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*World Organisation for Early Childhood Education (OMEP)*
RECENT ISSUES IN THE SWEDISH PRESCHOOL

Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson and Sonja Sheridan

SUMMARY

In Sweden most of the young children are in preschool from early years. The government has taken responsibility by introducing different reforms such as child allowance, maternity leave, access to preschool for all children etc. Preschool (in Sweden for children aged 1-5 years and preschool class for 6 years old) is, since 1998, the first step in the educational system with a national curriculum (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a). The local education authorities have now had five years to launch the curriculum.

Reforms that provide support for families started before World War II, but as they culminated during a period of increasing effectiveness in combination with harsh economies in the public sector they are experienced by the teachers both as quality improvements and quality threats. The quality of preschool is a matter of concern at both a national and local level, although most parents appear to be satisfied. In the process of evaluating preschool quality in Gothenburg (Sweden’s second largest city) focus groups were developed with representatives from the 21 city districts. The results of the focus group analyses are presented and discussed in the present article.

RÉSUMÉ


Des réformes pour procurer une aide aux familles ont commencé avant la 2e guerre mondiale mais, à cause du fait qu’elles ont culminé pendant une période de rigueur économique, elles ont été vécues par les enseignants comme étant à la fois des améliorations et des menaces. La qualité du préscolaire concerne à la fois le plan national et le plan local ; en fait la plupart des parents s’en contentent. Pour procéder à l’évaluation de la qualité du préscolaire à Gothenburg (la seconde grande ville de Suède), un groupe d’observation s’est développé avec des représentants de 21 arrondissements urbains. Les résultats des analyses de ce groupe sont présentés et discutés dans le présent article.

RESUMEN

En Suecia la mayoría de los niños pequeños, desde temprana edad, asisten al preescolar. El gobierno ha tomado la responsabilidad introduciendo diferentes reformas tales como asignación por niño; permiso materno; acceso para todos los niños al nivel preescolar, etc. El nivel Preescolar (en Suecia incluye a niños de 1 a 5 años y la clase preescolar para niños de 6 años) es desde 1998, el primer nivel del sistema educacional que tiene un curriculum nacional (Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia de Suecia, 1998a). Las autoridades educacionales locales tienen ahora cinco años para el lanzamiento del curriculum.
Las reformas para apoyar a las familias se iniciaron antes de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, pero estas se terminaron después de un período económico muy duro en el sector público. Los profesores frente a las últimas reformas experimentaron tanto una sensación de mejoramiento como de amenazas en la calidad. La calidad del preescolar les corresponde a ambos, nivel local y nacional, y la mayoría de los padres están satisfechos al respecto. En el proceso de evaluación de la calidad del preescolar en Gotenburgo (la segunda ciudad más grande de Suecia) se desarrollaron focus group con representantes de 21 distritos. Los resultados de los análisis de los focus group son presentados y discutidos en el presente artículo.

**KEYWORDS:** Preschool, Quality, Reforms

**The issues to be dealt with**

Kindergarten as an educational concept developed from Fröbel’s ideas about the child and children’s rights to a good start in life. His ideas have been spread nearly all over the world, even though early childhood education has taken different cultural and contextual forms depending on time, needs, interests and intentions of society for its growing generation (Gunnarsson, 1993).

Today preschool is the first step in the Swedish educational system and from an international perspective considered to be of high quality (OECD, 2001). The societal position has been preceded by a prolonged process based on different reforms, research and documents stating the rights of the child, such as the UN Convention (1989).

The aim of this article is to discuss recent issues in the Swedish preschool from a perspective of quality and to give a retrospective view of these reforms that have contributed to the quality of preschool at the same time as they are experienced as a threat towards it. A specific focus will be directed towards the latest reforms, which are the “Maximum fee”, the public preschool reform, and the right of every child to be in preschool even when their parents are unemployed or have parental leave. We will also look at the implementation of the national curriculum (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a) in relation to questions in terms of children’s learning and knowledge formation.

The main question addressed is: How do representatives from preschool experience different reforms and the contribution these make to the pedagogical quality of preschool?

**Reforms of significance to preschool as an educational setting of high quality**

In Sweden different forms of early childhood education existed on a rather limited base until 1960s, which was the start of an explosive expansion of mainly day-care that developed when the call for an enlarged workforce was directed towards the women, which in turn required a safe place for the child. So, even if the historical start of Kindergarten (as it once was called also in Sweden) was based on its presumed benefits for the child, its expansion in both
Sweden and other westernized countries can be related more to the need of an available and mainly female flexible workforce.

Thanks to the enormous expansion preschool became an important part of Swedish society, especially the civil sector. Throughout the past decades different reforms have been initiated and taken together they have prepared the way for making preschool part of the Swedish educational system.

The government has for a long time taken the responsibility for the life and development of young children by introducing several key economic and structural reforms. These include the introduction of: child allowance in 1946; maternity leave in 1974, which today is 480 days to be shared by both parents; in 1994 access to preschool for all children who’s parents ask for it; and from 2003 an Act of Parliament giving each child the right to participate in preschool activities from the age of four, even if their parents are out of work or on maternity leave for another child.

During the late 70s and the 80s the National Agency for Social Welfare and Health worked specifically with the development and distribution of guidelines for preschool and after school centres. This means that the actual work of these institutions has been debated and reflected upon in Sweden for quite some time (see further Alvestad & Pramling Samuelsson, 1999).

One of the main reforms influencing the work and quality in both preschool and school is the reform from relating to decentralization in which the public sector became decentralized and governed by goals instead of regulations. The philosophy that has been said to be behind this reform is that decisions are to be made at a local authority level by people who are directly involved with and affected by the issue at hand. However, there are also economical motives behind the reform.

A flexible school starting age was introduced in 1991 giving parents the right to decide if their child should start school at the age of 6 instead of 7, which is the stipulated school age in Sweden. However, only very few parents took advantage of this reform, mainly because most of the children (96%) already attend preschool class, which in 1998 became a school form of its own within the Swedish school system. The perspective on transference has also changed: The question is not if a child is mature enough for starting school – instead, school shall be ready to meet every child (Pramling Samuelsson, 2003).

In 1994 preschool was talked about in official texts as “the foundations for life-long learning”, something people within preschool, had always stated. In 1996 the responsibility for pre-school came under the Ministry of Education and in 1998, as previously mentioned, preschool got its first national curriculum (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a).

Many of the reforms have concerned the parents. In 1991 parents were given the right to have their child in pre-school when studying or working. This reform was in 2001 extended to include children whose parents were unemployed and in 2002 further extended to include those on parental leave.
The reforms of main interests in the present article are the Maximum Fee and the 2003 Public Preschool Reform, and we will mainly discuss the preschool representatives’ conceptions and experiences of these reforms. The reason for this is that these reforms give all children the right to be in preschool, at a low cost and from the age of 4 without charge. The Maximum Fee Reform gives parents the right to have the child in preschool to a maximum fee of 3% of the family’s total income for the first child and a maximum of 2% for the second child and 1% for the third child. There is also a “ceiling” set for the cost of first, second and third child etc. per month. The aim of this reform is equality between children and between communities, but it has also led to more children being in the groups.

Maybe it is only a question of time before preschool as well as school is free of charge and considered as a right of the child. Especially as preschool on a national level comprises 77% of the children between the ages of 1 to 5, even if there are local variations (Skolverket, 2001).

The Swedish preschool context

Pedagogical intentions have always had a strong influence on activities in preschool. Today even more as the national curriculum for preschool is linked to the curriculum for compulsory school (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998b). The aims are that the curricula should take a common view of knowledge, development and learning in the direction of the overall goals in order to enhance quality throughout the education system.

The curriculum for preschool embraces the fundamental values, the tasks, goals and guidelines for preschool activities. However, it does not lay down the means by which the goals should be attained. This is an issue primarily for the teachers in the preschool. In this way each teacher is expected to become involved as a curriculum maker by interpreting and adapting the goals to their group of children (Alvestad, 2001). This also makes teachers participants in the same democratic learning process as the one children are expected to take part in (Pramling Samuelsson, in press).

Democracy forms the foundation of the preschool and all activities should be carried out in accordance with the fundamental democratic values to help children acquire the values on which Swedish society is based. The inviolability of human life, individual freedom, and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between the sexes as well as solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are all values that are to be actively promoted in the work with the children and they express the ethical attitude that should characterise all preschool activity.

The preschool should also lay the foundations for life long learning and be enjoyable, secure and rich in learning. Learning that should be based, not only on the interaction between adults and children, but also on what children learn from each other. Care, nurturing and learning together form a coherent whole.
In the preschool curriculum the goals are formulated as something to strive towards. They set out directions for the work and contain targets for quality development. Goals and guidelines are given for the following areas: norms and values; development and learning; influence of the child; preschool and home; cooperation between the preschool class, the school and the after school centre.

According to these goals the preschool is to give children support to develop a positive picture of themselves as learning and creative individuals, develop confidence in their own ability, increase their competence and acquire new knowledge and insights through their own activity, stimulate their language development etc.

In preschool children shall also be able to create and communicate by different forms of expression such as pictures, song, music, drama, rhythm, dance and movements as well as spoken and written language. The various forms of expression also involve building, designing and using various material and technologies, among which multimedia and information technology can be appropriate both in the development and application of creative processes (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a).

It is the State that determines the overall goals and guidelines for the education system and the municipalities that take responsibility for implementation. If preschool is administered by the municipality they are obliged to follow the national curriculum. The curriculum will also provide a foundation for evaluating the quality when determining whether a private preschool fulfils the stipulated requirements. Both are under the responsibility and supervision of the National Agency for Education.

**Quality questions**

Today the concept of quality appears to be used more than ever in both the private and the public sectors of society. The issue of quality within the public sector focuses on how education should be organised to promote a child’s learning and development, which contents are of importance to learn and the “best way” to bring children up to become active, participating citizens in a democratic society (Sheridan, 2001).

Changes in the Swedish preschool system over the past century can be characterised as dynamic and radical in particular as they have been carried out during a period of increasing effectiveness in combination with a hardening public sector economy (SOU, 2000:3). Parallel to these new realities a national law was enacted requiring that all activities in preschool be of high pedagogical quality (Socialstyrelsen, 1995:2). When preschool became part of the educational system this law was transferred into the Education Act (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1985:1100, chapter 2a, §1-12), stipulating that the municipalities are obliged to prove the quality of preschool activities without unreasonable delay.
Discussions about quality were intensified as the economy worsened within the public sector to the point that it became a threat towards its quality. That this process of reduction took place parallel with findings in research emphasising the importance of high quality in preschool added to the intensity of debate. This research showed that high-quality early childhood education can have a significant and long-term effect on children’s learning, can lead to improvements in educational achievement throughout schooling, and can lead to better social behaviour and more productive citizenship (Sylva & Wiltshire, 1993). Evaluations of quality became a way to control that individual preschools fulfil the stipulated requirements and can guarantee an equal standard of quality (Sheridan, 2001).

Quality issues seem to be one of the main targets for the Government and the National Agency for Education, which is the central authority for the Swedish state school system and preschool. The Agency’s duties are being streamlined and concentrated on quality control by follow-up, evaluation and educational inspection, which is becoming their priority task and will increase substantially in volume over the next few years. Education authorities and schools will be inspected regularly and this will cover both the conditions and outcomes of their activities and quality assurance work. At local authority level, the spotlight is mainly on the overall responsibility of the authority, whereas, at school level professional standards will occupy centre stage (Skolverket, 2004).

One important aspect of educational inspection is the dialogue with those involved in order to systematically develop quality thinking in relation to results. The results will also be made public, accessible and comparable for the benefit of pupils and parents. Supervision focuses on guaranteeing the right of the child, pupil or adult student to a good education. The amount of supervision directed to various areas of deficiency will increase on the National Agency for Education’s own initiative.

Following-up the underlying conditions of activities and their performance and results provides an important empirical basis for both inspection and evaluation and will continue to be one of the agency’s important tasks. The biggest challenge is to develop new matrices of results and quality that can complement those currently used, which in school are usually based on exam results and marks. National measurements of the attitudes of the public, parents, pupils and teachers to schools are carried out.

National evaluations involve in-depth studies and analyses of selected areas with the aim of problematising, analysing and explaining underlying causes and connections. Attention is paid to the systems level, which may involve all or parts of preschool activities, types of school, assessment and marking systems, language programmes and how syllabuses operate. International comparative studies are carried out so as to be able to evaluate our own education system and compare it with those of other countries (Skolverket, 2004).
Methods and survey group

The control of quality on a national level is directly related to evaluation and the enhancement of quality in the municipalities. In Gothenburg the improvement of quality takes place through dialogue between representatives from preschool, administrators and a researcher from Gothenburg University.

The community of Gothenburg is a city of approximately 900,000 inhabitants, divided into 21 districts. These districts can be viewed as representing Sweden as a whole, by having rural areas (islands), inner city area, areas with extremely high levels of immigration, working class, middle or upper class areas. Within many of the districts there is also a large variation in population. Each district can independently decide about the conditions for preschool, which for example can be seen in the difference of numbers of university educated preschool teachers employed, which varies between 38% and 78%.

The dialogues took place as two separate half-day meetings with the representatives from each district. The objectives were to define areas of improvement and how to take actions for the future quality enhancement. Every district sent a focus group of maximum 20 persons, which they selected themselves. The groups often consisted of the director of preschools in the district, head masters, preschool teachers, specialists, nursery-nurses and in some cases parents. Altogether about 420 persons have been involved in the dialogues.

The researcher was the communication leader. Two representatives from the Central office for the municipal executive board in Gothenburg took notes and made a summary of the first meeting. At the second meeting the researcher presented the summary as feedback to each of the 21 districts. Every director also given a short summery written by the researcher where the strengths and weaknesses of their preschools were presented. Before the final report was published (Göteborgs stadskansli, 2003) shorter dialogues once again took place with the directors.

The dialogues are similar to phenomenographical interviews, where the interviewer raises open questions and then follows up and challenges different conceptions (Doverborg & Pramling Samuelsson, 2000). In this way the participants experience or ways of thinking about the different issues will be made visible in the analysis and quality of the statements about their experiences, and it becomes possible to characterise and compare between districts. In this article we will deal with some major issues, which could be of interest to an international audience if they are viewed in the context of the Swedish preschool today.
The maximum fee reform from the staff perspective

The general picture appearing in the dialogues as a whole is that children have a good life in preschool and very much enjoy being there. Parents are also very satisfied with their child’s preschool. However, the results of the dialogues also show that different societal reforms for quality enhancement can also be experienced as a threat by the teachers to the pedagogical quality in the preschool, if it is not combined with financial resources and actions for competence development.

In 20 of Gothenburg’s districts the average time of each child in preschool has increased as a consequence of the reform. However, it is important to emphasise that this is not the case all over Sweden (Skolverket, 2003a). Before this reform was implemented parents in Gothenburg paid for their children in accordance with the time their children spent in preschool. Naturally they tried to lower the fee by shortening the children’s time in preschool, and it is this that the new reform has changed. The teachers perceive this as both positive and negative. On one hand they appreciate that they no longer have to be “time keepers” who keep track of when parents pick up their children. On the other, they have a feeling of never being able to meet every child’s needs or use their full potential with children as their work has become even more intensive. The reasons given are that the groups already are too large and that by prolonging the time for many children they never find the small and calm situations with just a few children that many children need. The enlarged number of children in the groups has gone on over a longer period from a mean of approximately 15 children and 3 teachers in the beginning of 1990 to a mean of approximately 17.5 children and 2.75 adults in 2002 (Skolverket, 2003b).

One effect of larger child groups is that the level of sound has increased and in many preschools has become so high that it can cause hearing problems (Kihlbom, 2003). Every preschool is aware of this problem and the teachers do their best to avoid it by making arrangements in the environment and when possible organising the children into smaller sub groups.

Another effect of the increase of numbers of hours for the children is that the costs have risen since almost all children have all their meals at the preschool. This is an example given from one preschool with five groups of children. The head master claimed that during the first week of the introduction of the maximum fee they bought 34 loafs of bread more than before!

However, the children’s prolonged time has also resulted in a change of the teachers’ schedule for work and they complain about difficulties to use their right of 4 hours weekly planning time. This can be considered as a serious threat towards the quality. With large groups and many young children (mixed aged groups of children 1-5 years) in the groups the quality has become vulnerable.

Sweden has maybe had the smallest number of children per pupil group in the world, but not any longer. This is viewed as a threat to the quality in preschool by research indicating that the number of children in the group is a
more important factor for the quality than the child/adult ratio. It is also clear that for the younger the children group sizes are the more important. Young children and children with special needs have the most to gain from small groups (Asplund Carlsson, Kärrby & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001).

Children with special needs and handicapped children are included in the Swedish preschool and in the light of larger child groups it is interesting that many of the districts have noticed an increase of the number of children in need of special support. The problems defined are language delay, difficulty of concentration and lack of social competence. Although all these children have different family backgrounds and live under different circumstances, the large number of children in groups cannot be eliminated as a factor behind these problems and it is also alarming that the norm for how to behave might have become narrower since the increase. As a consequence these children in need of special support appear as more demanding of resources, which may contribute to diagnosing these children in order to get extra resources. In a smaller group, where these children should be, they might fall within the “normal” variation. A teacher’s human resources are not enough in a large group of children since there are so many relationships to deal with. However, all of the community districts are working on these issues, not the least by employing more specialists.

Competent staff is one of the key-factors of quality when it comes to giving children the best possible conditions for learning. (see e.g. Kärrby, 1997; Asplund Carlsson, Kärrby & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001; Sheridan, 2001; Gustavsson & Myrberg, 2002). Unfortunately, what all districts share is the problem of finding more preschool teachers! This is both a question of recruiting new people into initial teacher training and also one of upgrading nursery-nurses. One way to deal with this is through money received from the EU, which seems to be a source for all kinds of development and competence work in preschool.

**The implementation of the national curriculum**

Most preschool teachers are very proud of having a national curriculum (Johansson, 2003), and all the districts have worked on its implementation. The teachers feel that the task of preschool has become much clearer through the curriculum. However, it is interesting that ambiguity came up in the dialogues about the curriculum. Almost everybody talked about how the curriculum has contributed to the teachers’ awareness about how children learn. The rhetoric, totally in line with the curriculum in terms of the competent child, the learning processes, listening to children’s voices, developing children’s thinking, making children aware of their own learning etc., is obvious. It is also obvious that the teachers have enhanced their ability to express what they do and why. In a way one can suggest that the teachers have become even better at the things they already are good at, e.g., the ways to relate to and communicate with the
children (Dahlberg & Lenz Taguchi, 1996; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2003). However, when the dialogue focused on the purpose of preschool and what one should expect children to learn, the picture became more traditional, expressed in developmental psychological terms, such as, children are expected to develop social, emotional and motor skills. Very seldom did anyone mention that children are supposed to develop an understanding of specific aspects of the world around them, which actually is the case in the curriculum.

Another way to talk about preschool children is that they are going to be confident and feel safe and develop a trust in their own competence. The romantic view of the “natural” child who is active by inner drives is extended (Emilson, 2003; Bjervås, 2003; Hultqvist, 1990). As an example, teachers often say: “when children show interest … then you can let them start to read and write or work on basic mathematics”. The question of how children can become interested is seldom raised. In this respect we mean that preschool has a major role, which can be labelled as the most distinguished difference in perspective from earlier guidelines. 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 (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a). This is also what Siraj-Blatchford, et al. (2002) use as criteria for high quality in the EPPE-project (Effective Provision in Preschool Education). They talk about “shared sustainable thinking”, which means that the child and the teacher share the same focus of attention – the same learning object (see Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2003).

This problem is also related to what the teachers want children to learn in preschool. The content, e.g., the object of learning hardly exists. The reason for this may be at least twofold: first, the teachers have very little experience of goal directed work (Enderberg, 2001), second, there is a taken-for granted conception that as soon as one talks more precisely about what children should learn, they think it becomes school. All districts agree that preschool should not become a traditional school! At the same time they are striving for what they call a 1 to 16 perspective, e.g., striving for a continuation from early years to the end of school, that is based on the same view of learning and of children. This shared view can hopefully be achieved through a joint competence development programme for all teachers, both in preschool and school. The results of the dialogue show that there is still a long way to go!

Collaboration and integration between preschool and school has gone on in Sweden over the past 30 years with support from the government, and still children meet two different cultures in preschool and school. Something many researchers give evidence for. Broström (2003) claims that there are children, who are confident and willing to speak in preschool, but become quiet and uncertain in school. In turn Davidsson (2002) shows that the only possibility to
develop a joint perspective between preschool and school is for the teachers to work together on concrete questions, which they both are concerned about. She also says that shared physical space will help this process. Since this process of getting wholeness in the education system has gone on for so long time, one can ask if focus is on the wrong questions (Pramling Samuelsson & Mauritzson, 1997)?

Coming back to the content or object of learning in preschool, we claim that it is the same in preschool as it is in school, even though it is on another level of complexity from the adult’s perspective (Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 1999; Doverborg & Pramling Samuelsson, 1999; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2003). Let us look at two examples, participation and equality. There is a variation of concepts in the focus groups on these issues, both within and between the districts. One way to talk about these two important objects of learning is that children participate when they are listened to or get equal opportunities. For example, do teachers claim that children get equal opportunities when they do not make any difference between girls and boys. The given answers may very well represent unawareness about what these two aspects of the curriculum means in practice. Teachers also claim that all children are supported to play with all kinds of toys and materials. The only way to comment on that is, if nothing particular is done the gender roles will remain the same. However, there are also wonderful examples of how children are participating and influencing their every day life in preschool. Children participate in group decisions about the meals for lunches, what they should plant in their garden, what visits they were going to make, what theme they should work on, how they should arrange the environment etc. One of the most impressive examples was from a preschool that was about to employ a new teacher. In order to find out how the new teacher responded to the children, the employer introduced her to the group. A good adoption to the children was a weighty reason for employment. When it comes to equality between boys and girls the most conscious teachers knew that they related to boys and girls differently and tried to do something about it (Svaleryd, 2003). These two aspects are examples of objects of learning, which are the same throughout the whole education system.

Finally we want to raise the question of play and learning, a pair of notions that may be problematised in curricula in the future (OECD, manuscript). Some of the districts made a point that they use children’s play as a main factor for learning in preschool. At the same time they said that they have problems convincing parents what that means. And we are not surprised, why should children go to preschool just to play? Can’t they do that at home? Do not misinterpret us, we think it is extremely important with play in preschool, but it has to be related to objects of learning and the content worked on for making it understandable both for the children and for people outside the preschool world. On the other hand play is often taken for granted in preschool and not made
visible in good practice (see National Research Council, 2001; Karlsson Lohmander & Pramling Samuelsson, 2003). An important question is: what characterises early childhood education built on an integration of play and learning related to the objectives of children’s learning?

**Conclusion**

Over the years many reforms have contributed to the quality of the Swedish preschool and made preschool an important part of both society and the education system. The quality of an educational setting is essential as it effects children’s possibilities to learn and develop (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons & Siraj-Blatchford, 1999). Therefore, evaluations and quality enhancement have high priority in Sweden on both a national and a local level. The maximum fee reform and the implementation of the national curriculum in preschool are examples of reforms that contribute to quality, even if the process of implementation is not always experienced as smooth.

Quality improvements in Gothenburg are carried out as dialogues. The result of these dialogues shows that the quality of preschool varies within and between districts and highlights issues of great concern. For example, how solid are old traditional perspectives and attitudes in preschool and how is that related to new research? New research and changes of curriculum and guidelines seem to be implemented on a theoretical and rhetorical level, but not altogether in practice. In practice traditional ways and attitudes still seem to have a strong grip, although there are many examples of changed practice. Therefore it becomes important to think about and make clear what the meaning of the intended change is since it is so easy to either fall into old traditional ways and/or to adapt “primary school” teaching on an easier level, and that is not the intention of the curriculum. The crucial question is to guide and challenge children towards learning objectives by building on their experience and at the same time giving each child a lot of freedom (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2003; OECD, manuscript).

The discussion about quality in relation to the implementation of the curriculum might seem paradoxical. On the one hand we state that the quality of the Swedish preschool is high, on the other we highlight limitations and areas of improvement. In this context it is important to stress that the curriculum for preschool has goals to strive towards and not goals to reach, which means that the goals are formulated in a way that they can never fully be achieved. The other aspect is that even if the total – average quality is high, there is a substantial variation in the quality between preschools. This variation can to some extent be explained by the competence of the staff, which varies not the least due to the level of education, but also to possibilities of competence development provided by the different city districts. Different preschools also work under different conditions in relation to social economical issues and the home situation of the children and their parents.
Another issue is why the Swedish teachers are feeling insufficient although the groups may still not be larger than they are in many other countries. Compared to them there are more teachers in each preschool group and also a larger percentage of university educated preschool teachers! One explanation could be that we can trace a professionalisation in the competence of the teachers who continuously build up their ambitions trying to reach an expected standard of high quality partly due to the growing field of research in this area. Maybe the teachers with a high competence have unrealistic expectations of themselves and their possibilities to meet, support and challenge each child? They know about all that can be done with and for children – but, reality with large groups and mixed ages limits their capabilities. One also has to bear in mind that a large percentage of these teachers also worked with children when there were less children and a more balanced age-mix in the groups.

Earlier we claimed that play is supposed to be an aspect that distinguishes preschool from school for older age-groups (Karlsson Lohmander & Pramling Samuelsson, 2003). But play had another meaning in the context of Kindergarten in the 19th century than it has today. The perspective of play has changed in the same way as perspectives on learning. This means that the teacher’s role in developing children’s play is as crucial as it is in their learning (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2003). Still, play is very much taken for granted as we can see in both the responses from the representatives and research such as the extended document about children’s learning in preschool developed by the National Research Association in USA – where play is only mentioned a few times (National Research Council, 2001). For an enhancement of the quality of preschool early childhood education in the future needs to be built on an integration of play and learning related to the objectives of children’s learning.

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