in learning?

These representatives were later to arrange similar discussions among the staff in their preschool. The goal was put for each preschool to finish the process of writing a local work-plan by the end of the first year. A joint structure was decided for all the preschools which included the national goals in each section to facilitate the reading for the parents. The main target group for the work-plans was the parents, as a starting point for discussions.

Let me give you one example from Högsåtra preschool.²⁷ This is a preschool for 75 children aged 1-5 years, located in a multicultural area with mixed buildings. After a number of meetings and discussions the staff presented their preschool like this:

²⁵ National Agency for Education. (2004c).

²⁶ Pramling Samuelsson, I. & Sheridan, S. (2004).

²⁷ Högsåtra förskola. (1999).

“The possibilities of multiplicity – Högsätra preschool – in the centre of the world”

The first part in the work plan is linked to the section on Norms and Values in the curriculum. The national goals to strive towards are:

- *“openness, respect, solidarity and responsibility,*
- *the ability to take account of and empathise with the situation of others as well as a willingness to help others,*
- *their ability to discover, reflect on and work out their position on different ethical dilemmas and fundamental questions of life in daily reality,*
- *an understanding that all persons have equal value independent of gender, social or ethnic background and*
- *respect for all forms of life as well as care for the surrounding environment.”²⁸*

The teachers worked in mixed groups discussing the meaning of the goals, what they already did, what needed improvement and how to describe this in writing to parents. This is the result:

“Children are eager to learn, positive and curious. They are active and they use all their senses and all different kinds of languages in their play. They are spontaneous and show their feelings. Fantasy is close in the world of play.

Högsätra preschool lies in the centre of the world, very close to nature. By spending much time outdoors following the changes in nature, we have many natural opportunities to see the cycle of seasons and to discuss vital questions.

By being sensitive to the children’s thoughts and wishes we meet them with respect and individually in their every-day life. Norms and values, moral and ethics are best made clear and conveyed in natural situations. We handle questions and conflicts when they occur and we talk together with the children about what is right and wrong and how to come forward.

Adults are models for the children and the children to a great extent do what we adults do. That is why the national goals above also express what we adults strive towards.”²⁹

There was lots of laughter when the sentence about adults as role-models was brought up. Someone wanted to write: *“We try to be good models”*, which got the comment: *“Not all of us, some don’t try and some aren’t good!”* This of course led on to a discussion if it is OK to work in a preschool if you don’t try. The work plan shows a very ambitious approach. As it is written by the teachers themselves, and not stated in an ordinance, chances are better that the teachers really will understand the meaning and will work hard to reach their goals.

The concept of the child

Many discussions throughout Sweden have concentrated on a new approach to view children. A frequently quoted attachment to the school curriculum committee of 1994 describes two different dominant views of children: *Children as sprung from Nature* and *Children as Reproducers of culture and knowledge.*³⁰

When you consider the child as sprung from nature, the content is focused on social, emotional, motor and psychological processes. You stress the daily routines in order to foster a capable group member. The underlying assumption is that children, as the nature, are mostly biologically

²⁸ Ministry of Education and Science. (1998a). p.11.

²⁹ Högsätra förskola. (1999). p.7. (own translation)

³⁰ Dahlberg, G. & Lenz Taguchi, H. (1994).

run. They will grow and mature in their own pace, and we adults should just make sure there is lots of time for free play, preferably outside. But where lays the cognitive challenge? This tradition is often found in preschools.

If you on the other hand look upon the child as a reproducer of culture and knowledge, the content is subject oriented, focusing on the cognitive processes of the child. It is rational, as opposed to emotional and the activities are related to specific goals. The underlying assumption here is that children come empty to school and they need to be taught everything (the teachers know). Where is the challenge to become a complete human being with social skills and in contact with the emotions? This tradition is mostly found in schools.

Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi describe a third possible way to look upon the child; “*the child as a producer of culture and knowledge*”.³¹ Here, you must recognise the child as a human being with her/his own rights. Children have the same value as adults and in many ways adults have lots to learn from children. The content will be decided by children and teachers together because you start with the children’s own thoughts and questions and you have to listen to what they try to communicate. This way to look upon children is inspired by, among others, the educational philosopher Loris Malaguzzi, one of the founders of the preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy.³²

Teachers have to be aware of and listen to the 100 languages of children, to disregard pre-suppositions and to involve children in communication. This includes learning how to argue, negotiate and criticise. An overall goal is a collaborative creation of meaning, as opposed to passing on facts. Thus learning is considered to be a process, best reached when working in projects and with themes. This view of children in fact also gives the teachers a new role - the child and the pedagogue as constructors and co-researchers.³³

Children are no longer viewed as objects, to be taken care of by adults. Children are active and intentional subjects. Right from birth they are occupied with trying to capture and to understand the world in an ever ongoing developmental learning process. Their construction of knowledge emanates from their own experiences. It involves the whole body and, is at the same time both social and cultural. Learning is always taking place in a context, social, physical and psychological. The result – the knowledge - can be understood as a relation between the child and her surroundings.³⁴

According to recent psychological studies children have a capacity to communicate and build relations to a larger number of people than was thought earlier.³⁵ Without neglecting the importance of strong relations to the parents and other family members, children now have broader possibilities. Children today take part in many different situations and social contexts. In Sweden, 40 % of the children start preschool when they turn one. Here, they meet lots of children, their parents and siblings and of course lots of teachers and they do make lots of new friends. Children are born with a competence for and an interest in being together. They have the ability to relate to others, to take other people’s wishes and perspectives into account.³⁶

Early childhood education is about getting to know yourself and others, to develop a personal identity and to capture the surrounding world.³⁷ Sometimes, the individual wishes are in conflict

³¹ Dahlberg, G. & Lenz Taguchi, H. (1994). p.21.

³² Reggio Children. (2004).

³³ Reggio Children. (2001).

³⁴ Johansson, E. & Pramling Samuelsson, I. (2003).

³⁵ Pramling, I. (1993).

³⁶ Sommer, D. (1997).

³⁷ Brodin, M. & Hylander, I. (1997).

with the common good, sometimes they go well along. These dual aspects of social life are necessary and well provided in educational settings. It seems like the many variations children meet daily are the challenging sources for exploration and an eagerness to learn.³⁸

An example of an active, competent child

Mathias, 14 months, is outdoors together with other children and with teachers. He starts crawling up a staircase leading up to a platform, attached to a suspension bridge. From the bridge he can reach another platform and finally a slide leading down into the sand again. From the very start the teacher encourages Mathias: "What a good boy!". He smiles towards her. Some children pass Mathias, almost bouncing into him. He almost stops crawling but, with the help of the encouraging teacher, he continues and finally reaches the platform, where there is a gap to the bridge. The teacher moves to the other side and says: "Come here!". Cautiously, Mathias crawls onto the bridge, the adult follows. The bridge is swinging while other children pass. Mathias stands up and balances away. The adult studies him carefully and says: "Hold on here!", showing him a rope. Slowly, Mathias manages to reach the other platform. The teacher again quickly moves to a new side to meet him.

Some older children are waiting for their turn to slide down. Mathias waits, sits down, is helped by the adult to turn around and goes down the slide on his stomach. "How clever you are!" the pedagogue says once again.

Mathias immediately stands up again and repeats the procedure around the climbing frame two more times, quicker and more secure for each lap.

The teacher follows him the whole time, smiles, jokes and supports him. Mathias smiles too. He has conquered the Slide!³⁹

When analysing the situation, maybe you start out by thinking that the climbing frame is too large for Mathias, who is just 14 months old. Shouldn't the adult discourage him from trying such a dangerous task? Well, some adults might, but here we are in a preschool, with a preschool teacher recognising the wish, the intent and the competence of Mathias. She makes it possible for him to try out his intentions. It is also evident that the pedagogue does not separate different aspects of Mathias development; social, motor, emotional and cognitive aspects are intertwined. Learning is an interactive process leaning on communication. The conclusion tells us something important about the competent child and about the importance of a sensitive teacher:

"Without the adults accompanying, this learning episode had not been possible and, without the child's active involvement, the learning had never taken place."⁴⁰

Taking the perspective of the child

The concept of child perspective has been raised in relation to the UN convention on the Rights of the Child⁴¹ and is also noted in the Swedish preschool curriculum. Taking the child's perspective has to do with studying children's social relationships and cultures in their own right apart from the perspective and concerns of adults. Child perspective can also be looked upon and discussed as children's accounts of their own lived life, which means taking into consideration children's accounts as well as the process of understanding children's views as part of the discussion.⁴²

³⁸ Doverborg, E. & Pramling, I. (1995).

³⁹ Pramling Samuelsson, I. & Lindahl, M. (1999).p.107. (own translation, somewhat shortened)

⁴⁰ Pramling Samuelsson, I. & Lindahl, M. (1999). p. 112.(own translation)

⁴¹ UN Convention. (1989).

⁴² Halldén, G. 2003.

Yet another way to define the child's perspective takes into account the child's experiences, intentions and expressions of meaning that is "*the phenomena that might become visible for the child*".⁴³ It is important to take the wholeness of the physical child into account as well as the entire situation when interpreting children's actions as expressions of a child's perspective. This includes the child's experiencing and expressing of meaning. Taking the child's perspective also means establishing a close relation, something which takes time. Closeness is attained through sensitivity and respect for a child's integrity. One teacher, when being interviewed about how she look upon child perspective said:

"I don't think I can put myself 100% into a child's perspective. No, because I have too much in my personal baggage that I have accumulated in my working years but, I think, if you're a teacher who's involved with children's play, if you're right there, if you take part in their games not as a teacher but as a participant then you're coming some way towards getting a child's perspective. Again, when you're in that position where you play together with the children discussing with them that they feel free that they can involve you. Show the children that you also are prepared to come into the playhouse to sit down and have tea with them then you're coming some way towards getting the child's perspective. I think, it's naive to believe that you really can see things from a children's view but you can try you can make an effort!"⁴⁴

Understanding the children's perspective involves different dilemmas and ambitions. Being a teacher is to value and encourage children's learning in their own terms. However, there are situations in early childhood education where the teacher makes decisions that are in conflict with a child's intentions. Some teachers interpret the curriculum to mean that the child's perspective shall be an integrated part of their teaching and their educational goals. Other teachers still seem to view the child's perspective as an obstacle for their teaching.⁴⁵ An example could be the teacher who is about to read a story for some children. One of the children has brought a book, but the teacher tells her to put the book away and starts reading the book the teacher had picked out her/himself. The ambition to do good in educational work with children may hinder the possibilities to understand how the world really looks from the child's perspective, a true challenge for praxis.⁴⁶

The curriculum not only asks teachers to take the perspective of the child. The section about *The influence of the child* defines the children's right to participate in the planning and decision making in the preschool. Taking the child's perspective is a serious question about a chosen approach. This is really how democracy is born! Children express meaningful things and the task is to try to interpret and to understand the intentions and meanings behind. With this knowledge the teacher shall create genuine meetings where learning processes may occur but also arrange situations which challenge the children.⁴⁷ Influence is about picking up on children's suggestions and interests as teachable moments. Teachable moments can be described as activities or learning situations that arise from a child's suggestion or an experience and that are led by a teacher in a way that supports the learning and development processes.

Children's influence can be used as a pedagogical tool. They influence their surroundings in direct ways through bringing forward their suggestions about different activities or other things verbally and, thus, causing a change in a teacher's timetable, for example. But children also influence their surrounding in indirect ways, which might also cause changes in teachers' plans. Children might not be in the mood and often influence a preschool day with their feelings as they

⁴³ Johansson, E. (2003).

⁴⁴ Malkamäki, T. (2004), p.21.

⁴⁵ Johansson, E. (2003).

⁴⁶ Qvarsell, B. (2003).

⁴⁷ Pramling Samuelsson, I. & Asplund Carlsson, M. (2003).

express their emotions constantly. It is a great advantage if children learn to express themselves verbally. However, children don't always use words to show their feelings and sometimes, just from a child's appearance, a teacher can interpret what he or she is feeling and then respond to this.

It is also fruitful to ask the children; children have lots of thoughts and ideas:

*"We sometimes ask the children to suggest what they would like to do or when they would like to do something that you planned for them to do. So they speak and they will tell you what are their plans and their interests so that, of course, will help you write your plans."*⁴⁸

Children often bring forward suggestions of things that they can relate to or things, which they have experienced at home if they are encouraged. They might have been baking at home or read a new story with their parents or been to the circus. This brings many new suggestions about what to play. Teachers should pick up on these suggestions and make it clear for the children what they may choose from. Influence is also about choices. During a preschool day children get to make choices among several activities and games that they want to play. They also get to choose things within teaching moments, such as what colour paper they would like to paint on or what sort of a writing utensil they prefer to use. That way the children have the opportunity to influence an activity that the teacher has planned.

It is also important that the children themselves feel that they are participating and have influence. They need to be seen and to feel that they are a valued part of the group so they want to share and be involved with what is going on. In order for the child to feel that he or she can participate and have an influence on the preschool day, it is important that both the teachers and the other children listen to them. In preschools of high quality, children are aware of their own participation and that they influence the everyday life.⁴⁹

Preschool children consider most decisions to be made by adults with one exception – in the realm of play. While playing, children can decide what to play and with whom, even if they are aware of the fact that they may not make decisions for their friends. Doing what you want includes communication; thinking, expressing, discussing and listening together with other children. Fantasy and creativity are involved when children play. In the process, children exercise power but they also negotiate to find out what most of the children really want to do. Important decisions about what is allowed and what is forbidden are also made. The processes above are all related to having influence and while playing, children learn a lot together. They participate as co-learners.⁵⁰

The concepts of Knowledge and Learning

The new Swedish curricula have broadened the concept of knowledge. One hundred years ago, knowledge was considered to be objective and permanent, something that could be passed on, learned-by-heart. A teacher could lean on her formal education, her knowledge would last all her professional life. Today, knowledge includes so much more; the amount of knowledge grows very quickly and it even becomes out-of-date. We live in a society with rich access to information and knowledge, which is not only found in schools and universities as before. New media invite us into new experiences. We travel around the world and sometimes we know more about someone in another country than about our neighbours. Children become experts in different fields and they often know more than their parents and their teachers. All in all, this

⁴⁸ Malkamäki, T. (2004), p.25.

⁴⁹ Johansson, E. & Pramling Samuelsson, I. (2003).

⁵⁰ Williams, P., Sheridan, S. & Pramling Samuelsson, I. (2001).

development of the society calls for new definitions of knowledge and of the task for preschools and schools.

*“Knowledge is a complex concept, which can be expressed in a variety of forms – as facts, understanding, skills, familiarity and experience – all of which presuppose and interact with each other. The starting point for the preschool is the experience children have already gained, their interests, motivation and compulsion to acquire knowledge.”*⁵¹

Professor Pramling Samuelsson, who has been engaged in research within Early Childhood Education during the last 25 years, recently summarised her position in a *Developmental Pedagogical Theory*.⁵² Teachers do no longer have the task to shape the child, to model them into some sort of ideal. In stead, they should direct their efforts towards the conditions in which learning take place and strive towards understanding. Learning is a process which grows if it is communicated, when discussed on a meta-level. Children need to talk and to reflect over their own thoughts and experiences. Children are unique, and this gives the teacher – and the children – a great variation of ideas and opinions in every situation. Using this multiplicity consciously, the teacher works with many different perspectives, thoughts and ideas. These perspectives can be used in natural or arranged situations where they certainly will challenge the children’s thinking.

*“A sense of exploration, curiosity and desire to learn should form the foundations for pedagogical activities. These should be based on the child’s experiences, interests, needs and views. The flow of the child’s thoughts and ideas should be used to create variety in learning.”*⁵³

But it is not just a question of picking up on the children’s ideas and wishes. The national curriculum lay down specific aspects of the world which children are supposed to develop an understanding of. These aspects are also put down as goals and guidelines in the curriculum. The fact that there is a specific curriculum that must be followed has become problematic for some preschool teachers. They seem to take for granted that when the curriculum mentions learning objectives, we are back to the old-fashioned school methods. Methods, that are so different from the holistic, inclusive pedagogical activities that they are used to.⁵⁴ Preschool teachers in Sweden don’t call their work “teaching”, although with a modern definition, we accept the task.

The process of formulating work-plans and methodology in accordance with the curriculum and within a changed society must continue. Teaching could be redefined from mediation – passing on certain knowledge - to something like *intentionally chosen pedagogical goal-directed acts*.⁵⁵

*“The teacher has a clear “teaching” role, that is, to work intentionally to develop the child’s learning of values, skills and an understanding of different aspects of the world around them.”*⁵⁶

An important step for Swedish preschool teachers to take is to become aware of the focused content in education and also to develop the skill to communicate their intentions. In the British project, *Effective Provision in Preschool Education – EPPE* the researchers talk about “*shared sustainable thinking*”.⁵⁷ Shared sustainable thinking means that the child – or children – and the teacher share the same focus of attention. Communicating around this shared focus seems to

⁵¹ Ministry of Education and Science. (1998a). p.10.

⁵² Pramling Samuelsson, I. & Asplund Carlsson, M. (2003).

⁵³ Ministry of Education and Science. (1998a). p.12.

⁵⁴ Pramling Samuelsson, I. & Sheridan, S. (2004).

⁵⁵ SOU. (1997b).

⁵⁶ Pramling Samuelsson, I. & Sheridan, S. (2004).p.16.

⁵⁷ Siraj Blatchford, I. et al. (2002).

enhance learning in a way similar to the sort of meta-communication Pramling Samuelsson previously has shown to be effective.⁵⁸

An example of shared sustainable thinking

The preschool curriculum requests teachers to document pedagogical activity in order to make them more explicit and thus provide an important basis for discussions, among teachers and with children and parents, and a background for assessment of the quality of activities and the need for development.⁵⁹ The following is an example of how the teacher asked the children to document their ideas by drawing them. The teacher then used the drawings as pedagogical tools for her pedagogical talks with the group of preschool children, aged three and four years.

During the circle-time, one of the children asks what they will be having for lunch. Spaghetti (Noodles) is the reply from one of the other children. Somewhat later, Johan (a boy) says that he has seen a Spaghetti-bush!, a comment which makes the teacher start a conversation during the circle-time about this Spaghetti-bush. Johan saw the bush on television. It was small and the spaghetti was collected in baskets. Britta (a girl) knows that spaghetti grows in China. Petter (a boy) denies this and tells that he and his grandmother have bought spaghetti in a store. Linus (another boy) says that spaghetti does not grow, it is found within the stomach of a cow. This is denied by the girl Stina. She says it grows in the country-side. The teacher thanks everyone for the exciting information and suggests that everyone will draw a picture and tell about where spaghetti comes from.

All children make a drawing about their thoughts. When they have all finished, the teacher gathers them again. Everyone shows and tells about her/his picture. There are many different ideas about the origin of spaghetti! Together with the children, the teacher sorts the drawings into three categories; You buy spaghetti in a store, It grows in the nature or It grows inside an animal.

Many children say that spaghetti comes from the store. They know there are different kinds, long, short, in the shape of butterflies, shells or winds, and they come in separate packets. They can also have different colours. All the children in this category are certain that spaghetti comes from the store – but they have no ideas where it was prior to the store.

Some children think that spaghetti grows on bushes of different size and shape, which is the explanation to why spaghetti can be of different kinds. How they know this? Calle (a boy) has seen it on television. Another child tells that spaghetti grows in rows and you pick it by breaking just the size you want.

There are a couple of children drawing the spaghetti inside a sheep or a cow. How does it get out? Well, they do pooh-pooh, of course! That information comes from a comic magazine. Some of the children who think spaghetti is inside a sheep tell that it comes out through the fur. This was also shown on television. When you want spaghetti, you simply cut the fur the length you want.⁶⁰

Analysing the episode, you can see that the teacher makes the children speak up and reflect simply by encouraging Johan when he starts on his story. She asks him to tell more, giving him time to reflect. Her strong interest invites the other children into the discussion. The teacher makes clear that all conceptions are welcome; there are no rights and wrongs.

⁵⁸ Doverborg, E. & Pramling, I. (1993).

⁵⁹ Ministry of Education and Science. (1998a). p.4.

⁶⁰ Doverborg, E. & Anstett, S. (2003). (own translation, shortened)

The next step is asking the children to draw their ideas – documenting their thoughts. The drawings show a great variety among the explanations and it is easy for the teacher to make this obvious to the children. Each child shows a drawing and the process of categorising them ascertains that detailed observations are being made. During the discussion they agree on consulting the encyclopaedia where it is told that spaghetti is produced. “OK, just like bread then. You can do your own or you can buy it in a store.” This comment from one child leads on to the project Making your own spaghetti, and the activities are again documented. Together the children make and eat all different kinds of spaghetti. There are lots of very detailed drawings of the borrowed pasta machine on the walls and in the children’s homes. Not only have the children’s ideas been challenged during this project. The children have developed new knowledge and in different forms, as fact and skills, as well as new understanding and experiences. It has been possible thanks to the great variations of ideas that started the project and because of a present, encouraging and sensitive teacher. Or as it is put in the curriculum:

*“The preschool should be characterised by a pedagogical approach, where care, nurturing and learning together form a coherent whole. ... Activities should promote play, creativity and enjoyment in learning as well as focus on and strengthen the child’s interest in learning and mastering new experiences, knowledge and skills.”*⁶¹

By documenting the whole project in writing, the teacher later made it possible for the team of teachers to reflect upon the children’s concepts and thoughts and, to share the work with the parents – and with us!

Challenges for the future

A tendency towards a more school oriented focus

Another part of the reforms – the preschool class for 6-year olds – has also been evaluated.⁶² The intentions here were to stress the importance of play and creative activities for young learners and to let the holistic approach in early childhood education influence the primary years. In some preschool classes, with well established traditions from preschool, this process is ongoing. Teams of teachers with Early childhood, primary or after school training, work together to implement the reformed curriculum. However, the result also shows something else. The school tradition has had a very heavy impact on the daily lives for the 6-year olds. In too many preschool classes, the way to schedule the day, to organise the classroom and to stress formal learning are dominated by school traditions, not preschool. Play is scarce. The preschool class, although a separate form of school, is headed by the local school manager and is in most cases located in regular classrooms in schools. There is a tendency of lacking support from local politicians or from heads of schools to implement the intended reforms. Old school traditions are too strong.

After five years with the curriculum, the aim to strengthen the pedagogical task for preschools seems already fulfilled.⁶³ Learning and teaching activities are taking place. One explanation has to do with the local organisation. Preschools have become parts of the local school system. Sometimes they have the head of the local school. In the suggested process of building continuity between preschool and school, the school vocabulary and the school rules are often followed even in preschools. If the preschool tradition about integrating care, nurture and learning to a coherent whole shall last, one must take the reports about “schoolifying” the Swedish preschools very seriously.

⁶¹ Ministry of Education and Science. (1998a). p.12.

⁶² National Agency for Education. (2001).

⁶³ National Agency for Education. (2004c)

Increased focus on individual assessment

One aspect that was found during the national evaluation,⁶⁴ which was not aimed at in the preschool reform, is about an increased individualisation. Surprisingly many preschools and municipalities make surveys of the each child's development within different areas. Many local politicians have translated the later-coming grades and assessment into educational or developmental plans for primary children. These plans are now also requested for children in preschool. The plans are modelled from a school stage where the curriculum includes goals to attain. Although there are no goals to attain in the preschool curriculum, as previously mentioned, the same structure and ambition has been adopted in preschools.

One preschool for instance has defined goals to attain linked to the national goal "*The preschool should try to ensure that children... develop their motor skills, ability to co-ordinate, and awareness of their own body...*"⁶⁵

The preschool in question interprets and specifies this by supporting each child to achieve a good motor development during their preschool stay. The goal is reached (attained) when: "*all 5-year olds can run and stop on demand, on demand quickly can change their movement and know the 18 most usual parts of the body*".⁶⁶ Whereas this may be one way of making the curriculum goal more precise, there is an immediate risk that the local goals are interpreted as tests that each child must pass. This in turn may adversely affect the way the activities in the preschool are organised. Goals to obtain, as described above, are not coherent with the intentions in the curriculum, which clearly states that the outcome of the individual child shall not be formally assessed in terms of grades and evaluation.

If the observations are made as a way to document the pedagogical activities, and, if the documentation is used for planning and development, this is all very well. But in too many cases the observations turn the focus towards children's shortcomings or deficiencies. They are used in a process of normalisation, pinpointing lacks in individual children. The observations in a way point out the child, or her/his family, as a problem, not living up to normal standards. But, with the new view on how learning is taking place, constructed in specific contexts, focus should be put more on the education and on the conditions for good quality instead of focusing the individual child.⁶⁷

In Sweden, the leading psychological and pedagogical theories during the last thirty years stress interaction and co-operation. Still, the old psychological school of assessing individual children within certain frames and stages, is very strong. If something problematic occurs, teachers still tend to pin the reasons on the children. Instead of saying for instance "*Peter has a hard time concentrating on his tasks*" teachers could ask Why is Peter so bored in this environment? Which learning style could better reach him? What have I misunderstood? What new ways could we try?⁶⁸ In stead of talking about children's lack of concentration skills and boredom, teachers could ask themselves why the environment is so meagre and poor and why the teaching is so monotonous and repetitive.

Variations in quality

In a decentralised school system, as we have in Sweden, local variation is expected and welcome. Decentralisation enables local politicians and teachers to adapt their preschools and schools to the different local and individual needs. However, the national evaluation shows that local authorities don't always take varying conditions into account when they allocate resources.

⁶⁴ National Agency for Education. (2004c).

⁶⁵ Ministry of Education and Science. (1998a). p.13.

⁶⁶ National Agency for Education. (2004:c).p.134.

⁶⁷ Dahlberg, G., Moss, P. & Pence, A. (1999).

⁶⁸ Nordin-Hultman, E. (2004).

Conditions that should influence the resources are for instance the socio-economic settings, the parents willingness to co-operate with the preschools, the proportion of immigrants, the number of children with special needs and the level of the pedagogues education. The report quotes the following paragraph from the preschool curriculum:

*“Account should be taken of the varying conditions and needs of children. This means that the preschool cannot be organised in the same way everywhere, and that the resources of the preschool need not be distributed equally.”*⁶⁹

The report concludes that local municipalities must take this provision into account in the future and a further recommendation is to involve the preschool professionals more in the decision-making.

Redefining play and learning within preschool pedagogy

Play is one of the foundations in Early Childhood Education, children play everywhere and all the time. But play had another meaning in the context of the early Kindergartens. The perspective of *play* has changed just as *learning* and *knowledge* have been redefined. Nowadays, involvement, concentration, having fun, using all senses, starting from the child's suggestions and being together is characteristic for both play and learning.

For children playing is a goal in itself; they play to create meaning in their lives. Teachers on the other hand tend to put up goals for the play, a different angle that shows how close play and learning have come. Play-ful education is of course better than boring education! You choose to play, it is voluntary and fun, while learning during lessons in school is not always perceived that way. Yet, you learn most when you have fun. Creativity and fantasy are other characteristics for play and nowadays researchers often link creativity with learning.⁷⁰ Play in a curriculum directed preschool must be related to the objects of learning and the content worked on, otherwise children might as well play at home.⁷¹ Just as development and learning are now seen as a joint, intertwined process, maybe early childhood education in the next decade will be built on an integration of play and learning.

⁶⁹ Ministry of Education and Science. (1998a).p.8.

⁷⁰ Pramling Samuelsson, I. & Asplund Carlsson, M. (2003).

⁷¹ Pramling Samuelsson, I. & Sheridan, S. (2004).

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