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Dimensions of pedagogical quality in preschool

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Four dimensions of pedagogical quality focusing on children’s opportunities for learning and development in preschool are suggested. This article explores how they are constituted and how they can be used for evaluation to discern pedagogical quality as a whole and part of a whole and to understand how quality is experienced and valued from different perspectives. The four dimensions are: those of society, the child, the teacher and the learning context. This approach to evaluation has evolved from a meta-analysis of the results of four empirical studies. The object of research in this article was children’s possibilities for participation and influence in preschool. When the four dimensions of quality were used for evaluation, a broader and deeper picture of influence and participation as a pedagogical quality emerged. The results highlight the complexity of pedagogical quality and how it is constituted in the interaction between various dimensions and aspects of human and material resources. It shows that, in order to grasp the complexity of pedagogical quality, it is necessary to study the same aspect, phenomenon and situation from more than one perspective at one and the same time.

Introduction
In recent decades, a considerable amount of research has been focused on the interrelation between preschool quality and children’s learning experiences. Longitudinal and concurrent studies have shown that high-quality early childhood education can significantly benefit children’s learning, academic achievements, self-esteem and attitudes towards lifelong learning (Burchinal et al., 2000; NICHD, 1998, 2002; Peisner-Feinberg & Burchinal, 1997; Schweinhart, Barnes & Weikart, 1993; Sylva, 1994; US Department of Education, 2000). There is also substantial evidence that variations in the quality of education affect a wide range of cognitive, social and emotional outcomes in children’s learning and development (Andersson, 1989, 1992; Ceglowski & Bacigalupa, 2002; Clifford, & Bryant, 2003; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004).

Pedagogical quality as a whole appears to be especially influenced by such aspects as the existence of overall goals and pedagogical intentions, and the competence of the teachers (NAEYC, 1991). Important structural and process characteristics have been
identified in high-quality preschools (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004). These refer to, amongst other things, stimulating pedagogical environments, high-quality teacher-child interplay and opportunities for the development of communicative and mathematical skills. In light of these realities, high quality preschool education and care are of utmost importance. But what do we mean by the concept of quality? Despite all the research on quality, little is known about quality as an educational phenomenon or about how it is constituted and experienced from different perspectives. Donabedian (1980) was the first to define quality as a multidimensional phenomenon by describing quality as structure, process and outcome. This article explores new dimensions of pedagogical quality in relation to these three dimensions.

The approach to evaluation of pedagogical quality presented in this article has evolved from a meta-analysis of the results of four empirical studies (Sheridan, 2001a). The objective is to show that, in order to understand pedagogical quality as a whole and part of a whole in relation to children’s opportunities for learning and development in preschool, it needs to be evaluated through four dimensions of quality embracing different perspectives. The characteristics of these four dimensions and their use as tools in the process of analyzing, describing and visualizing structural and pedagogical processes of early childhood education will be demonstrated.

**Methods of evaluation**

Selecting an appropriate method of evaluation is a vital research issue. Today there is a host of evaluation models on the market. These models are often a combination of methodological descriptions, epistemological assumptions and recommendations concerning the relation between the evaluator and those to be evaluated (see for e. g., Granström & Lander, 1997). Some of these methods may be considered appropriate in the sense that there is a sincere ambition to capture different characteristics of quality, to visualize pedagogical processes, to control an acceptable standard and equality and to improve quality. Others are simple checklists to meet demands from various groups and organizations in society that seem to have an interest in controlling that a minimal standard is held. Some methods are embedded in implicit values and needs to be analyzed.
critically to visualize its underlying values and theories of learning. It is also important to
screen evaluation methods from an ideological perspective by examining the ontological
and epistemological assumptions on which they are based and their implications
(Granström & Lander, 1997).

A critical approach ought to be adopted towards methods that are constructed to
assess quality in a simplified way, that is, methods without clear definitions of theoretical
approaches, with hidden values and no clear indication as to how the evaluation is to be
used (Penn, 1994). To be avoided are methods that are simplified, instrumental, and focus
on a traditional psychological developmental perspective and tests of children’s outcomes
without taking into account contextual or cultural aspects (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence,
1999; Sommer, 2005). Tobin (2005) demonstrates that quality standards are cultural
constructs and states that the meaning of quality arises from negotiations among
stakeholders in local communities. We also need to bear in mind that an evaluation is
always some kind of definition of quality, in which the quality of a process is valued
afterwards in relation to certain goals or criteria (Franke-Wikberg & Lundgren, 1982).

Contrary to Dahlberg et al. (2002) and Tobin (2005) this study suggest that some
standardized methods can be used for national as well as cross-national studies if its
values are explicit and the evaluation of quality are understood and interpreted from a
perspective of society taken into account changes over time, values, overall goals and
cultural contexts. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS; Harms &
Clifford, 1980 and ECERS-R; Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998) has become a common
and widely used method in research on quality. Together with translated national
adaptations it has been used as an evaluating instrument in various studies in different
parts of the world for comparative purposes and for investigations of the relationship
between process quality and the various conditions of early childhood education
provision (Phillips & Howes, 1987; Rossbach, Clifford, & Harms, 1991; Scarr, Eisenberg
& Deater-Deckard, 1994) In Sweden, ECERS has been used as a tool for research,
external and self-evaluation and improvement of quality in preschool (Andersson, 1999;
Sheridan, 2001a). The validity and reliability of ECERS have been examined both in the
USA (Harms & Clifford, 1983) and elsewhere (Kärrby & Giota, 1994; Tietze, Cryer,
Barrio, Palacios & Wetzel, 1996).
ECERS consists of 37 items, which define different levels of quality in typical situations of early childhood education. These items are combined within seven subscales: personal care routines of children, furnishings and display for children, language reasoning experiences, fine and gross motor activities, creative activities, social development and adult needs. The items are presented as a seven-point scale with quality descriptors under one (inadequate), three (minimal), five (good) and seven (excellent). Significantly, the lower levels of quality are characterized by pedagogical unawareness and a focus on rules and material resources, while, the excellent level is characterized by implicitly or explicitly focusing on interplay, that is, how the teachers are expected to interact with the children and use all resources, including themselves, to promote children’s learning, participation and influence. Further, the criteria are defined in such a way that ratings of quality in different preschools are comparable in a national as well as a cross-national perspective.

ECERS was selected for this study primarily because it focuses on preschool quality from a child perspective and identifies different levels of quality concerning children’s opportunities to take initiative, participate, communicate and develop competences as expressed in the national goals for preschool.

A further advantage using ECERS in the present study was that the values, content, activities and development of competences as described in ECERS are mirrored in the Swedish curriculum for preschool (Ministry of Education and Science, 1998) e.g. communication skills, understanding the meaning of communication, taking the initiative and learning to make choices. What is important is that the focus of the evaluation of the conditions for learning, the pedagogical processes and the experiences of children is on the preschool setting rather than on individual teachers and children.

To understand preschool pedagogy from a comprehensive perspective the evaluations of quality with ECERS needs to be combined with other evaluating methods such as interviews with teachers and children, questionnaires etc. In England evaluations of quality with ECERS-R have successfully been complemented with ECERS-E which is an evaluating method that was developed to assess curricular aspects of quality and pedagogy (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Sylva et al., 2006).
Four empirical studies of pedagogical quality

The four empirical studies are based on a pedagogical perspective of quality. This multidimensional phenomenon focuses on children’s opportunities for learning and development in relation to the overall goals of preschool. Based on interactionistic theories, pedagogical quality does not exist in itself, but takes shape and develops in pedagogical processes through the interaction between people and people and objects in learning contexts of preschool (Sheridan, 2001a). It is a broad perspective that takes into account the norms, values, traditions, cultural specifics, contextual specifics and heritage of society. At the same time, it closes in and focuses on how various pedagogical processes in preschool are formed to support the right of the child to learn and develop, to participate and influence ongoing processes and activities, to be respected, listened to and counted on as a worthy member of society.

The overall aims of these studies were to define and describe characteristics and values of pedagogical quality and to deepen the understanding of quality by exploring how different aspects of quality are experienced, expressed and valued from diverse perspectives, contexts and time.

The first two studies are part of a research project whose aim was to develop a theoretical model for competence development. In both studies 31 teachers from nine preschools participated in the development program, which started with external and self-evaluations of quality using ECERS.

The aim of the first study, *A comparison of external and self-evaluations of quality in Early Childhood Education*, was to compare evaluations of quality between an external evaluator and the teachers’ self-evaluations of quality in preschool with the help of ECERS. The external and self-evaluations of quality are analyzed both statistically and qualitatively, see Sheridan (2001a).

The main result of the first study was the marked difference between external and self-evaluations of quality. In general, the teachers give their own preschool a higher rating than does the external evaluator. There is a tendency for teachers in preschools externally evaluated as being of low quality to overrate their own preschool quality, while teachers in preschools of high quality seem to underrate their schools, especially on the
quality dimension socialization and communication. This dimension is described and discussed in Kärrby and Giota (1994) and in Sheridan (2001a). On the item level, the teachers generally rate the quality higher on items that mirror the quality of their own ability to interact with children as well as their working methods. On items that evaluate the quality of the amount and use of space, materials, furnishings, room arrangement etc. for learning experiences, the teachers rate the quality lower than the evaluator. The rationale for scoring points to an obvious difference between comments made by teachers from preschools evaluated as being of high quality and those evaluated as being of low quality. The content of their comments mirrors the numerical ratings made by the evaluator rather than by themselves.

This study shows that the level of agreement differs, both between the evaluator and the teachers and among team members of each working team. The results clearly show that evaluations that are expected to lead to change and development derive from a combination of external and self-evaluations of quality. The meeting of these two perspectives in the discussions and comparisons among teachers and between teachers and the external evaluator throughout the development work is assumed to function as a catalyst for change (Sheridan, 2000).

The aim of the second study, Quality Evaluation and Quality Enhancement in Preschool – A Model of Competence Development, was to develop a model for competence development in order to enhance the pedagogical quality in preschool. The evaluations of quality with ECERS constitute the foundation for the planning of a directed development program. The underlying assumption was that, to improve the quality in their own pedagogical practice, the teachers had to be aware of what is meant by good quality and how quality manifests itself in various pedagogical processes. They also had to be aware of the current level of quality as well as knowing how to change and develop the quality to comply with the national goals. The framework for competence development is discussed and described in Sheridan (2001b).

The main result was a positive answer to the research question of the study, whether quality in preschool could be enhanced through competence development despite organizational changes and financial cutbacks. Quality could be enhanced provided that
the competence development program challenged the teachers to change their pedagogical ways of thinking and understanding. To achieve this, the teachers had to become aware of the changes in and requirements of society, modern theories of how children learn, and the importance of their own role as teachers in this process. Through the evaluations of quality they also became aware of what was going on in various pedagogical processes in their own pedagogical practice and its current level of quality. Together the teachers developed ideas about how to improve the quality in relation to the national goals (Sheridan, 2001b).

The aim of the third study, *Children’s conceptions of participation and influence in preschool – A perspective on pedagogical quality*, was dual. The first aim was to take the perspective of the child and what s/he means by deciding and decision-making. The second aim was to relate the child’s experience of influence to the preschools’ level of pedagogical quality, as evaluated with ECERS (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). Interaction, communication and participation characterize a pedagogical practice of high quality (Dahlgren, Moss & Pence, 1999; NAEYC, 2006; Sheridan, 2001a; Sylva et al., 2004). Therefore, it could be assumed that children in high-quality preschools have more opportunities to participate and to exercise influence than children in low-quality preschools.

The third study involved conducting external and self-evaluations of quality in 14 preschools with ECERS. From the total number of participating preschools, the three shown by external evaluation to have the highest level of quality and the three of the lowest quality were selected for interviews with children. To avoid any influence on the level of quality on grounds of differences in physical structure, such as space and materials, the quality dimension *socialization and communication*, which was derived from a factor analysis, was used as the basis for this selection (Kärrby & Giota, 1994).

Thirty-nine five-year-old children were interviewed about how they conceived their possibility of influencing what goes on in the preschool setting. The children’s conceptions were related to their experience of exercising influence over their situation, their learning processes, the content and the physical environment in preschool. The
children’s experience of influence was also related to the preschools’ level of pedagogical quality, as evaluated with ECERS.

The main results was the children’s experience of exercising influence varied with the level of quality in preschool. High-quality preschools seem to have a more open atmosphere inviting children to participate and negotiate. In high-quality preschools more children believed that the teacher knew what they liked than in the preschools evaluated as being of low quality. The results of this study show that the interviewed children experience that they can decide over their own play, their own activities, their own things and to some extent, over themselves in preschool. They seldom seem to participate in and influence the overall organization, routines, content and activities that are initiated by the teachers (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). This is contrary to the intentions of both the UN Convention (1989) and the Swedish curriculum for preschool (Ministry of Education and Science, 1998).

The aim of the fourth study, Evaluations of Pedagogical Quality in Early Childhood Education – A cross-national perspective, was to find out how the concept of quality in ECERS is concretized in pedagogical processes in early childhood education and how those pedagogical processes can be made visible, and to study the validity of evaluations of quality with ECERS in cross-national comparative studies.

This study is a joint research project on quality in which researchers from two different countries and cultures (Sweden and Germany) made parallel and independent evaluations of the quality in 20 preschools, 10 in each country. Each preschool was visited twice, during a period of two consecutive weeks, by two three-member observation teams, each team representing members from both countries. Altogether, each preschool was evaluated by each of the six observers according to a predetermined schedule with a systematic variation of combinations. Both the German and the Swedish research groups used national adaptations of ECERS. No statistically significant differences were found amongst the team of observers from the two countries, or between the Swedish and the German versions of ECERS (Tietze & Giota, manuscript). In addition to ECERS ratings, the observers gave the rationales for their scoring of selected items during an observation and described them in an informal way. The perceptual
process underlying the ratings of quality was thereafter analyzed and reconstructed from a country-specific perspective.

The main result: The reconstruction of the perceptual process is presented in the form of five different themes reflecting various pedagogical processes in early childhood education as evaluated with ECERS. These are inside space and equipment for children; goals and planned activities; encouragement of language development; play and the social climate; and the educational style. Through the reconstruction of the perceptual process underlying the ratings of quality with ECERS, an overall picture appeared of the preschools’ profiles and levels of quality in each country, as did differentiating characteristics of quality in a cross-national perspective. The reconstruction showed that there was a far greater variation in and between the German preschools than in the Swedish ones (Sheridan & Schuster, 2001).

Multiple assessments of quality strengthen results of relations (Sylva et al., 2004). The results of the four empirical studies are based on external and self-evaluations of quality with ECERS, documentation of rationales for scoring, questionnaires to the teachers during the development program and interviews with the children. The combination of several research approaches and methods allowed a more complex picture of pedagogical quality to emerge. It gave a deeper understanding of pedagogical quality as a whole and of how quality was experienced from different perspectives. The meta-analysis deepened our knowledge even further.

**Four dimensions of pedagogical quality**

Pedagogical quality has to be evaluated at a number of systemic levels. The ecological framework of Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) explains how micro-systems (family), meso-systems (preschool and school), macro-systems (economic and social policies) of cultures and societies and chrono-systems (time) influence conditions for children’s learning. Macro-systems are formed by ideological, economical, historical, political values and conditions within cultures while chrono-systems show how these will change over time. All these systems integrated must be taken into consideration to fully understand children’s experiences of and possibilities for learning in preschool.
Four dimensions of quality, embracing micro, macro and chrono-levels, evolved from the meta-analysis of the results of the four empirical studies. A meta-analysis means that the results of the four studies were related to one another as well as to theories of learning, previous research on quality, and to the values and goals in the curricula of the Swedish educational system. Taking the perspective of the child, the meta-analysis focused on the variations in preschool quality, availability and use of resources, teachers’ learning strategies and interplay with the children, the interrelation between children’s learning and the overall goals for preschool etc. The meta-analysis made it possible to compare the external evaluator’s, teachers’ and children’s experiences of these aspects in specific social and cultural contexts with one another. It can be described as an analytical process of abduction (Peirce, 1931-1935). An analytical process of abduction consists of studying facts and devising a theory to explain them. It is a metaphoric process that connects old and new meanings to one another, e.g. an approach to idea generation. The analytical process within which increased knowledge of regularities and variations were gained oscillated between the whole and the part and the whole, with the whole as the starting-point.

From the meta-analysis it became obvious that at least four dimensions ought to be visualized and problematized to develop a theory of pedagogical quality, and to be used as the point of departure for internal and external evaluation as well as to enhance the quality of preschool. The four quality dimensions are: 1) the dimension of society 2) the dimension of teachers 3) the dimension of children 4) and the dimension of settings/learning contexts. It should be pointed out, however, that these dimensions of evaluation and analysis are inseparable in pedagogical quality as a whole. The dimension of society is the macro level, which constitutes the frame of the educational system in a societal context. It clarifies values, educational intentions, resources, structures and pedagogical processes in the educational environment from a broad perspective. The other three dimensions are on meso and micro levels within the preschool context.

Each dimension is to be evaluated as structure, process and outcome and from different perspectives (Sheridan, 2001a). This is in line with other studies that emphasize the perspective of the teachers, the parents and the children in research on pedagogical quality (Ceglowski & Bacigalupa, 2002; Katz, 1993). The meaning given to perspective
in this article is: “how things/the world appear to people” (Marton & Booth, 1997). Differences in perspectives are necessary for seeing and for understanding (Rogoff, 2003, p. 26), but it is impossible to take another person’s perspective in an unprejudiced fashion, implying that the perspective of the “other” will always mirror the perspective of the “onlooker” to some extent.

Preschool quality can be evaluated through the four dimensions as a whole or from one aspect of quality at time. In this article I have chosen to take one aspect as a concrete example, that is, children’s possibilities for participation and influence in preschool. Children have the right to influence their own situation and to express their thoughts and views (UN Convention, 1989). Opportunities for participation and exerting influence are vital for the development of democratic principles and for their learning process (Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2003). Therefore, children’s participation is regarded as an important criterion for high quality in Swedish preschools. However, for teachers in preschool it can be rather difficult to facilitate children’s participation and to know what the limits of the child’s right to participation in decision-making are and what forms of influence will result in the involvement of young children in decision-making processes and roles.

Before proceeding I would like to stress that deciding is not a question of leaving the decision to the child. The core of this issue is to involve children. To make them feel that they are competent to participate in decision-making processes by communicating with them, asking questions, listening to them in order to encourage them to develop skills and a desire to argue for their stand-points.

The Dimension of Society

The first dimension of evaluation and analysis is based on the dominant discourses in society. It embraces knowledge about the changing intentions and requirements of public policy, the task of preschool and how to improve the quality in educational settings to achieve the overall goals. A perspective of society helps us to understand the socioeconomic and cultural context in which preschool exists. These framing aspects need to be considered as the pedagogical quality of preschool depends on how social and
cultural values, traditions and overall goals for learning interact with various aspects of quality, one another and in accordance with parallel changes in society over time.

A focus on the evaluations of quality from the cross-national perspective of Germany and Sweden highlights cultural differences on a societal level (Sheridan & Shuster, 2001). The ten Swedish preschools had a higher overall quality. There was a greater variation in quality in and between the ten German preschools visited. This variation was found in both the external and internal structure of preschool and appeared to depend on differences in economic resources, laws, guidelines etc. When the evaluation took place, neither of the countries had a national curriculum for preschool. German preschool programs overemphasized less formal teaching methods, and academically oriented activities were deliberately excluded. In the Swedish preschools, learning was emphasized, but never as a question of formal and teacher-directed learning. It was a question of learning in everyday activities and situations in which the children are seen as actors, who take the initiative and constitute their own knowledge (Sommer, 2005).

Today both countries have a national curriculum. Let us examine the goals for children’s participation and influence in the Swedish curriculum. It is stated that preschool should provide the foundation for children’s understanding of democracy. According to the curriculum, it is the interests and needs expressed by children in direction of the overall goals that should provide the foundation for shaping the environment and the planning of pedagogical activities. The social development of the child presupposes that, in relation to their capacity, they are able to take responsibility for their own actions and for the environment in preschool. The preschool should therefore ensure that children develop the ability to:

- express their thoughts and views, and thus have the opportunity to influence their own situation,
- accept responsibility for their own actions and for the environment of the preschool and, understand and act in accordance with democratic principles by participating in different kinds of cooperation and decision-making. The preschool staff should therefore work towards ensuring that the individual child develops the ability and willingness to exercise influence in preschool and that the
opinions and views of each child are respected (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998, pp. 16-17).

The results of the second empirical study clearly show that to enhance preschool quality the teachers need to be in phase with the tasks of preschool based on both historical knowledge and an understanding of how today’s changes in society, such as new laws, attitudes, requirements, economy, research etc. will influence their work. Together they constitute an intentional framework that explicitly and implicitly points out the direction of preschool pedagogic and its implementation in pedagogical processes (Sheridan, 2001b).

The teachers also need to keep up to date with current discourses in which children are seen as subjects rather than objects, and consequently in possession of certain rights in respect of their existence as human beings (Kjørholt, 2001). This view has been reinforced by the UN Convention (1989) on the Rights of the Child, which has given children the status of citizens with fundamental social, political and civil rights (Bartley, 1998).

Quality evaluations in this dimension provide knowledge of pedagogical quality at the point of intersection between the interest of the individual and that of society.

*The Dimension of the Teacher*

The focus of the second dimension of evaluation and analysis is how the teachers approach and interact with the children, their pedagogical awareness and educational strategies in relation to the learning process of the child and the content from which a child has to constitute knowledge. Evaluating quality in this dimension includes external evaluations of what takes place in the meeting between teacher and child as well as self-evaluations, which mirror the teacher’s own perspective (Sheridan, 2001a).

Several studies indicate that it is the competence and the approach of the teacher that seem to have a crucial impact on the quality in preschool (Johansson, 2003; Kärrby, 1992; Pramling, 1994; Sheridan, 2001; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004). The meta-analysis of the four empirical studies highlights four teaching
strategies in which the teachers interact with and approach the children: the strategy of *abdication* in which the teacher has given up his/her professionalism, the strategy of *dominance* overriding the children’s initiatives, the *democratic strategy*, which is an engaged, sensitive, social and negotiating teaching strategy and the *democratic/learning-oriented strategy*. The latter approach has a clear learning orientation in addition to what distinguishes the democratic approach (Sheridan, 2001a).

Consequently, different teaching strategies will lead to different possibilities for children’s participation and influence. The teaching strategies of abdication and dominance seemed to either restrict or limit the children’s possibilities for learning and experiencing. Significant was the attitude of harsh control and the demand for obedience, or no control at all. In these preschools there were conflicts and less sharing among the children. There was little space for children’s own initiatives and participation, and the quality was evaluated as low.

It was the democratic approaches that promoted interplay, participation, communication and co-operation between the teachers and the children and among the children. Characteristic of this interplay was the mutual respect, trust, open-mindedness and reciprocity. Teachers with a democratic learning-oriented strategy encouraged the children to ask questions, to learn and participate, and the children seemed rather contented, helped each other and solved conflicts through negotiation. The distinguishing quality in this educational approach was that the teachers had a clear direction of learning and focused on the child’s possibility of developing an understanding of various phenomena, such as the principle of democracy and skills to practice it. The variety of understanding among the children was made visible both to themselves and others, as a tool for learning.

Let us examine ECERS evaluations of the quality of the six preschools participating in the third study. The range of the preschools’ quality as externally evaluated is 2.88-6.13. (Minimum is 1.00 and maximum 7.00). The variation in quality depended on how the teacher used his or her competence to interact, communicate with and approach the child, and whether the child was made part of what was going on in preschool, e.g. if
he/she was involved in the organization of the physical environment, in the planning of the content and activities etc.

Observable in the self-evaluations is the tendency for preschool teachers to evaluate higher than the external evaluator in low-quality preschools and vice versa (Sheridan, 2000). Analysis of the self-evaluations indicates that in low-quality preschools there seems to be a pedagogical unawareness compared to high-quality preschools. Different reasons for difficulties in interplay with the children were given by the teachers from high- and low-quality preschools. External factors were seen as obstacles hindering the teachers from low-quality preschools to interact. They said that it was the large number of children in the groups that prevented them from communicating with individual children, and from making children part of the planning of ongoing activities etc. They also explained: ”if we had an extra room, the children could paint more often and when they want to.” In these preschools a meal situation was not seen as an opportunity for socializing or as a time to engage in a stimulating conversation. Instead the teachers’ comments emphasize the importance of rules and keeping quiet during meals. They write, ”We try to place the children so it is as quiet as possible. Unfortunately, there are always some children who talk loudly and need to be told off all the time.”

The teachers from high-quality preschools were self-critical and held themselves responsible for missing opportunities to communicate, to extend children’s learning, and to make children part of what was going on. They said: ”I need to discuss and reason more with the children in conflict situations.” In these preschools, the focus in the meal situation is on the provision of a pleasant atmosphere and the opportunity for learning. They write, ”The atmosphere at the table is pleasant, we talk all the time and try to make all children express their points of view during the ongoing conversation.”

We may thus conclude that the teacher’s competence can be seen from two intertwined perspectives: first, how they use their competence when trying to approach the perspective of the child in relation to participation and influence, which is the object of learning here. Secondly, the awareness of their professional role and the task of preschool provide the foundation for children’s understanding of democracy.
Evaluations of quality in this dimension highlight that the core of pedagogical quality is in the interplay. According to interactionistic theories, it is constituted in, takes shape and develops in the meeting between the child and the teacher. How this meeting turns out depends on the competence of the teacher to combine the short- and long-term goals of society with the child’s own intentions and goals for learning in a positive manner. The challenge is to combine them in such a way that the child maintains his or her curiosity to explore the world and develops an urge for life-long and life-wide learning (Sheridan, 2001a).

The Dimension of the Child

The third dimension of evaluation and analysis is a question of seeing children as subjects with voices of their own and having a desire to understand children’s intentions and expressions for meaning in a certain situation and context. From this perspective and in the light of their opportunities to learn in preschool, you have to try to evaluate what children have learned by being there.

An evaluation in this dimension entails seeing children as competent social actors who constitute knowledge and culture within specific time, social and cultural contexts, i.e., to see the whole in which a child communicates and interacts (Rogoff, 2003). Viewing children as competent means acknowledging their ability to relate to the world, to create meaning and understanding of phenomena and situations, as well as actions they are involved in. It means recognizing that even the youngest children in preschool have their own intentions and goals for learning, that they are curious about life, and have a desire to learn about the surrounding world (Lindahl, 1996).

When we study and evaluate children’s competence, we need to observe what they normally do and are involved in during everyday activities, relate this to theories and express these activities and actions in the form of concepts. Children’s interactions with all human actors are to be explored, and the competence of the child should be valued according to its social and cultural functionality (Sommer, 2005).

Relationships build on mutual respect between teacher and child as well as among children develop over time by shared interests in situations, activities and conversations (Maybin, 1994). To see what is important from the child’s angle the teachers have to try
to take the perspective of the child. To achieve this, the teacher has to go into the child’s communicative discourse and make the child part of ongoing activities in preschool. The base to build on in interplay is joint attention and topical sharing (Carr, 1999; Hundeide; 1999; Klein, 1989). In order to reach “sustained shared thinking” between the child and the teacher, s/he has to try to interpret the meaning of the child’s acting (verbal or behavioral) for the child itself (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002). Participation seems to be one basic condition for children to be able to speak their mind and participate in both words and actions (Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2003). Based on shared thinking and attention, a child’s initiative, participation and influence may be supported, expanded and challenged in different ways and directions.

In Sweden children’s opportunities to practice the principles of democracy are imperative. It is in the very process of being consulted that children develop an understanding of the impact their decisions can have on others, and it is through participation that children develop skills that can contribute to democratic decision-making (Lansdown, 1996).

Let us return to the study of children’s conceptions of participation and influence in preschool (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). The external evaluations of quality gave one perspective of children’s participation, the interviews with the children another. The overall experience of the interviewed children was that their opportunities to participate in decisions and influence what went on in preschool were limited, except in their own activities and play. Even if the overall experience of participation was limited, there was a clear tendency. The children in preschools evaluated as being of high quality express more often than the children in low-quality preschools that they can participate in decision-making and that they are listened to.

To interpret the meaning of decision-making from the child’s perspective, the variation of conceptions, and how they conceived their possibility to decide in preschool, were related both to the context, (e.g. self- or teacher initiated activity, peer interactions, teacher interactions, context of preschool and home, etc.) and to answers to specific questions. The analysis showed how the children experience decision-making in preschool, what the teachers decide and what they themselves can decide. In some
aspects a common and shared essence emerged, as the answers among the children were homogenous. On others a variation appeared. The variations of conceptions were categorised in five qualitatively different categories: to do what you want to do, to allow or to forbid, to exercise power, to think out/invent and to do what the majority wants to do. They originated from all the various situations in which the children described that decisions were made (Pramling, 1983).

During the interviews the children were asked if they believed that the teachers know what they like to do in preschool. At first many children said a definite no! The children were then not only asked to take and interpret the perspective of someone else, but were also asked to explain why they thought something appeared in a certain way to the teacher. Explanations given by most of the children were: ”she can’t know because she isn’t with us, can’t hear us, she can’t see everything, she has so many other things to do, or, I have not told her what I like”. However, continuing the conversation, many children made a distinction or expanded on their answers concerning the activities they often take part in throughout the day. They then assume that the teacher has seen them doing it and therefore she knows that they like to do it:

I. Do you believe that the teacher knows what you like?
C. Noooo, I don’t, only a little bit, I think she knows that I like to go out a lot.
I. Do you think she knows that?
C. Yes, because that is what I usually do, I love to go out.

In the high-quality preschools the children also seem to know that agreements and rules are negotiable and flexible. That is, rules depend on the situation and if certain conditions are fulfilled. For example, to go outside the fence is forbidden unless the teacher is outside and the child can take responsibility for staying within sight. The atmosphere in high-quality preschools can be characterized as open for negotiation, and a child’s answer has more nuances and seems to depend on the time, situation and activity:

I. You said that you could decide together, that you talked to each other, did you say that?
C. Yes, I said that. We can do what we like except go out.
In low-quality preschools children are not given this responsibility. The rules are fixed and valid at most times and for every situation. It also seems as if more children in the low-quality preschools say that they cannot do what they like to do, they must do what the teacher says and/or express that they are not allowed to do certain things. The pedagogical practice seems to be embedded in strict rules, which are familiar to the child who without hesitation answers yes and no to questions about what they can decide or not: ”Think again, is there anything you have decided here in preschool? - No!” These children’s experience of not being seen, not listened to and that they could seldom influence what was going on in preschool were confirmed by the external evaluations, which showed that in low-quality preschools the teacher directed most of the content and activities.

Statements concerning the children’s beliefs (whether they believe that the teacher knows what they like to do or not) were compared to the preschool units evaluated level of quality. In the three high quality preschool units, 41 percent of the 17 children believed that the teacher knew what they like and 41 percent said maybe while 18% said no. In the low quality preschool units, up to 45 percent of the 22 children did not think that the teacher knew what they liked to do. Out of them 32% said yes and 23% maybe.

We can conclude that the children from high-quality preschools experienced participation and possibilities of exercising influence to a larger extent. It was also one 5-year old child in the preschool evaluated as being of the highest quality that aired a perspective of democracy:

C. Mmm…then you’re, then you do what the others think, it's fair too, and er and then, the one's who want most things, mostly it turns out as most people want.
I. Does it?
C. Mm, I think so? But I don't think that mummy and daddy do.
I. Hu, why not?
C. Because… no, 'cause the three of us decide… we want to stay up until 7, we have to go to bed even though there are two of them and three of us.
I. You have to do what the grown ups want anyway.
C. Mm, 'cause they're my mum and dad.

Important results are that the children experienced that they participated in decision-making on equal terms if the situation was characterized by reciprocity, turn-taking and
involvement. Participation in decision-making is one indicator of quality that in a very subtle way separates the preschools with different levels of quality from each other.

Evaluations of quality in this dimension highlight the importance of a child perspective on quality. Significant for the lower levels of quality in relation to influence and participation is that the voice of the child is seldom being heard or taken into consideration. In a Swedish preschool context high quality is characterized by children’s participation and practice of the principles of democracy.

*The Dimension of Settings/ Learning Contexts*

The fourth dimension of evaluation and analysis is the learning contexts of preschool. From an interactionistic perspective, preschools can be seen as meeting places of values, attitudes and intentions for learning both from home and society. They are a link between the macro, micro-levels of society and, as such, they cannot be studied or evaluated in a simplistic way (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986). The complexity of the learning context can only be grasped by adopting several research approaches, and examining it from diverse perspectives and in diverse dimensions.

To evaluate pedagogical quality from this perspective includes an evaluation of structural aspects, pedagogical processes and children’s expected outcomes in relation to the overall goals viewed in a specific context and time. Included here are space, equipment, materials and how they are arranged and used, the organization of content and activities in relation to a time schedule, all pedagogical processes that take place throughout the day, such as: interplay between the child and the teacher and between the children, the atmosphere, the attitude of the teacher, their educational strategies and what children have learned by being in preschool. This is an environment that has a message for the child (Rinaldi, 1993), an environment that set frames for learning and development (Bruner, 1996; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999), and an environment that can or cannot be influenced and changed by the child.

Evaluations of quality with ECERS on both an international and national level show that there is a significant variation in the quality within and between educational settings (Clifford, & Bryant, 2003; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004). This means that children’s opportunities to learn and develop in preschool will
differ. Before proceeding I would like to stress that the variation of quality as described below from a cross-national perspective is also to be found within and between preschools from a national perspective (Andersson, 1999; Kärrby & Giota, 1994; Sheridan, 2001a).

Let us once again focus on the evaluations of quality from the cross-national perspective (Sheridan & Shuster, 2001). The variation in the quality between the ten German and the ten Swedish preschools concerns both structure and process. The observed pattern of structural quality in the ten German preschools can be roughly generalized as follows: at the time of evaluation the resources were limited and the physical conditions were rather poor compared to Swedish standards. There was little space, equipment and very sparse materials, which was, however, to some extent compensated for by the way it was planned with activity corners, organization and materials in relation to the activity area. These are structural conditions that can restrict children’s possibilities for making choices concerning both materials and space to play.

Evaluated as high quality in the participating preschools from both countries were spontaneous and/or planned situations, e.g. situations in which the teacher recognized, guided and supported the children’s efforts to learn and master various conditions. They were situations in which the child sought challenges, developed skills and competencies and constituted meaning. Compared to the German preschools, the atmosphere was often more pleasant and democratic in the Swedish preschools. One obvious difference lay in the manner in which the Swedish teachers were able to involve children without intrusive and controlling directions.

Care and education in most of the ten Swedish preschools were based on a structured and balanced schedule with fixed times for daily routines and several planned activity periods for the whole group as well as for more homogeneous subgroups (according to age, interests etc.). In the ten German preschools, the children stayed in the larger group most of the day. There were few planned activities and no organization into small groups in an effort to meet individual interests, experiences and needs of the children.

Time for play differed between the German and Swedish preschools as did the teacher's role in children's play. In the ten German preschools, free play seemed to be the
main activity. The children had more time to play by themselves but with less material, support and stimulation from the teacher. In the ten Swedish preschools, play was regulated to a greater extent and there was less time for continuous play, but the teacher interacted more with the children during play and used play as a learning opportunity. In both countries the interplay between teacher and child varied according to the professionalism of the teachers. Despite a high staff child-ratio and rich space and material resources, some of the ten Swedish preschools were evaluated as being of low quality. In these preschools, the teachers distanced themselves from the children to engage in practical tasks or with one another. In some of the ten German preschools it was the other way round. In such cases, the competence of the teachers trying to understand children’s perspectives compensated for limited material resources.

Evaluations of quality within this dimension demonstrate the complexity of pedagogical quality. It shows that the level of quality depends on how different dimensions and aspects are used and interact with one another in a specific time and context.

Conclusion
This article introduced four dimensions of quality focusing on children’s opportunities for learning and development in preschool, i.e. those of society, the child, the teacher and the learning context. These dimensions have evolved from a meta-analysis of four empirical studies. Each of them should be evaluated in terms of structure, process and outcome as well as from different perspectives. They can be seen as a complement to the other quality dimensions referred to by Munton, Mooney and Rowland (1995), which are effectiveness, acceptability, efficiency, access, equity and relevance.

The aim has been to explore the constitution of the four dimensions and how they can be used for evaluation to understand pedagogical quality as a whole and as a part of a whole. The results indicate their usefulness in research and quality evaluation with the purpose of understanding the relationship between preschool quality and children’s opportunities for learning. The object of research in this article was children’s possibilities for participation and influence in preschool. When the four dimensions of
quality were used for evaluation, a broader and deeper picture of children’s influence and participation as a pedagogical quality emerged.

This approach to evaluation highlights the complexity of various structural aspects and pedagogical processes in ways that previous studies have not. It shows how the level of quality is constituted in the interaction between different dimensions and aspects of quality and its dependence of time and context. In preschool, overall goals, human and material resources, teacher’s learning strategies and children’s experience of participation and influence are not stand-alone constructs and situations but shape and constitute each other. This means that space and material resources have little value in themselves. The value given to them in a Swedish preschool context depends on how they are used as tools to enrich, extend and deepen children’s experience and thereby the possibility of learning and understanding the principles of democracy.

To discern quality as a whole and a part of a whole, these four dimensions of quality needs to be considered from different perspectives. Rogoff (2003) implies that one can only see and understand a particular phenomenon by being aware of other perspectives than one’s own. The results of this study show that if we are to understand how quality is experienced and valued from different perspectives, the same aspect, phenomenon and situation ought to be studied from more than one perspective at one and the same time. External and self-evaluations ought to be combined as any desired change and development of quality begins in the meeting between those perspectives (Sheridan, 2000).

When quality is evaluated from different perspectives and in different dimensions as mentioned above, several questions might arise: Are the perspectives and dimensions of equal value or do they differ in importance when it comes to understanding pedagogical quality as a whole? Which perspective and dimension should be given priority if all of them cannot be evaluated at one and the same time for economic reasons, or due to lack of time or evaluation skills? If there has to be a choice, the choice does not have to be between perspectives and dimensions. Instead of evaluating the preschool quality as a whole, the option is an evaluation of specific aspects, for example, children’s participation and influence, as demonstrated in this article.
Preschool and school are institutions in which the voice of the child has to be heard. At the same time they are also organizations in which learning is aimed towards overall goals. The teachers are expected to plan both the content and the methods in order to comply with these goals and, at the same time, involve the children by creating opportunities for them to influence these decisions. Analysis of external and self-evaluations of quality using the ECERS in relation to interviews with five-year-old children’s conceptions of their possibilities of deciding in preschool clearly demonstrate that there is a gap between the perspective of the child and the teacher (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). In Sweden it is the task of the teacher to direct children’s attention towards questions of democracy and to make them think, become interested in participation, argue for their standpoints and enable them to influence various situations. Even though the children in high-quality preschools express that they are more often affirmed and involved in situations in which they can participate, negotiate and make decisions together with the teacher, the results show that children seldom seem to participate in and influence the overall organization, routines, content and activities that are initiated by the teachers. The restrictions placed on children’s influence are contrary to the intentions of both the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Swedish curriculum for preschool (Ministry of Education and Science, 1998). Those documents stipulate that the child has the right to exercise influence in a far wider area than these five-year-old children experienced in preschool.

The results clearly show that an evaluation of pedagogical quality in preschool needs to include the voices of children, otherwise an essential part of how children experience quality within various preschool settings, as well as an overall understanding of pedagogical quality, will be lost. They indicate that even if the teachers involve the children, they cannot take for granted that the children feel part of what goes on. One reason could be that children are not placed in positions where they can abstract meaning from their experience, as participation and “minor” everyday-decisions are taken for granted and, consequently, not made visible for the children as acts of influence and democracy.

All methods used for research, evaluation and enhancement of quality ought to be revised continuously and developed in accordance with new research on quality, new
theories of learning, and changes in society concerning its values and overall goals (Sheridan, 2001a). The results of this study show that to grasp the complexity of pedagogical quality as an educational phenomenon and the relationship between preschool quality and children’s learning, it is necessary to adopt new approaches and develop new methods for evaluation of quality. They have to be open and flexible and involve both teachers and children. They need to be constructed in such a way that they allow creativity and originality. When established criteria are used for quality evaluation, they should be constructed in such a way that the complexity in situations, various degrees of sensitivity and inventiveness in practice are in focus. Further, the criteria for evaluating and enhancing pedagogical quality ought to be based on a framework of characterizations of quality. The framework should be neither too general, leaving room for any interpretation, nor too detailed, which can lead to a static, unreflective and inflexible use. It is essential that the defined and formulated criteria for pedagogical quality allow room for reflection, creativity and a variety of uses related to time, context, goals and content (Sheridan, manuscript). The increasing amount of documentation and evaluation of children’s experiences, interests and conditions for learning have highlighted the necessity of developing tools that allow children’s voices to be heard and considered.

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