

Abstract

The aim of this research is to acquire knowledge about fostering young children, as expressed in everyday interactions between teachers and children in Swedish preschools. The three empirical studies in this doctoral thesis investigated partly specific democratic values such as participation and influence and partly the values that teachers explicitly or implicitly encourage and how these values are communicated to children. The thesis takes a critical approach in order to also acquire knowledge about important fostering aspects that can move hierarchal power structures towards a fostering of values characterized by intersubjectivity. In order to understand the interactions, the concepts of communicative and strategic action (Habermas, 1984) are used, as well as strong and weak classification and framing (Bernstein, 2000). Preschool fostering is also analyzed from a double perspective, with a starting-point in Habermas' (1984, 1995a) concepts of the system and the life-world. The fieldwork took place with three different groups of toddlers in Swedish preschools. Forty-six children (aged 1 to 3 years) participated, as well as their ten teachers. The data consisted of videotaped observations of teacher and child interactions. The first study investigated how a toddler's participation can be understood in two kinds of educational activities where the degree of teacher control differs. The results showed how strong classification and framing risk restricting children's participation and how a weak classification and framing can promote children's opportunities to participate on their own terms. Important issues for children's participation were found to be a participant teacher who creates meaningful contexts, where teacher control is about being emotionally present, supportive and responsive. The purpose of the second study was to investigate how very young children can exert an influence in circle-time situations in relation to teacher control. The results showed that the children do, in fact, make choices, mostly based on several fixed alternatives, and that they do take the initiative, sometimes to express an opinion or a right, sometimes to express what they want to do in circle time. It was also found that the influence young children are able to exert varies with the control the teacher exercises. It is evident that strong teacher control is maintained in different ways and that strong control does not necessarily limit children's influence; it depends on the nature of the control. Children's influence increases when the teacher's control over the what and how aspects of communications is weak, and is characterized by closeness to the child's life-world and a communicative approach. The third study examined the values that teachers explicitly or implicitly encourage and how these values are communicated

to children. The analyses resulted in ten specific values embedded in value dimensions of discipline, caring and democracy. These, in turn, can be divided into different social orientations – both collective and individualistic. The values are communicated differently and the *what* aspect of the communication (the value) is interrelated with the *how* aspect of the communication; how teachers communicate influences and sometimes changes the communicated value. In order to change power structures in teacher and child interactions, three aspects of importance have been identified: teachers' closeness to the child's perspective, their emotional presence and playfulness. Theoretically, the aspects are within the framework of communicative action and contribute to the understanding of what the theory might mean in communication with the youngest children in the educational system.