

The professional preschool teacher under conditions of change

The Professional
Preschool Teacher
under Conditions of Change
Competence and Intentions in Pedagogical Practices

Panagiota Nasiopoulou



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THE PROFESSIONAL PRESCHOOL TEACHER UNDER CONDITIONS OF CHANGE

Abstract

Title: The professional preschool teacher under conditions of change
– Competence and intentions in pedagogical practices

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This thesis explores the relationship between preschool teachers' professional competence and their pedagogical practices. Specifically, preschool teachers' considerations on two pedagogical practices are studied: (i) organizing children into subgroups and (ii) working with curriculum content areas. The research is part of a Swedish research project entitled "The Impact of Group Size on Children's Affordances in Preschool", financed by the Swedish Research Council.

Ecological systems theory is the theoretical framework underpinning the research. The thesis includes four empirical studies. The analyses are based on data drawn from preschool teachers' responses to questions included in the project's web-based questionnaire. In study I, preschool teachers' professional profiles across different preschools in Sweden are explored. The results show differences between profiles with respect to preschool teachers' graduation year, continuing professional development, and experience. Studies II and III aim to generate knowledge about preschool teachers' practice of organizing children into subgroups. The results from these two studies put forward the organization of children into subgroups as a collectively negotiated practice embracing a child-centered perspective. Study IV focuses on preschool teachers' considerations on the curriculum content areas they least involve in their daily work. Reading and writing are revealed as the least-emphasized content areas. The combined results of the four studies point to the importance of addressing the diverse needs for professional development among preschool teachers, along with the challenges, dilemmas, and questions embedded in their immediate environment. A transactional approach to preschool teachers'

professional competence, which considers their diverse competences along with theoretical and practical knowledge, is suggested.

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Stockholm, January 2020
Panagiota Nasiopoulou

Part I

Chapter 1

Setting the Scene

When it comes to the implications for conceptualizations of the early childhood profession, the situation is contradictory, thus contributing to the practitioner's dilemma. As individuals (or team members), practitioners are living and acting a relational, reciprocal, open and inevitably uncertain professionalism, and they are increasingly expected to do so by those who dominate the discourse that subsequently manifests in qualification and workforce strategies. They are, at the same time, part of a professional system that, instead of being co-constructive, and all but embracing uncertainty, still largely operates within a paradigm of hierarchical knowledge production and application. (Urban, 2008, p. 145)

Tensions and contradictions between increased policy expectations on preschool teachers' professional competence and the complexity embedded in their everyday work context, as expressed in the above quote, are the departing points of my research inquiry. More specifically, this thesis explores the relationship between preschool teachers' professional competence and their considerations on pedagogical practices surrounded by societal discourses and policies, in creating optimal conditions for children's well-being, learning, and development. Two of the preschool teachers' pedagogical practices are specifically scrutinized: (i) organizing children into subgroups, and (ii) their least-emphasized curriculum content areas. This thesis is part of a large Swedish research project financed by the Swedish Research Council entitled "The impact of group size on children's affordances in preschool" (Williams, Sheridan, & Pramling Samuelsson, 2012). The four studies referenced in the thesis are based on data drawn from 698 preschool teachers' answers to the project's web-based questionnaire.

In Sweden, group size, that is, the number of children per preschool unit, has been a recurring quality issue both in public debates and in research during the last decade. During this period, preschool teachers' professionalization toward creating a preschool of high quality has been a central goal in policy reforms. These reforms, which lay the foundation for the background of the thesis, include the preschool curriculum and its revisions, alongside changes in

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preschool teachers' education programs in which new content areas have been introduced and preschool teachers' professional competence is increasingly emphasized. In line with these policy and curriculum reforms, preschool teaching in Sweden is undergoing a process of dynamic change (Sheridan, Williams, Sandberg & Vuorinen, 2011), and preschool teachers are expected to assume a clear leadership role for the goal-oriented work in preschool that the team jointly performs. Accordingly, in addition to theoretical knowledge on children's learning and development, preschool teachers are expected to have content knowledge and didactic competence, in order to carry out high quality pedagogical practices and realize curriculum content areas in their daily praxis (Williams & Sheridan, 2016). Furthermore, being a professional preschool teacher within the Swedish early childhood education system demands not only the ability to plan, analyze, constantly review, and develop activities based on the best interest and needs of the children, but also the ability to document the work of the preschool for societal review (Kuisma & Sandberg, 2012; Vallberg Roth, 2014). To ensure quality, society monitors and scrutinizes whether the preschools are living up to the curriculum guidelines and whether preschool teachers' education provides them the theoretical knowledge they need to perform high quality work according to the curriculum guidelines (Kuisma & Sandberg, 2012).

The inextricable link between preschool teachers' professional competence and preschool quality has been a central debate in the international policy agenda, indicating a movement toward the professionalization of the early years workforce. In most countries, preschool teachers' professionalization takes place within a regulatory framework (Miller, 2008; Osgood, 2010), which includes requirements of a high level of education and continuing professional development. While there is a general agreement in the literature that preschool teachers' formal qualifications are associated with high quality pedagogical practices (e.g., Cameron & Moss, 2007; Early et al., 2007; Peeters & Vandenberg, 2011; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2010), critical voices are emerging. These critics are opposed to an understanding of professional competence solely as the individual preschool teacher's property; they advocate for a holistic and systemic approach in which professional competence is conceptualized as a multidimensional, relational, and ongoing learning process closely aligned to the complexity of the everyday educational practice (Miller, Dalli & Urban, 2012; Sheridan et al., 2011; Siraj, Kingston & Neilsen-Hewett, 2019; Urban & Dalli, 2012; Urban, Vanderbroeck,

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Van Laere, Lazzari & Peeters, 2012). Taking this approach, as Urban (2008) argues in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, preschool teachers need to act professionally and to actualize their acquired theoretical knowledge in pedagogical practices in reciprocal relationships with all actors involved in the system and on the basis of questions arising from in situ conditions. In alignment with this standpoint, ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), as extended by Miller et al. (2012), who advocated for a critical ecology of the early childhood profession, lays the foundation for the theoretical framework of the thesis. This theory underpins the research to understand the complexity of preschool teachers' everyday practice, and thereby the multiple ecological systems that interplay with their considerations of their pedagogical practices. Aspects within and between the systems can create enabling or restricting conditions for preschool teachers' pedagogical practices (Sylva, Ereky-Stevens & Aricescu, 2015). From this perspective, my research inquiry is positioned at the intersection between policy expectations and preschool practice.

The complexity of the increased expectations of preschool assignments manifested in policy documents and preschool teachers' experiences of their assignment, which means constantly keeping up with relevant research and society's views on children and learning, has been highlighted in several studies (Jonsson, Williams & Pramling Samuelsson, 2017; Miller et al., 2012; Moss, 2010; Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2019; Sheridan, Williams & Pramling Samuelsson, 2014; Siraj et al., 2017; Urban, 2008; Vallberg Roth & Tallberg Broman, 2018b). These studies highlight preschool teachers' need to balance increased requirements and new tasks to carry out their assignments.

Recent Swedish research has pointed out the complexity of preschool teachers' everyday praxis and expressed concern about the tension between the curriculum's increased demands on preschool teachers' professional responsibility and competence and the prerequisites for fulfilling their assignments (Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2019; Vallberg Roth & Tallberg Broman, 2018b; Williams, Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2019). Facets of the complexity of preschool practice, according to these studies, are related to current conditions that restrict preschool teachers from accomplishing their task; these include the increasing shortage of preschool teachers and substitute personnel, the staff's diverse educational backgrounds, the growing rate of staff turnover, the number of children attending preschool, and strengthened economic resources.

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The Education Act (2010:800) makes highly qualified preschool teachers an explicit requirement for early childhood education and care (ECEC). For several years, however, there has been a shortage of qualified preschool teachers, and workforce estimates indicate that the shortage will continue to increase. According to recent statistics from the Swedish National Agency for Education (2019), approximately 40% of all preschool employees have a degree from an early childhood education program—a decrease of 0.5% from the previous year—and around 30% have a degree from a teacher, leisure time pedagogy, or upper secondary education program for working with children. However, a considerable number of preschool employees, almost 31%, lack education specifically on working with children. Furthermore, the group size, is an important quality aspect both for preschool teachers' working conditions and children's conditions for well-being, learning, and development, as has been noted in both research and policy documents (cf. Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011; Swedish School Inspectorate, 2018; Williams, et al., 2019). Special guidelines for preschools were presented by the National Agency of Education in 2016 (Williams & Sheridan, 2016), with recommended benchmarks of 6 to 12 children for groups with children under the age of 3, and 9 to 15 for groups of older children. However, the statistics from the Swedish National Agency for Education (2019) show that group sizes are continuing to increase and vary greatly among municipalities. Roughly 9% of preschools have 22 or more children, which is far above the recommended benchmark.

The importance of group as a fundamental and active component in children's possibilities for developing and learning from both individual and collective perspectives, has been accentuated since the introduction of the Swedish preschool curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). Studies from the project of which this research is a part show that preschool teachers need the professional knowledge and competence to organize curriculum content and group activities to maximize children's opportunities to learn and develop (Pramling Samuelsson, Williams, Sheridan & Hellman, 2016; Sheridan et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2019).

The project applies a mixed-methods design consisting of a web-based questionnaire and interviews to combine quantitative and qualitative analytical approaches to capture a comprehensive account of preschool teachers' perspectives on group size in preschool. The results of the project's studies, based on data generated from interviews, have shown variations in how

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preschool teachers experience the number of children in groups. In particular, the general conclusion of these studies is that preschool teachers' views on group size are dependent on interconnected aspects, including the teacher's qualifications and competence, the organizational structure of the preschool environment, and the composition of the child group. If these aspects do not interact constructively, preschool teachers perceive the number of children in the group as being too large. Large child groups are then viewed by preschool teachers as associated with challenging working conditions, in terms of a lack of time and space for work with specific curriculum content areas, limited opportunities to devote attention to individual children, stress, and a feeling of being insufficient when striving to fulfil their assignment. This implies that, while there is a commitment to their assignment, conditions that are beyond their own influence exist contrary to their intentions with their pedagogical practices, and some planned activities are set aside on the basis of in situ situations. Considering the large variations in group sizes across municipalities (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2019), this affects the quality and equality of opportunities provided to children to develop relative their potential. Preschool teachers' ability to organize children into subgroups is pivotal, according to the studies, so that they may handle the restrictions created by the large numbers of children in their groups (Sheridan et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2019).

Based on these premises, the specific research interest in this thesis is, as stated earlier, focused on two subsidiary topics included in the questionnaire, namely preschool teachers' practice of dividing the whole child group into subgroups, and their work with curriculum content areas. To supplement the previous findings of the project, these topics are examined, analyzed, and discussed both on the basis of group size as an influential structural condition on preschool teachers' daily work, and in relation to their professional background and competence. The first topic was examined by one study of the project (Sheridan et al., 2014) focusing on *how* preschool teachers organize the groups during the day and *how* the group size influences the various groupings. In the present thesis, the interest is turned toward preschool teachers' considerations of *what* determines their decisions and *what* they intend to do with the grouping practice. The preschool teachers' considerations relative this specific practice are also examined in relation to their professional background, including their graduation year, years of experience in preschool, and attendance in continuing professional development activities. With regard to the second

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topic, studies from the project (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2019) showed that the large number of children in groups is important for the selection and/or de-selection of curriculum content areas. In this thesis, the focus is specified on *what* curriculum content areas are least emphasized by preschool teachers and their considerations in relation to such de-selection. These curriculum content areas are further examined in relation to preschool teachers' professional competence and group size in preschool. On the basis of these empirical findings, the contribution of the present thesis is to supplement these studies and advance the knowledge on preschool teachers' pedagogical practices by obtaining broad information from a large, nationally representative sample. Furthermore, the study endeavors to contribute methodologically by applying a plurality of analytical procedures, including latent variable modeling and mixed-methods analysis.

Aim and Research Questions

The overarching aim of this thesis is to contribute with knowledge to the research field of early childhood education by exploring the intersection between recent policy reforms involving expectations for preschool teachers' professional competence and preschool teachers' pedagogical practices. First, the relationship between preschool teachers' professional competence and their considerations on pedagogical practices is examined. Second, two pedagogical practices are specifically scrutinized: organizing children into subgroups, and working with curriculum content areas for the children's well-being, learning, and development. The aim is addressed through the following general research questions:

- What is the relationship between preschool teachers' professional competence and their considerations on pedagogical practices? (Studies I, III, IV)
- How do preschool teachers' considerations on organizing children into subgroups and on working with curriculum content areas interplay in their pedagogical practices? (Studies II, III, IV)

The specific relationships among the aim, the research questions, and the four empirical studies (I, II, III, and IV) are shown in Figure 1.

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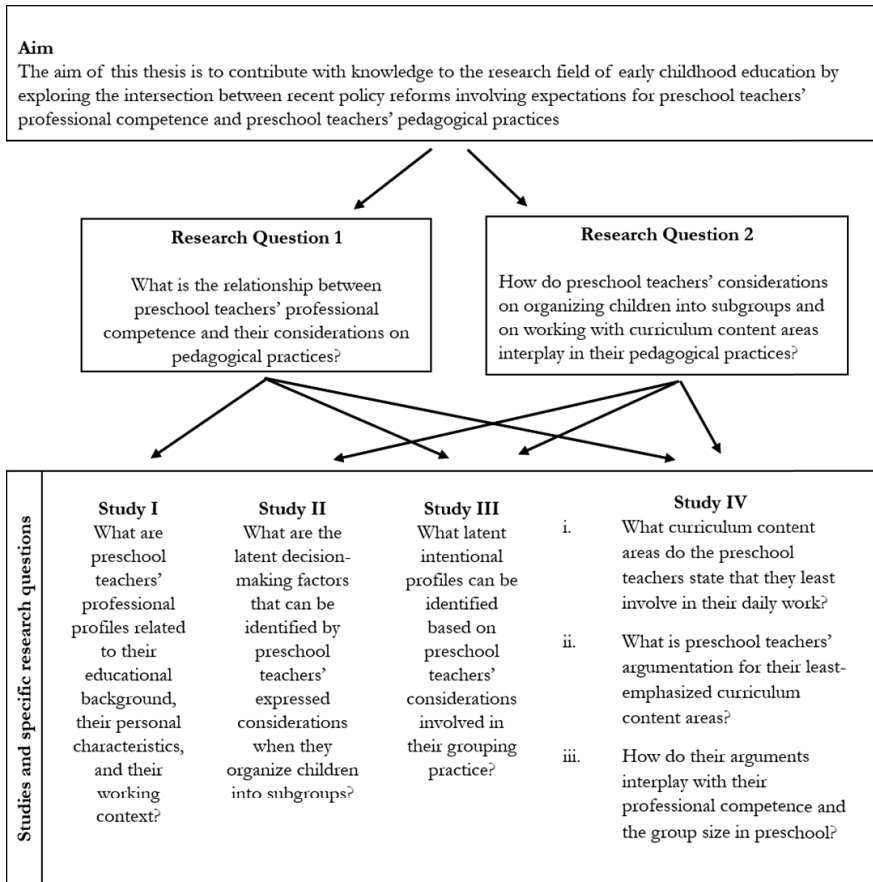


Figure 1. Overview of the relationships among the aim, the research questions, and the four empirical studies.

The first research question is addressed in Studies I, III, and IV. In Study I, preschool teachers' professional profiles across different preschools in Sweden were the focus of the research interest. This study served to create a general mapping of the sample, with respect to preschool teachers' professional characteristics and a wider net of issues that could then be taken into account when conducting the subsequent studies. Thus, the distinct differences among preschool teachers' professional profiles identified in Study I are subsequently used in Studies III and IV to further examine possible relationships with their

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considerations with the two specific pedagogical practices, namely grouping practice and work with curriculum content areas.

The second research question is addressed in Studies II, III, and IV. In Studies II and III, grouping practices is examined through a dual perspective: preschool teachers' accounts of the factors that might determine their decisions to organize the whole group into subgroups (Study II) and their pedagogical intentions with this specific practice (Study III). The second research question is also addressed in Study IV, where possible relationships among the least-emphasized curriculum content areas and preschool teachers' professional competence and group sizes in preschool is the focus.

In this thesis and the four empirical studies referenced herein, the terms "subgroups" and "small groups" are used as synonyms referring to arrangements with fewer children, as opposed to the whole group in a preschool unit. The term "preschool unit" refers to the group of children that the child is mainly part of for most of the day. The term "group size" refers to the total number of children per preschool unit and is considered an organizational condition of the preschool that may impact the teachers' considerations of their pedagogical practices.

Outline of the Thesis

The thesis contains two parts. The first consists of seven chapters, including a presentation of the research background, an account of the theoretical framework underpinning the thesis and analytical methods used, a summary and discussion of the main findings of the four studies as well as a Swedish summary. This part is outlined as follows: Chapter 1 provides an introduction, including the departure point of the study; its aim; research questions; an overview of the relationships among the aim, the research questions, and the four empirical studies; and an outline of the thesis. Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical framework of the thesis. The chapter presents the evolution of the ecological systems theory and closes by illuminating how the theory's interrelated systems have been considered in the thesis. Chapter 3 briefly situates the research through four sections. First, a short outline of policy reforms provides an overview of the dynamic changes that Swedish ECEC has undergone. This is followed by two sections including previous research on various perspectives on preschool quality and professional competence as overarching concepts guiding preschool teachers' pedagogical practices. The

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chapter closes with a brief literature review on the two pedagogical practices explored in the study. Chapter 4 includes the methodological underpinning of the thesis, accounting for the questionnaire from which the empirical material was generated. This chapter includes the sampling process. The analytical procedures of the studies are also discussed. The chapter concludes with details on the thesis' validity and ethical considerations. Chapter 5 contains a summary of the results of the four empirical studies. Chapter 6 presents a discussion of the findings in relation to the research questions. Some methodological issues of importance are also considered, and suggestions for further research are presented. Chapter 7 is a Swedish summary of the work. The second part of this thesis consists of the following four empirical studies:

- Study I: Nasiopoulou, P., Williams, P., Sheridan, S., & Yang Hansen, K. (2019). Exploring preschool teachers' professional profiles in Swedish preschool: A latent class analysis. *Early Child Development and Care*, 189(8), 1306–1324. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2017.1375482>
- Study II: Nasiopoulou, P. (under review). Decision-making factors for group organizing in Swedish preschools.
- Study III: Nasiopoulou, P. (2019). Investigating Swedish preschool teachers' intentions involved in grouping practices. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-019-00988-8>
- Study IV: Nasiopoulou, P., Williams, P., & Lantz-Andersson, A. (submitted). Preschool teachers' work with curriculum content areas in relation to their professional competence and group size in preschool: a mixed-methods analysis.

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Theoretical Framework

In this thesis, preschool teachers' pedagogical practices are understood to be influenced by the broader political and societal contexts and negotiated in the contextual and relational complexities embedded in everyday established cultures and praxis. These baselines imply that the research is grounded in interactionist perspectives (Bergman, Magnusson & El Khouri, 2002; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), in which the developing individual is reciprocally influencing and being influenced by the environment in a continuous interaction. In this perspective, it is through interaction that a preschool teacher, as a developing professional, constructs professional knowledge and values while also gaining the tools to concretize theoretical knowledge into practice. To understand the interrelationship between the individual and society, the theoretical frame of reference used in this thesis is, as previously mentioned, to be found within ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The theory involves a life course approach, in which individuals' development occurs through processes in a reciprocal interaction with the environment. The environment is conceived as an arrangement of five distinct but mutually interconnected systems: micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems. Interdependency and reciprocity are the fundamental concepts of the ecological systems theory. This implies that what occurs in one system is influenced by what happens in other systems (Perry & Dockett, 2018). The developing individual is viewed as a growing, dynamic entity who progressively moves into and restructures the environment in which she or he resides. At the same time, the environment is conceptualized in ecological systems theory as "extending beyond the behaviour of individuals to encompass functional systems both within and between settings" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 6). It exerts its influence by requiring a process of mutual accommodation.

Bronfenbrenner defined the micro-system as the most proximal setting, in which the individual is physically present and interacts directly with others. It encompasses "activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the

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developing person within this setting with particular physical and material characteristics” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). The meso-system refers to the interrelation between microsystems/settings in which the developing individual participates. Bronfenbrenner defines this interrelation as intersecting communications in which knowledge, in the form of information or experience, is transmitted from one setting to another, thus “encouraging the development of mutual trust, a positive orientation, goal consensus between settings and an evolving balance of power in favour of the developing individual” (1979, p. 212). The exo-system is related to settings in which the developing individual is not involved, but is instead influenced indirectly by what happens in these settings. Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) defines these settings as the settings of power that can occur both at the local and national levels, including the allocation of human and material resources and decisions affecting what happens in other settings in the community or society at large. The macro-system embraces the overarching ideology and constitutes the wider political, social, and economic systems that influence the other systems. The chrono-system, including the concept of time, refers to the development of individuals as shaped by conditions and socio-historical changes occurring during the developing individual’s life course.

Reviewing Bronfenbrenner’s theory-related publications from 1973–2006, Rosa and Tudge (2013) note that his ideas have undergone an evolution over three phases, moving from an ecological to a bioecological theory. They characterize the first phase (1973–1979) as the period with the fullest description of the five systems of the ecological environment, described in the previous paragraphs, in which the individual develops. In this phase, Bronfenbrenner paid little attention to the individual’s personal characteristics. In the second phase (1980–1993), the theory developed and was modified to pay more attention to individuals’ personal characteristics and how they contribute to developmental processes. In the third phase (1993–2006), which constitutes the more mature form of the theory, the Process–Person–Context–Time (PPCT) bioecological model was included as the appropriate research design of the theory. While the consistent use of the term “ecology” throughout all the phases of the theory signifies the interplay between the environment and individuals, refinements to the theory and changes from “ecology” to “bioecology” added an increased emphasis to the role of the individual as an active agent in her or his own development (Perry & Dockett, 2018; Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

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The bioecological model has four interrelating components. The first is the developmental process, which is viewed as the primary mechanism that drives an individual's development. It involves reciprocal interactions over time between an active individual and the persons, objects, or symbols in the individual's immediate environment. The second component is the person, which refers to the role that an individual's personal attributes play in societal interactions. Bronfenbrenner classified these personal attributes as demand, resource, and force characteristics. Demand characteristics, such as age, gender, and certain aspects of behavior, influence both the ways in which individuals engage in interactions and how others interact with them. Resource characteristics include, among others, particular abilities, past experience, and knowledge that, while less readily apparent, can be more powerful than demand characteristics (Jaeger, 2016). Force characteristics include combinations of cognitive, social, emotional, and motivational factors. These are considered the most likely to influence an individual's development. The third component of the model is the context that comprises of the four distinct but interrelated systems described above, namely the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-systems where the individual's development occurs. The last component of the bioecological model is time (chronosystem), which has a prominent place in all phases of the theory, indicating socio-historical changes over time that influence dominant discourses in any society. In the bioecological perspective, the effect of an individual's development process is tied to the personal characteristics of the developing person, the context in which this process is taking place, and the socio-historical changes occurring over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Miller et al. (2012) further developed the ecological systems theory by suggesting a critical ecology of the early childhood profession, emphasizing an enquiry and critical reflection not only into individuals' practices, but also into the entire early childhood and education system. Seeking questions and answers beyond, within, and across all levels of the system, a critical ecology of the early childhood profession provides a foundation for understanding preschool teachers' pedagogical practices as a systemic endeavor that is affected by more than the immediate environment in which they act. From the perspective of the critical ecology of the profession, the early childhood profession, conceptualized as a critical learning community or community of practice, needs to adopt a critical approach to the system as a whole—including individual and collective practices in early childhood settings, in trainings and

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professional preparation and learning, in policy, and in research. Thus, grounded in this conceptualization of the profession, this thesis understands preschool teachers' pedagogical practices as a means of drawing attention to both context-specific factors reflecting the complex realities in which preschool teachers conduct their practices and how these realities are interlinked with the wider socio-political context.

Applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as extended by Miller et al. (2012) to this thesis, the micro-system includes preschool teachers' immediate preschool environment, embracing the daily interactions and relationships both with children through activity settings and other persons involved in direct communication with teachers, such as caregivers and co-workers. This system also comprises the structural components of the preschool that create conditions for these interactions. As such, we can consider the physical design of the preschool, the group size, the group composition, or the teacher-child ratio. Within this microsystem, preschool teachers balance their multiple tasks and demands, actualize their professional competence, and conduct their pedagogical practices; they are also affected by developments and decisions outside this system's boundaries. Their decisions and intentions are constructed through the influence of meso-, exo-, and macro-systems' dynamics over time. In the meso-system, for example, preschool teachers' relationships with the head of the preschool or other professionals, such as supervisors during continuous professional development activities, can influence ways of organizing the children into subgroups or how they implement the curriculum content areas. These relationships create possibilities for preschool teachers to develop as professionals by enhancing their professional knowledge and supporting their practice. The exo-system, including municipalities' allocations of human and material resources or local decisions on, for instance, group size, affects the organizational conditions of the preschool. Further, restricting conditions, such as staff shortages or a lack of non-contact time with the children, make the sharing time for collaborative planning and reflection challenging from a practical point of view. The macro-system denotes the wider ideological patterns, values, and pedagogical approaches to children's learning and development and policy decisions related to the overall goals for the preschool, indicating how preschool teachers ought to act as professionals. Included in the macro-system are also decisions concerning teachers' formal requirements and the content of teacher education programs, where the teachers acquire their professional knowledge in

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connection with theories and perspectives reflecting society's overarching ideology and values. Political discussions and policy decisions on, for instance, the curriculum revisions toward an intensified learning orientation and expectations for preschool teachers' professional responsibility, research evidence on quality issues, and policy guidelines have immediate implications for preschool teachers' everyday practices. The chrono-system indicates societal changes across time expressed through preschool curricula revisions and reforms throughout the years in preschool teacher education and affecting teachers' professional growth.

The definitions of the concepts within the ecological system and how they are relevant to preschool teachers' pedagogical practices, which is the research interest of this thesis, are presented in Table 1. The ecological systems theory is the theoretical framework in all four studies outlined in the thesis, used to understand and discuss relationships among the various layers of the ECEC system and embedded in preschool teachers' considerations of their pedagogical practices. The bioecological model is more explicitly emphasized in Study I, both as a theoretical framework and research design for operationalizing the selection of variables used as indicators for preschool teachers' professional profiles.

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Table 1 Definitions of ecological system terms used in this thesis (adapted from Miller, Dalli & Urban, 2012)

Ecological Level	Definition	Examples
Micro-system	The proximal setting in which the individual is physically present and interacts directly with others.	Preschool teachers' relationships with children, colleagues, and caregivers. Structural components of the preschool influence teachers' working context (e.g., group size, group composition, child/staff ratio, physical ecology of preschool).
Meso-system	Interrelations among settings in which the individual participates.	Relationships with other professionals, such as the head of the preschool, special educators, supervisors of continuing professional development activities, and school teachers.
Exo-system	Settings in which the individual is not involved but is influenced indirectly.	Local decisions on human and resource allocation, group size, non-contact hours with children, time for planning, and documentation and participation in continuing professional activities.
Macro-system	The overarching political, social, and economic systems that influence the other systems.	Ideological patterns, values, and pedagogical approaches to children's learning and development. Curriculum intentions for the preschool's overall goals and guidelines for the staff's pedagogical practices. Preschool teacher education.
Chrono-system	Socio-historical changes occurring during the individual's life course.	Policy reforms over time.

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Situating the Research on Preschool Teachers' Pedagogical Practices

The purpose of this literature review is twofold: i) to provide an overview of the policy reforms implemented in Swedish preschools in recent decades, particularly in relation to curriculum introduction and its revisions as well as changes in preschool teachers' education, and ii) to elucidate various perspectives on preschool quality and preschool teachers' professional competence as overarching concepts guiding preschool teachers' pedagogical practices. Thereafter, I present a brief literature review on the two pedagogical practices explored in the study. The overview of policy reforms in Swedish preschools contributes further insight for understanding the wider socio-political context shaping the profession of preschool teaching in Sweden and premises for preschool teachers to conduct their pedagogical practices. The literature review serves to position the study's exploration of how preschool teachers' considerations of pedagogical practices interplay with current policy issues on preschool quality, the curriculum intentions, and conditions within which preschool teachers realize their practices.

The literature review is based on a systematic literature search. To identify relevant and current peer-reviewed literature, combinations of keywords were used for searches in the social science databases accessible through the University of Gothenburg's library (e.g., ERIC, Education Research Complete, ProQuest Social Science). The literature review involves academic research, European policy documents, and policy-oriented documents from international organizations (e.g., the OECD).

Recent Policy Reforms in Swedish Preschool

In Sweden, ECEC has undergone dynamic changes during the past few decades. Although the preschool, as an institution, has a relatively short history in Sweden, its function and purpose have undergone major changes. The Commission on Nursery Provision (in Swedish: Barnstugeutredningen) was

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first appointed in 1968. It serves as the foundation, ideologically, pedagogically, and organizationally, for the full expansion of child care in Swedish municipalities (Martin Korpi, 2007; Westberg, 2017). Its scientific foundation was based on theories of developmental psychology and social psychology of the growing child. The pedagogical dialogue, was recommended as a basis for developing mutual relationships between pedagogues and children based on respect for the individual child and confidence in the child's ability, curiosity, and desire to learn. The importance of encouraging children's participation in and influence on activities was the foundation of a powerful democratization of activities for children and introduced a pedagogy for creating equivalent conditions for all children's development. Care and play should be integrated in pedagogical activities that are organized around themes based on children's diverse interests and needs. The ambition of the Commission was to integrate traditions from a variety of daycare centers and play schools under a common organization called "preschool" (Martin Korpi, 2007). The idea of a work team and collaboration among all those working in daycares became a fundamental democratic principle of the pedagogical work.

In 1985, the Swedish Government's bill "Preschool for all Children" emphasized preschool as the right of all children. This became a foundation for the subsequent expansion of the country's preschools. The pedagogical role of the preschool in supporting children's development and learning from an early age thus became a political issue in itself (Martin Korpi, 2007). In 1983, to reinforce the pedagogical role of the preschool, the National Board of Health submitted a proposal for preschools' educational programs that focused on goals, content, and working methods based on four starting points: i) social goals, such as equality, solidarity, security and responsibility; ii) children's comprehensive personality development; iii) the preschool's working methods, emphasizing work, play, and learning as the basic pillars of all preschool activities; and iv) subject areas that are central to the preschool's activities, including building and designing, language development, sound and movement, social world orientation, and nature orientation (National Board of Health, 1983). A thematically organized work form should guide the activities and the content of the activities and related to the children's own experiences. The pedagogical program for preschool, published in 1987, has been characterized as a set of general guidelines, but in practice, it functioned as a curriculum (Karlsson Lohmander & Pramling Samuelsson, 2015).

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In 1996, the responsibility for preschool serving children ages 1 through 6 years was transferred from the social to the educational sector, and preschool was integrated into the national educational system. The decision for this integration process has been widely supported by increasing policy attention to the importance of preschool as a first step in children's lifelong learning and development. At the same time, a new school form, the preschool class for 6-year-olds, was introduced, changing the age structure of preschool groups, now covering the age from 1 to 5 years. Following this transfer, in 1998, the first national curriculum for preschool was introduced, and preschools' educational mandate was strengthened. Reflecting globalized, societal changes and views on childhood and children's rights, the preschool curriculum is based on sociocultural theoretical approaches (Vallberg Roth, 2014) in which caring, child development, and learning are understood as relational and contextual, taking place in reciprocal interactions. By guiding and ensuring preschool's quality, the curriculum encompasses fundamental values, tasks, goals, and guidelines for preschool activities. The goals specify the direction of preschool's work, while the guidelines indicate the responsibility of the preschool staff as a whole team for ensuring that the work is conducted in accordance with the curriculum goals and the desired quality targets (Sheridan et al., 2011; Vallberg Roth, 2014). Based on a holistic perspective of children's well-being, learning, and development, the preschool curriculum clearly emphasizes lifelong learning (Vallberg Roth, 2006), and with democracy as a fundamental value, children are seen as active participants in their own learning process. The child perspective and the child's perspective also become essential concepts for preschool staff's pedagogical approaches (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson & Hundeide, 2011). The preschool staff as a whole team was, in this regard, expected to conduct preschool activities that provide playful, rich learning environments and meet each child's interests and needs.

In the Education Act (2010:800), preschool became a school form in its own right within the overall educational system. Additionally, it was explicitly emphasized in the Act that education within the overall educational system should be grounded in scientific basis and proven experience. In recent decades, the preschool curriculum has been revised on four occasions (in 2006, 2010, 2016, and 2018), in an effort to enhance the educational assignment of preschool. This thesis is situated within the first two revisions of the curriculum, because the studies included herein were conducted before the last two revisions were implemented. During the first two revisions, the focus on

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children's learning was strengthened; content areas, including literacy, early mathematics, natural science, and technology, were clarified; and the demand for the documentation, follow-up, and evaluation of preschools' pedagogical work was increased. However, even though learning in various content areas was emphasized, it was still tasked with being integrated with play and care as a whole (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2016). Furthermore, in the 2010 reform, preschool teachers' responsibilities for teaching and pedagogical activities were clarified and strengthened. This was justified on the basis of the teachers' academic educational background and their professional competence, in terms of the theoretical knowledge, didactic skills, and dispositions required for ensuring preschool quality (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). The changes, thus, reflected the influences of international approaches for increased academic learning and preschool teachers' professionalization, were aimed at strengthening the preschool's educational assignment by creating a higher level of professional expertise for preschool activities (Vallberg Roth, 2014).

Although these reforms were generally welcomed by preschool staff, concerns regarding the "schoolification" of preschool (Dahlberg & Lenz Taguchi, 2015; Eidevald, Engdahl, Frankenberg, Lenz Taguchi & Palmer, 2018; Johansson & Moss, 2012) and the complexity of the implementation of the curriculum were raised. Furthermore, the specific emphasis on preschool teachers' professional responsibility in the revised curriculum was noted as particularly problematic in a work context traditionally characterized by horizontal collegial relationships among preschool teachers and other professional categories (Eriksson, Svensson & Beach, 2018). The intensified learning orientation of preschool and the emphasis on raising preschool quality is even more evident in the later revisions of the curriculum, where the focus is placed on three additional areas: i) the importance of collaboration between preschool and school for facilitating children's transition to school, ii) the clarification of preschool teachers' teaching responsibilities, and iii) the preschool head's responsibility for ensuring conditions for preschool quality (Sheridan & Williams, 2018; Vallberg Roth & Tallberg Broman, 2018a).

The preschool teacher education program has also changed over time, progressing from relatively short courses to an extensive 3.5-year university degree program. More specifically, in 1977, preschool teachers' education was integrated into the university system as a two-year academic program. This integration was part of a broader reform of the Swedish higher education system intended to create a unified system by including all post-secondary

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education in a new structure and integrating practical/vocational and theoretical/academic programs. Previously, preschool teachers' training was grounded in practice and delivered in seminar form. After the transfer to universities, a change was made in the balance between practice and theory, and a program with a structure more similar to university-level courses was developed (Karlsson Lohmander, 2004). Through the Higher Education Act of 1992, the preschool teachers' training was extended to three years in length.

A new system of teacher education was introduced in 2001, and the program was thereby extended to 3.5 years of study. The new teaching degree encompasses three areas of education: general field studies, major orientation studies, and a specialization. Moreover, by emphasizing the importance of workplace-based learning, the new program stresses a strong link between theoretical knowledge and practical experience. The motivation behind this reform was broader societal changes and changes made in the school system during the previous decades. This was followed by the introduction of a preschool curriculum and new school curricula at the compulsory school levels. In light of these changes, preschool teachers' professional role changed to show an increasing demand for content knowledge, both in terms of breadth and depth (SOU, 1999).

In 2011, a new preschool teacher education program with a clear didactic perspective was introduced. In the new program, students were tasked with developing a professional identity as a preschool teacher (Lillvist, Sandberg, Sheridan & Williams, 2014; Sheridan et al., 2011). In accordance with curriculum intentions and guidelines on preschool teachers' responsibilities, the new education program aims to educate independent professionals. By strongly emphasizing its scientific foundation, the program is organized within the domains of (i) knowledge and understanding, (ii) skills and abilities, and (iii) judgement and views. At the same time, a new reform was introduced: the regulation of a license required for permanent employment in preschool.

Besides changes in preschool teachers' education, investments in preschool teachers' professional development have also been realized in recent decades. Two evaluation studies by the Swedish National Agency for Education (2004, 2008) following the introduction of the preschool curriculum pointed out that some municipal and local initiatives were promoting preschool teachers' in-service training in the forms of mostly coaching, supervision practices, or sharing experiences with other preschools. Whilst language learning and development were the priority content areas in most in-service training, it was

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unclear if these efforts were systematic. At the national level, the “Boost for Preschool” in 2009 and 2011 were the government’s initiative for providing preschool teachers with advanced, continuing professional development courses that focused mainly on the new content areas emphasized by the revised curriculum such as mathematics, language, the natural sciences, and technology. The Swedish National Agency for Education (2017) emphasizes that preschool teachers’ continuing professional development is a prerequisite for the entire ECEC system, in order to provide all children with a high quality preschool. However, preschool teachers’ continuing professional development is still not obligatory (Karlsson Lohmander, 2017) and varies among municipalities and preschools across the country, in terms of the amount of time, the forms, and the kinds of specialized knowledge offered to preschool teachers. Local decisions closely connected both to economic issues and the shortage of substitute staff can influence preschool teachers’ participation in continuing professional development activities.

In 2018, the Swedish School Inspectorate indicated in an evaluation report that quality differences across preschools, in relation to their curriculum goals’ fulfilment, affect the quality and equality of ECEC provision. The report showed a variation across preschools on how both preschool staff and heads of preschools interpret and, in turn, realize the intentions and goals of the curriculum in everyday practice. While the commitment to the preschool’s educational mission and curriculum’s goals are high, the report shows further that preschool teachers are experiencing uncertainty regarding their work with some content areas, such as science, technology, mathematics, and language development for multilingual children. These conclusions show that, despite investments in professional development, there is a shortage of content knowledge and competence. This, in turn, influences preschool quality. The report strongly emphasizes that a central aspect for ensuring preschool quality is the preschool teachers’ professional competence. This entails placing an emphasis on teachers’ content knowledge and professional awareness of what is important for children to learn and how they, as teachers, relate this to their pedagogical practices in providing all children opportunities to develop their potential. Additionally, the compensatory contribution of preschool is linked to the distribution of structural resources that can support or constrain teachers’ everyday interactions with children.

Perspectives on Preschool Quality

Research evidence supports that high quality experiences in preschool are critical for children's short- and long-term well-being, learning, and development (e.g., Sheridan, 2007, 2009; Siraj et al., 2017; Slot, 2018; Sylva et al., 2010). Despite this, a universal definition of what pedagogical practices can be demonstrably ensured as enhancing children's learning and development remains a research imperative (Siraj et al., 2017). This is because quality, as an educational phenomenon, is a value laden concept stemming from different paradigmatic perspectives. Sheridan (2007, 2009) argues that quality in early childhood education is often conceived as being either a subjective or an objective concept. In the subjective approach, quality is perceived as a dynamic and contextual concept with definitions evolving and changing over time, reflecting each country's core values and objectives, ideologies, and academic traditions, not as an objective reality (cf. Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007; Taguma, Litjens & Makowiecki, 2013; Urban et al., 2012). According to Sheridan (2007, 2009), in the objective approach, the concept of quality is considered to be valid in any situation and context. Sheridan argues for an intersubjective approach to quality, as educational phenomenon, emanating from the belief that there is a need for a shared understanding and knowledge of characteristics that constitute the concept of "quality."

Despite the discrepancies in the meaning and constitution of quality noted above, a large body of research using observational quality measurement scales has examined the impact of preschool quality on children's outcomes through the distinction that can be made among the structural characteristics of preschools and process quality (e.g., Howes et al., 2008; Pianta et al., 2005; Sylva et al., 2006; Thomason & La Paro, 2009). Structural quality includes distal and regulable aspects of a preschool, such as its physical environment and design, staff-to-child ratio, group size, and its teachers' pre- and in-service professional development and working conditions (Burchinal, Howes & Kontos, 2002; Slot, Leseman, Verhagen & Mulder, 2015). Process quality includes children's everyday experiences in preschool while engaging in activities and interacting with peers, preschool staff, and materials; these are seen as proximal determinants in children's cognitive and social development (La Paro, Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Slot et al., 2015).

While most prior research has been dominated by the "iron triangle" characteristics, including child-staff ratios, group size, and teachers' pre-service

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qualifications (Slot et al., 2015), which are deemed to be a necessary foundation for creating conditions for children's well-being, learning, and development, evidence suggests that structural quality alone is insufficient. Increasingly, national and international research has focused on the quality of processes, indicating that interactions, relationships, and social processes between preschool teachers and children and among children are more strongly associated with a variety of children's cognitive, socioemotional, and behavioral outcomes (Booren, Downer & Vitiello, 2012; Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta & Mashburn, 2009; Persson, 2015; Siraj et al., 2019). Because the structural aspects of quality and process quality have been found to be linked, the research indicates a need for a balanced approach, taking into consideration both quality aspects when preschool quality is intended to be studied (Siraj et al., 2017; Slot, 2018).

This thesis adopts a multidimensional and multilevel approach to quality based on Sheridan's (2007, 2009) definition of preschool quality. Using the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998) to assess and evaluate quality in different preschools, and inspired by Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory (1979, 1986), Sheridan suggests a pedagogical perspective on quality. A pedagogical perspective on quality is defined by four interrelated dimensions: the society, the preschool teacher, the child, and the context (Sheridan, 2007, 2009). The dimension of society, on a macro level, embraces knowledge about the policy-changing intentions, the theoretical view of children's learning and development, the task of the preschool, and the overall goals to be achieved. The dimension of the preschool teacher includes preschool teachers' professional competence in terms of knowledge, practices, and values to combine children's interests and needs with the overarching goals of society and thereby create conditions for a secure, playful, stimulating, and learning-rich environment. It also reflects preschool teachers' pedagogical intentions and the approaches that influence their working methods and strategies for organizing their daily work. The dimension of the child embraces dominant theoretical perspectives on children's participation and influence. This implies that the dimension reflects how children experience and construct their learning through interactions with the preschool's staff, their peers, and the physical environment and to what extent they participate in influencing and forming their learning environment. The dimension of context includes the availability of human and material resources and how they are used and experienced by all actors, both locally and nationally,

involved in the preschool. Sheridan (2007, 2009) pointed out that different levels of quality emerge in preschools, depending on how these interacting dimensions are perceived from different perspectives and in relation to time and a specific context. The evaluation of preschool quality is beyond the scope of this thesis; however, the pedagogical perspective of quality underpins it, to facilitate understanding and discussion of the relationships among current policy issues on preschool quality, curriculum goals, the structural aspects of preschool, and preschool teachers' considerations of the pedagogical practices involved in their daily work.

Perspectives on Preschool Teachers' Professional Competence

There is a broad consensus among researchers, practitioners, and supranational policymakers that ECEC quality, and ultimately children's well-being, learning, and development, depend on well-educated and competent staff who can deliver high quality curricula to children with diverse interests and needs (e.g., European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019; Manning, Garvis, Fleming & Wong, 2017; OECD, 2019; Sheridan et al., 2011; Siraj et al., 2019). Professionalizing the ECEC workforce by raising qualification levels to achieve high quality standards has been a worldwide priority for policymakers. Several studies have found that a high level of formal education is associated with high quality pedagogical practices, thus yielding better support for children's wellbeing, learning, and development (Barnett, 2003; Sylva et al., 2010); more effective teaching (Howes, James & Ritchie, 2003); and positive classroom interactions (Pianta et al., 2005). Other international observational studies investigating the relationship between preschool teachers' formal qualifications, including education level, and the quality of pedagogical practices have shown inconsistent results with few and weak associations (Early et al., 2007; Lin & Magnuson, 2018; Slot, 2018). Several scholars have related these inconsistent findings to the different analytical models applied across studies and statistical choices, which can affect the outcomes of the analyses (Lin & Magnuson, 2018; Slot, 2018). Other scholars have pointed out concerns related to large variations in preschool teachers' education programs, in terms of their structure and content (Whitebook et al., 2012), and the ongoing discussion questioning the link between theoretical/academic knowledge acquired in the university context

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and experience-based knowledge acquired in the workplace (La Paro, Van Schangen, King & Lippard, 2018).

There is also research evidence indicating that policies focusing solely on preschool teachers' formal education do not reliably ensure that they have the skills, knowledge, and dispositions to enhance preschool quality (Early et al., 2007; Egert, Fukkink & Eckhardt, 2018; Siraj et al., 2019). In recent years, research focusing on ECEC quality in relation to preschool teachers' competence has adopted a developmental perspective in which continuing professional development (CPD) has been paid more attention (Egert et al., 2018; Jensen & Iannone, 2018; Litjens & Taguma, 2010; Siraj et al., 2019; Urban et al., 2012). Research on the field has emphasized the potential of CPD to highlight up-to-date, scientifically based methods and curriculum subjects that preschool teachers may require updating on, due to changes in particular curriculum content areas (Litjens & Taguma, 2010).

While the provision of professional development activities in ECEC is widely diverse with respect to intensity and delivery (Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin & Knoche, 2009), the research on the efficacy of such activities has pointed out an interconnectedness of the “who,” “what,” and “how” aspects of professional development programs (Buisse, Winton & Rous, 2009; Siraj et al., 2019). This implies that attempts to enhance preschool teachers' practice through professional development activities must consider the interplay of: i) the learners' diverse educational backgrounds, roles in the preschool, and experiences; ii) the content of the professional development efforts, including what specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions are needed by specific professionals and in specific context; and iii) the organization—that is, the duration and structure of the provision of the professional development contents (Buisse et al., 2009; Siraj et al., 2019). These components are especially crucial in ECEC, where the preschool population is increasing and diverse and new education programs are developed continuously, reflecting rapidly changing societal values and pedagogical and didactical approaches.

Despite the above, a growing body of research has criticized the understanding of the concept of professional competence as being solely an individual's property and instead advocated for a holistic and systemic approach in which professional competence is conceptualized as a relational and ongoing learning process closely aligned to the complexity of everyday educational practices (Miller et al., 2012; Urban & Dalli, 2012; Urban et al., 2012). Within this approach, preschool teachers' professional competence is rather associated

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with what Oberhuemer labels “democratic professionalism,” which foregrounds “collaborative, cooperative action between professional colleagues and other stakeholders” (2005, p. 13). These studies emphasize that ECEC quality requires a constant enquiry, not only into individuals’ practices, but also into the entire ECEC system that sustains and contributes to the professional growth of staff in relation to changing political and social realities, knowledge, and practices (Miller et al., 2012). For example, in an interview study, Dalli (2008) identified three core themes related to teachers’ professional competence: purposeful pedagogical strategies of planning, evaluating, and reflecting on practice along with teachers’ sensitivity and responsiveness to children’s interests and needs; professional knowledge, including theoretical knowledge on children’s learning and development, content knowledge, and the ability to reflect on their own practice along with a willingness to be updated; and collaborative relationships with colleagues, caregivers, and beyond the institution’s stakeholders. Relatedly, the cross-national survey “Competence Requirements in Early Childhood and Care” (CoRe; Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari & Peeters, 2011) examined different professional competence profiles in 15 European countries. The survey argued for expanding the traditional approach to professional competence from the definition as an individual’s acquisition of knowledge and skills through formalized learning to a broad vision of ECEC that embraces negotiated goals, reflectiveness, and collaborative practices. Professional competence is thus understood as unfolding in the dimensions of knowledge, practices, and values derived from within ECEC practice and developed in a reciprocal interaction among all levels embedded in the ECEC system: the individual, the institutional, the inter-institutional, and the level of governance (Urban, 2014; Urban et al., 2011).

Similarly, preschool teachers’ competence, as a multidimensional, relational, and ongoing learning process, has also been emphasized in Swedish research. For example, in a study by Sheridan et al. (2011) that investigated the meanings that Swedish preschool teachers ascribe to competence, three mutually interdependent dimensions were identified: i) the competence of knowing what and why, ii) the competence of know-how, and iii) interactive and transactional competence. The first dimension refers to preschool teachers’ content knowledge, reflectivity, and ability and desire to be updated on current research, which increases their knowledge and helps them to conduct their daily work constructively. The second dimension is related to teachers’ democratic

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leadership among children and colleagues and the ability to organize their daily work to provide a dynamic, rich, and challenging environment for children's well-being, learning, and development. The third dimension includes teachers' communicative, collaborative, caring, and didactic competence. In another study, Lillvist et al. (2014) examined the perspectives of students in Swedish early childhood education programs and found similar dimensions. The students' definitions of preschool teachers' competence were composed of six dimensions: a general pedagogical competence, specific content competence, distinct teacher competence, play competence, competence of the child's perspective, and collaborative and social competence.

As previously mentioned, in this thesis, preschool teachers' professional competence is understood to be a multidimensional concept embedded with and influenced by global changes and closely connected to its national and local dimensions (Miller et al., 2012; Sheridan et al., 2011; Urban & Dalli, 2012). Professional competence actualizes in practice through Sheridan's four quality dimensions, in terms of the reciprocity of the various layers of the ECEC system, embedded in preschool teachers' considerations of their pedagogical practices.

Preschool Teachers' Pedagogical Practices

Increasingly, the complexity of preschool teachers' work in ECEC settings as a constant balancing of multiple tasks and demands is being recognized (Miller et al., 2012; Moss, 2010; Sheridan et al., 2014; Siraj et al., 2017; Urban, 2008). Preschool teachers have to address not only the need to provide care, but also broader requirements in terms of educational, social, and cultural demands in line with rapid societal changes and new scientific insights on children's learning and development. Because of the huge disparity in the skills, the diversity of needs, and interests of the young children attending preschools, supporting their learning and development is complex and challenging. Studies on preschool quality and effective pedagogical practices have found that effective preschool teachers combine positive relationships with meaningful learning experiences and provide responsive and individualized feedback and intentional engagement. At the same time they have to balance ecological resources and constraints and maintaining a preschool environment that is well thought-out and predictable, but not overly structured (Fuligni, Howes, Huang, Hong & Lara-Cinisomo, 2012; Sheridan, 2007, 2009; Siraj et al., 2017).

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In the literature, pedagogical practices, pedagogy, and curriculum implementation are often referred to as interchangeable concepts related to preschool teachers' actions, activities, and practices for educating and caring for the children (Wall, Litjens & Taguma, 2015). Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, and Bell define pedagogy as "that set of instructional techniques and strategies which enable learning to take place and provide opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions within a particular social and material context" (2002, p. 28). Based on this definition, preschool teachers' pedagogical practices are defined, in this thesis, as organizational strategies and pedagogical approaches for children's well-being, learning, and development. They are, also, considered as being constituted by mutual influence of the policy, curriculum goals, and organizational conditions of preschools and preschool teachers' professional competence.

In this thesis, the research is focused on preschool teachers' views on their practices for organizing children into subgroups (Studies II, III) and working with curriculum content areas (Study IV). The first practice is explored through a dual perspective; to identify i) contextually latent factors that determine preschool teachers' decisions to divide the whole group into subgroups and ii) profiles of preschool teachers' intentions with this particular practice. Previous national and international studies, which are thoroughly presented in Studies II and III, have applied various methodological designs and shown that incorporating small group activities into preschools' daily schedules is associated with high quality pedagogical practices (e.g., Alvestad et al., 2014; Ansari & Purtell, 2016; De Schipper, Riksen-Walraven & Geurts, 2006; Goble & Pianta, 2017; Sheridan et al., 2014; Slot, Cadima, Salminen, Pastori & Lerkkanen, 2016). One general conclusion of these studies is that preschool teachers' small group arrangements have the possibility to enable a sustainable preschool environment with a range of benefits for children's well-being, learning, and development. These benefits include, for example, opportunities for dynamic children-teacher and child-child interactions and possibilities for children's active participation and engagement in activities that support conditions for their well-being and learning in specific content areas.

However, even though the research supports the benefits of working in subgroups in preschool, there is a need for a detailed investigation of the factors that may affect preschool teachers' decisions related to grouping practice and, even more, their intentions with this practice, both nationally and internationally. From an international perspective, a growing body of research

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in the United States has examined how children's time in preschool is allocated in various activity settings: whole group, small groups, and free choice settings (Ansari & Purtell, 2016; Chien et al., 2010; Early et al., 2010; Fuligni et al., 2012; Goble & Pianta, 2017). These studies, using observational data and applying mostly latent variable modeling analyses, have examined the various classroom typologies in relation to children's cognitive and socioemotional outcomes. While the effect sizes for the associations between classroom typologies and children's early learning were relatively small, these studies found that the largest gains in academic achievement were in teacher-directed whole or small group activities. One recent multi-case study (Slot et al., 2016) was conducted in seven European countries with the objective of investigating associations between structural and process quality and pedagogical practices in preschools. The study found that, when the structural aspects of the preschool, such as the whole group size and staff-to-child ratio, were not optimal, preschool teachers provided most activities in small groups. The study showed that working in small groups was associated with high levels of process quality, with respect to the quality of preschool teachers' feedback provided during problem-solving activities, and their responsiveness to children's needs, views, and interests (Slot et al., 2016).

Relatedly, in the Swedish research context, preschool teachers' practice of organizing children into subgroups has been examined in relation to group sizes in preschools and their impact on both preschool staff's working conditions and children's conditions for well-being, learning, and development (Alvestad et al., 2014; Sheridan et al., 2014; Williams, Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2016; Williams et al., 2019). These studies, based on interviews, have shown that organizing the whole preschool group into subgroups was primarily a functional way for teachers to make the entire group more manageable. Furthermore, the studies pointed out that working in subgroups was a practice that was adopted by preschool teachers during a limited part of the day and often without purposeful planning. How, why, and when children are divided into smaller groups were described by Sheridan et al. (2014) as three organized environments: (i) a free-play organized environment in which teachers and children were primarily together in the whole group throughout the day, (ii) an activity-organized environment where the focus was on planned activities, and (iii) a learning oriented environment in which groupings and activities were a communicated issue between teacher and children intended to create optimal conditions for children's learning. While these studies (Alvestad et al., 2014;

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Sheridan et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2016, 2019) provide important information on group organizing in preschools, they have investigated only a small sample of preschool teachers and were based solely on qualitative interviews. Furthermore, among the studies referred above, only the study by Sheridan et al., (2014), has a specific focus on the organizing of children into subgroups. Therefore, the studies referred to in this thesis are based on a need to further investigate this particular practice. Additionally, the nationally representative sample of preschool teachers is based on endeavors to contribute to a broader understanding of grouping practices.

The second practice explored in this thesis is related to preschool teachers' emphasis on curriculum content areas. This topic was examined in relation to possible relationships with preschool teachers' professional competence and group size in preschool. While a number of studies have examined measures of classroom quality, such as preschool teachers' pre- and in-service training, child-staff ratios and group size in preschools in relation to children's developmental and learning outcomes (for a review of these studies, see Burchinal, 2018), there is little research that links the group size in preschools and preschool teachers' competence to their considerations on the work with curriculum content areas.

Sylva et al. (2015) explored the official curriculum of 11 European countries, along with enabling or constraining factors on their implementation. Despite many shared pedagogical principles across countries, the study found large variations in the quality of pedagogical practices. The study pointed out that, irrespective of how committed the preschool staff is to working with curriculum goals, successful implementation demands expertise and staff time. High quality pedagogical practices require the preschool staff to have access to continuing professional development and supportive working conditions, including low ratios and optimal group sizes (Sylva et al., 2015). There are a few previous Swedish studies that have explored preschool teachers' perspectives on their work with curriculum content areas in relation to group size in preschool (Pramling Samuelsson, Williams & Sheridan., 2015; Williams et al., 2019). These studies, based on interviews, found that preschool teachers view a large number of children in groups as an obstacle to working with some specific content areas: technology, science, the arts, and reading. The great range of children's ages in groups, as well as a shortage of human resources, coupled with the lack of space and time to divide the whole group into subgroups, were some of the reasons why particular content areas were

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discarded. Another study, by Lillvist et al. (2014), examined what view students in early childhood education programs had on the competence they acquired during their course of education and found low levels of confidence in specific content knowledge concerning literacy, mathematics, science, and technology. According to the authors, these low ratings suggest a concern among students about the quality of specific courses in early childhood education programs in relation to the shortage of lecturers with degrees in ECEC. Therefore, further investigating the curriculum content areas preschool teachers report that they involve least in their daily practice, and the reasons for this, can bring crucial knowledge to preschool teachers' education and continuing professional development efforts with the goal of enhancing the quality of preschool practices.

Chapter 4

Methods

This chapter presents the sampling process and analytical strategies that were applied in the four studies. It also discusses validity and reliability issues, as well as the study's limitations. The chapter concludes with ethical considerations that have been taken into account during the collection, analysis, and presentation of the results.

Sample and Data Collection

As mentioned in previous chapters, this thesis is part of a large Swedish research project entitled "The impact of group size on children's affordances in preschool" (Williams et al., 2012). The four studies consist of a data analysis drawn from questions included in the project's web-based questionnaire. The data were collected between autumn 2012 and early 2013. The preschool coordinators in each municipality were contacted, informed of the project's purpose, and asked to distribute the information and the link to the web-based questionnaire to all preschools in their respective municipality. One preschool teacher in each preschool was asked to complete the survey. A covering letter was also sent detailing the project's purpose, procedure, and reporting process, as well as outlining the ethical considerations of ensuring the teachers' anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy of participation.

The sampling process used with the municipalities and preschools, which is thoroughly described in Study I (Nasiopoulou et al., 2019), was stratified and based on statistics from the Swedish National Agency for Education (2013) on the grounds of which municipalities with both large and small numbers of children in preschool groups were selected. In Sweden, there are 290 municipalities in total, which are classified into nine categories, namely metropolitans and large cities, commuting municipalities near metropolitans and large cities, medium-sized cities, commuting municipalities near medium-sized cities, commuting municipalities with a low commuting rate near medium-sized cities, small towns, commuting municipalities near small towns, rural municipalities, and rural municipalities with a visitor industry (Swedish

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Association of Local Authorities and Regions, 2017). Municipalities within the same municipality type share rather similar sociodemographic characteristics. The municipalities in the sample were selected so that they represented, to a great extent, the sociodemographic characteristics of these nine categories of municipalities. Around 45.3% of respondents were from large cities, 45.7% were from medium-sized towns, and 9% were from smaller towns/rural areas. It should be noted that the number of metropolitan and large cities is much smaller than, for example, the number of small towns or rural areas; however, children and preschools in metropolitan areas and large cities outnumber those in smaller locales. Hence, the sample is proportional to the size of the municipalities with respect to the number of children and preschools (Nasiopoulou et al., 2019).

In total, 698 preschool teachers from preschools in 46 municipalities completed the questionnaire. Taking into account that one preschool teacher from each preschool was asked to answer the web-based questionnaire, the answers represent 13% of preschools in Sweden. A majority of respondents worked in municipal preschools (92.4%), among which 97.7% were female, 1.6% were male, and 0.7% did not identify their gender. The average age of the responding preschool teachers was 44 years. One uncertainty with the chosen sampling process is the total number of preschools the survey reached out to in each municipality, which makes it difficult to calculate the survey response rate. This raises a concern on the selection procedure, as the final selection of respondents was in the hands of the preschool coordinators, who distributed the link with the web-based questionnaire, and the applied selection criteria are unknown. Thus, even though the preschool teachers who answered the questionnaire can be considered a relatively large and geographically representative sample, potential limitations as a result of the internal selection criteria are worth bearing in mind when interpreting and generalizing the results.

The questionnaire comprised 31 fixed-format and 15 open-ended questions. These questions were formulated to encompass five themes related to preschool teachers' background characteristics; group sizes in their own preschool; the teachers' working conditions; views on the grounds for organizing children in subgroups; and on children's abilities, learning, and participation in relation to group size. Study I uses questions regarding preschool teachers' personal background characteristics, such as age, gender, native language, working experience in preschools or other school settings, questions related to their educational background, and questions related to their

working context. Studies II and III analyze data generated from two questions related to the teachers' views on group organizing in preschools. Study IV analyzes one question concerning preschool teachers' views on their work with curriculum content areas.

Analytical Strategies

The four studies apply multiple analytical strategies, including latent variable modeling, descriptive analysis, and qualitative thematic analysis. The reason for this plurality of analytical strategies is rooted in the various research questions addressed in each study. Study I aimed to explore preschool teachers' professional profiles by applying latent variable modeling (Hagenaars & McCutcheon, 2002; Collins & Lanza, 2010) to capture individual differences and identify homogenous subgroups of preschool teachers with similar characteristics. This study served as a basis for the others, providing a general platform and a wider net of issues that could then be taken into account when conducting the subsequent studies. Thus, the differences between the identified profiles were then used in Studies III and IV to further examine preschool teachers' views on grouping practice and their work with curriculum content areas, which was the aim of each respective study. Studies II and III explored and analyzed teachers' views on organizing children into subgroups through different, but complementary perspectives and analytical strategies with the intention of investigating an area of research that has not been explored much before. Accordingly, Study II focuses on preschool teachers' views on factors that determine their decisions when organizing children into subgroups. This study applies confirmatory factor analysis (Brown, 2015) to identify latent factors that account for the variations and covariations among a set of variables. Study III focuses on preschool teachers' intentions when they organize the children into subgroups. This study applies, in a way similar to Study I, latent variable modeling to capture differences in preschool teachers' intentions with grouping practice and identify homogenous intentional profiles. Mplus 7 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017) statistical software was used to conduct the analyses in the three studies. Study IV aimed to investigate preschool teachers' considerations of the curriculum content areas they least involve in their work and, on the basis of their explanation for that, to examine possible relationships with their professional competence and group size in preschool. The study, drawing on a mixed-methods analytical procedure (Creswell & Plano Clark,

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2011), applies both a quantitative (descriptive statistics) and qualitative analytical approach (thematic analysis, Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017).

Person-Centered Analytical Approach

Study I explored the professional profiles of preschool teachers across different preschools in Sweden. The underlying assumption of the study is that preschool teachers are a considerably diverse population, with regards to their different levels of formal education and continuing professional development, their personal characteristics, educational experience, various roles in preschools, and their working contexts. To tackle the heterogeneity among the preschool teachers, a latent class analysis (LCA) was applied (Collins & Lanza, 2010; Hagenaaers & McCutcheon, 2002). LCA is a person-centered analytical approach (Bergman et al., 2002; Collins & Lanza, 2010) where the emphasis is on individuals' characteristics. Person-centered analytical approaches, such as LCA, enable researchers to identify individual differences and thus model distinct configurations of heterogeneity within a given sample, identifying patterns of characteristics in subgroups (Collins & Lanza, 2010). In the person-centered approach, general patterns carry the information, and their differences can be compared (Bergman et al., 2002). Thus, the underlying principle of person-centered approach is that, rather than quantifying the role of particular variables in a study, a population is organized in terms of discrete, mutually exclusive, and exhaustive subgroups (profiles/classes), each comprising individuals with similar characteristics (Collins & Lanza, 2010; Lanza & Rhoades, 2013). The latent class membership of individuals is unknown, but can be inferred by the pattern of item-response probabilities, that is, the conditional probabilities indicating the likelihood that an individual in a latent class responded in a particular pattern to a set of observed categorical variables (Lanza, Collins, Lemmon & Schafer, 2007; Yang Hansen & Munk, 2012). Thus, the goal with the LCA is to identify items that clearly indicate the classes, estimate the class probabilities, identify covariates that explain class membership, and classify individuals properly within each latent class (Marcoulides & Heck, 2013). In evaluating individuals' classification and the number of distinguishable classes, three criteria, as recommended by Nylund-Gibson and Masyn (2016), were used in this study: (i) the fit of the model, (ii) the classification quality, and (iii) the meaningfulness and interpretability of the latent classes in practice. The two-class solution was better compared to the

three-class solution, with regard to the model fit information criteria. Consequently, the solution with two classes was chosen, as it best described the differences among preschool teachers' professional profiles.

Complementary Use of Variable- and Person-Centered Analytical Approaches

Studies II and III apply, respectively, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA; Brown, 2015), as a variable-centered approach, and latent profile analysis (LPA; Collins & Lanza, 2010), as a person-centered approach, in a complementary manner. The objective of the complementary use of these analytical approaches was to elicit a comprehensive account of preschool teachers' expressed views on organizing children in groups in preschool, which is the overarching research interest connecting these two studies. The variable-centered approaches, such as the CFA applied in Study II, emphasize capturing information about interrelationships among variables applied to the overall sample (Scotto Rosato & Baer, 2012), and the identified factor structure is the same for all individuals. By distinguishing these approaches, variables in person-oriented approaches, such as the LPA applied in Study III, are considered only as components of the pattern under analysis, and the focus is on capturing individual differences and studying individuals on the basis of their response patterns on variables that are relevant to the research question (Bergman et al., 2002; Wang & Wang, 2012). According to Bergman et al. (2002), the results from the application of these approaches in a complementary way can be useful and thought provoking, as the provided information can be hard to align for comparison. Indeed, a comparative perspective was not the purpose with these analytical strategies. The rationale behind the choice of the complementary use of these analytical approaches was that preschool teachers' decisions and intentions when they organize the groups is not only a feature of their individual pedagogical approaches and intentions, but also an attribute of the entire system imposed by the complexities of everyday life in a preschool (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Miller et al., 2012; Urban & Dalli, 2012). Thus, using these analytical strategies, the purpose was to establish a deeper understanding of the interplay between the contextual factors and individual differences involved in preschool teachers' intentions with this particular practice.

As previously mentioned, Study II focused on preschool teachers' views on grouping practices in Swedish preschools. By applying the CFA strategy, the study aimed to identify factors that determine preschool teachers' decisions when organizing children into subgroups. CFA requires researchers to have

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previous knowledge of the dimensionality of the variables under study, based on theory or empirical findings (Brown, 2015; Wang & Wang, 2012). Therefore, a hypothetical model must be specified with a predetermined factor structure according to the existing theory and previous research findings before testing the model. In applying CFA, researchers are interested in evaluating the extent to which a set of observed indicators of the latent factors measure the factors for which they have hypothesized to measure. Thus, based on interactionist perspectives and ecological system theory (Bergman et al., 2002; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) and previous research findings on group organizing in preschools (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2015; Sheridan, et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2019), a hypothesized one-factor model was tested to investigate its fit for the study's variables (factor indicators). The model was evaluated according to three criteria, as recommended by Brown (2015): (i) overall goodness of fit, which reflects the degree to which the estimates of the CFA model reproduce the relationships among variables in the observed sample; (ii) global fit indices, to examine localized areas of poor fit; and (iii) the interpretability, strength, and statistical significance of parameter estimates. CFA was conducted in several steps and the initial hypothesized one-factor model was modified according to overall goodness-of-fit indices, standardized residuals, and modification indices. The modified model revealed a three-factor solution with one general factor (parent model) and two distinct residual factors, which were identified after taking into account the general factor.

Study III applied LPA to identify latent profiles of preschool teachers' intentions involved in their grouping practice. LPA is similar to LCA; the primary difference is that the observed variables, which are indicators of the latent variable, are treated as continuous, whereas in LCA they are categorical (Collins & Lanza, 2010). Thus, the goal with the LPA is, as with LCA, the capture of individual differences and the identification of mixtures of subgroups (profiles) with similar characteristics. Study III, therefore, followed the same analytical procedure as that described in Study I and used the same criteria for evaluating both the individuals' membership in each profile and the number of distinguishable profiles. In Study III, however, preschool teachers' graduation year, continuing professional development, and working experience in preschool, which were the main differences among the professional profiles identified in Study I, were also used as predictors of preschool teachers' latent profile membership.

Complementary Use of Quantitative and Qualitative Analytical Approach

Study IV explored preschool teachers' views on their work with curriculum content areas with a focus on the least emphasized content areas. The study also examined whether and how their professional competence and group size in the preschool interplayed with their work with these content areas. One question in the web-based questionnaire, which consisted of both a fixed-format section and two open-ended questions, was analyzed in Study IV. The fixed-format part used a five-point Likert-type rating scale to measure preschool teachers' degree of emphasis on 12 content areas involved in their daily work. The two open-ended questions asked the teachers whether their professional competence or the group size can be an explanation for their least-emphasized content areas. The study used descriptive statistical analysis and a thematic analysis, thus encompassing a mixed-methods analytical procedure that included both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The mixed-methods analytical procedure was employed to provide an in-depth understanding of the reasons why the preschool teachers consider involving some of the content areas more seldom than others - a question that cannot be answered by one approach alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Procedures for mixed-methods analytical approaches do vary, and for this study, what Creswell (2003) conceptualizes as concurrent procedures was applied, wherein the researcher "converges quantitative and qualitative data in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem" (p. 16). This means that qualitative data were used to support and explain the quantitative findings (Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 1989).

The analysis was conducted in a stepwise manner. First, a descriptive statistical analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics software for Windows (version 21.0). The central tendency, dispersion of the variables, and distribution of frequency responses were first examined to find out which content areas were most/least emphasized by preschool teachers. Based on these results, the least-emphasized content areas were then examined via cross-tabulation analyses, to find a possible relationship between these content areas and variables related to preschool teachers' professional background, which were distinguished in the teachers' professional profiles identified in Study I and the variable group size.

The two open-ended questions were analyzed via thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017). Thematic analysis is a method for

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identifying, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting patterns of meaning, referred to as themes, an approach that “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). The advantage of thematic analysis is that it provides step-by-step procedures, making it useful for exploring views on topics that are not known. This implies that the thematic analysis enables an inductive, data-driven approach in which the themes identified are linked to data themselves and may provide new insights with no strong relation to the specific question that was asked of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, using quantitative analysis along with qualitative thematic analysis, the purpose was to identify the underlying ideas, assumptions, and perspectives that were not possible to capture solely on the results of the quantitative analysis. In short, the thematic analysis in this study was a recursive process which began by becoming familiar with the content of the data and proceeded to generating initial codes, searching for candidate themes, and reviewing them in a constant moving back and forth until clear definitions for each theme could be generated.

Validity

Validity is an important aspect of the design of any measurement instrument in educational research. Generally, validity refers to what extent a particular instrument measures what it purports to measure (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Muijs, 2011). While there are several types of validity, three distinct aspects of importance are discussed in this section: external validity, content validity, and construct validity. Before continuing to describe each of these aspects, it is worth noting that, primarily, the raw data were entered and stored in Microsoft Excel before being imported to SPSS for analysis using the various statistical methods available in the program. The input process was repeated several times by several persons, to avoid input errors that could affect the validity and reliability of the results.

“External validity” refers to generalizability, including the degree to which the sample is representative of the target population to which the researcher is seeking to generalize the findings and the transferability concerning the extent to which the findings of a study can be generalized to wider populations, settings, times, or situations (Cohen et al., 2011). As it was mentioned in the first topic of this chapter, the sample of the responding preschool teachers to the web-based questionnaire was geographically representative to the nine

categories of municipalities as classified by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (2017). The sample was also proportional to the size of the municipalities, with respect to the number of children and preschools. However, female teachers were overrepresented in this study (97.7%), compared to the situation in the field during the data collection period (i.e., late 2012 and early 2013). According to the Swedish National Agency for Education (2014), the percentage of male preschool teachers was approximately 4–5.8%, depending on whether the preschool was public or private. As the objective of the web-based questionnaire was to analyze preschool teachers' views on various themes related to group size in preschool, the purpose was to represent preschools with large, medium, and small group sizes; however, how the sizes of the group categories were defined was somewhat problematic, as there were no national guidelines or regulations specifying the size of groups in Swedish preschools during the period of data collection. Based on data from the Swedish National Agency for Education (2014), the average group size in Swedish preschools in fall 2012, was 16.9 children per preschool unit, the ratio was 5.08 children per adult, and the average mean range was between 12.6 and 25.6 children per group. In this study, the mean group size was a bit larger, 20.3 children per group, and the ratio was 5.13 children per adult, which is quite close to the nationally reported ratio. Around 90% of the responding preschool teachers in this study worked in groups of 12 to 27 children.

To reduce the threat of external validity concerns in Studies I, II, and III, clear descriptions of the research findings and the theoretical assumptions underpinning the selection of the observed variables as indicators of latent variables were given in each study. These descriptions helped to enable replication and the use of the variables in other research studies. However, certain limitations must be considered concerning the generalizability and transferability of the results. First, because of the lack of studies examining both Swedish preschool teachers' professional profiles (Study I) and the practice of organizing children into subgroups (Studies II and III), the three studies were explorative without predefined indicators, which could have been used to more accurately infer the latent variables. Moreover, a specific concern is related to the types of variables used as intentional indicators in Study III. These were ranked variables, and preschool teachers' ranking of one variable was related to the rank of the other variables. This implies that the two profiles identified in Study III can be considered reflective of each other. However, the differences in estimated means between the two profiles are adequately large enough to

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identify some trends in preschool teachers' intentions with grouping practices, thus providing useful information for future research to further investigate this practice. Lanza, Rhoades, Nix, and Greenberg (2010), have pointed out that, when a study is exploratory and has no prior research guiding the selection of its indicators, the results can be dependent on sample characteristics, so generalizations should be made with caution. Second, it is important to notice that the research questions explored in Studies I, II and III, were not the primary objective of the web-based questionnaire from which the data were drawn. This implies that the selection of the variables included in each study has been guided by possibilities and limitations provided by the available data material and the project's overall research interest, which was the impact of group size on children's affordances in preschool. With respect to study IV, the aspect of time is also important for consideration. The data were gathered from late 2012 through early 2013. In the ensuing years, the preschool curriculum was revised twice, and investment in preschool teachers' continuing professional development was intensified. This implies a call for caution in interpreting and generalizing the results, and thus, further research in this area is necessary. Lastly, while the results provide insight and contribute to knowledge of rather unexplored research areas, the transferability of the findings to other cultural contexts must be resolved with attention to the situated nature of preschool teachers' practices.

"Content validity" refers to whether the questions of a questionnaire are theoretically defined and comprehensively cover the theoretical domains that it purports to cover (Cohen et al., 2011; Muijs, 2011). It should be noted here that I have not involved in the construction of the questionnaire. However, according to studies from the project of which this thesis is a part and that have been published in peer-reviewed journals, the questionnaire was constructed based on an extensive search of the relevant literature and well-established theories; ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986) and sociocultural theories of learning provided the foundation for generating the topics and issues to be addressed, and data were required to meet the purpose of the research (Williams et al., 2019). The questionnaire was reviewed by experts in the field with regard to the readability, clarity, and comprehensiveness of all themes/items before the construction of its final form. The questionnaire was also piloted before it was sent out, to refine the design, formulations, and length.

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“Construct validity” refers to the degree to which the operationalization of a construct measures that which it is intended to measure (Cohen et al., 2011). The questionnaire was constructed to capture a comprehensive perspective on the group size in preschool operationalized in the five themes described in the first topic of this chapter. The operationalization process was based on previous empirical research findings and relevant theories. Each theme consisted of various kinds of closed questions including, for example, dichotomous questions, multiple choice and rating scales questions, and open-ended questions. In total, there were 31 closed questions and 15 open-ended questions. The rationale for including open-ended questions complementary to closed questions was to give the respondents the opportunity to express their opinions in writing and gather more in-depth information. With regard to the closed questions, a variety of variables were selected as indicators for each theme. For the present study’s research purpose, two themes were selected from the questionnaire. In Studies II and III, the aim was to investigate one of them—the organizing of children into groups. This theme consists of two sub-questions, one related to preschool teachers’ views on factors that may determine their decisions in organizing subgroups and another related to their purpose/intentions with this particular practice. Each of these questions included a number of rating scale variables aimed at measuring each specific question of the theme. The internal consistency of reliability of these variables in each sub-question was high ($\alpha=0.84$), indicating that the variables measured the intended purpose of each question. In Study IV, the question consisted of 12 variables related to preschool curriculum content areas. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for internal consistency of these variables was 0.83, indicating also high consistency.

Validity in qualitative thematic analysis (open-ended questions in study IV) refers to as the product of a transparent and trustworthy analytical process. This process should reflect researcher’s representation of respondents’ views (credibility); provide rich and thick description of findings, conclusions and interpretations (transferability); establish that the researcher’s interpretations and findings are clearly derived from the data (confirmability) and ensure that the research process is logical, traceable, and clearly documented (dependability) (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). Thus, in establishing trustworthiness in the study IV, the six-phase analytical procedure according to Braun and Clarke (2006) has been followed. This procedure includes i) familiarizing with the data, ii) generating initial codes, iii) searching for themes,

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iv) reviewing themes v) defining and naming the themes and vi) producing a scholarly report of the analysis by selecting vivid, compelling extract examples and relating these to the research questions and literature. The thematic analysis was based on an inductive approach which means that the themes identified are linked to the data themselves. Thus, based on the inductive coding of the data, the researchers, made individual protocols with suggested patterns deriving from the data, without trying to fit the empirical statements into a preexisting coding framework. From this process several themes were initially suggested by the individual researchers. Thereafter, these themes were synthesized, discussed, and refined throughout the continuing process, by emphasizing to creating a solid consensus and ensuring the trustworthiness of the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017; Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). Throughout the reviewing process, the researchers checked that each theme was coherent and substantial, featuring clear boundaries and a distinct central organizing concept.

Ethical Considerations

This thesis has followed the Swedish Research Council's (2017) regulations for humanities and the social sciences. Based on the principle that questionnaire respondents are not passive data providers, but rather the subjects of the research (Cohen et al., 2011), ethical issues have been taken into consideration throughout the research design. In the covering letter that was sent as an attached document to preschools' administrators and preschools along with the link with the questionnaire, important aspects of research ethics were followed and explicitly described. The first issue of research ethics regards respecting the research participants' right to autonomy and self-determination. The participants were informed of the purpose of the project; the principal investigator; the storing, archiving, and use of the questionnaire data; and their voluntary participation and right to withdraw from the research at any time if they wished to do so. The second ethical issue concerns research participants' right to privacy by ensuring anonymity and confidentiality for data protection. To eliminate the connection between questionnaire answers and a specific person's identity, the questionnaire contains numbers instead of names, both for preschool teachers and preschools. All participants' ages are given by year of birth, and their e-mail addresses were not identifiable, as they were directed to answer the questionnaire using the provided link. Further, the data analysis

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included in the four studies concerned groups, not individuals. The data were archived and stored according to existing rules at the Department of Education, Communication and Learning, University of Gothenburg. The original data and all copies of analyses for this thesis were kept safe in a folder on a password-protected computer. The data material will be stored and archived in the research storage site intended for the University of Gothenburg. The data material will be stored for 10 years following the study's publication, in accordance with the University of Gothenburg's application decision of the National Archives' regulation (Riksarkivet, 1999). All ethical considerations have also been referred to in each of the four studies, though only briefly due to the word limit requirements set by the peer-reviewed journals in which they have been published or submitted.

Chapter 5

The Empirical Studies: Summaries

Study I

This study aimed to explore preschool teachers' professional profiles across different preschools in Sweden. The background of this study is the broad range of reforms in early childhood education and care policy agendas that have been developed in recent decades, both nationally and internationally, toward the demand for professional preschool teachers and the provision of high quality education and care for young children (e.g. Osgood, 2010; Sheridan et al., 2011; Urban et al., 2012). These reforms have implied that the development of preschool teachers as professionals is constantly undergoing changes that are influenced by societal changes across time and expressed by political and educational intentions for preschool goals. Preschool teachers' professionalization is, in this study, understood to be a multi-layered concept embedded in and influenced by broader global changes and closely connected to its national and local dimensions (Sheridan et al., 2011; Urban et al., 2012). Thus, the starting point for this exploratory study is the assumption that preschool teachers' professional profiles are considerably diverse and closely aligned with various socio-historical, political, and local contexts. While cross-national studies conducted in Europe have shown this diversity (Oberhuemer, Schreyer & Neuman, 2010; Urban et al., 2011) in the Swedish preschool context, it remains unclear how and to what extent this diversity is represented. Therefore, the following research question guided this study: "What are preschool teachers' professional profiles, related to their educational background, their personal characteristics, and their working context?"

As mentioned in the chapter 2, interactionist perspectives (Bergman et al., 2002; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986) and the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) as extended by Miller et al., (2012) underpin the theoretical framework in all four studies of the present thesis. In this study, however, the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) was more explicitly used, both as a theoretical framework and

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research design in operationalizing the selection of variables used as indicators for preschool teachers' professional profiles. Preschool teachers' professional profiles were measured by nine professional indicators, including educational background (graduation year, further education, and continuing professional development), personal characteristics (number of years working in a preschool or other school settings, age, and cultural background) and their working context (work schedule, workload, and area of responsibility in the preschool). Applying a latent class analysis as a person-oriented approach, this study intends to capture unobserved heterogeneities within the sample (Collins & Lanza, 2010) and, consequently, to identify meaningful subgroups of preschool teachers who share similar characteristics. The analysis revealed two professional profiles of preschool teachers, according to the response patterns of professional indicators, namely *late educated* (Profile 1, preschool teachers educated after 1998, when the preschool curriculum came into force) and *early educated* (Profile 2, preschool teachers educated before 1998). The pattern of graduation year, experience, continuous professional development, and specified area of responsibility in a preschool was the most distinctive one across the two profiles. The results show that *early educated* preschool teachers, compared to *late educated* ones, were more experienced, more likely to engage in continuous professional development activities, and more likely to have specified assignments in preschool. These assignments include subjects associated with curricular goals and intentions, such as language, culture, science, or mathematics, in which the participating preschool teachers in this study might have attended professional development activities. The significant knowledge gained from this study can guide quality improvement issues in Swedish preschools and is important, considering that there is limited research in Sweden examining multiple sets of preschool teachers' professional indicators. Additionally, in Sweden, there is no national framework that regulates continuing professional development activities for preschool teachers; thus, these activities may vary among different municipalities across the country (cf. Karlsson Lohmander, 2017). From this perspective, the results of this study can contribute with specifics on what kinds of specialized knowledge are needed, depending on preschool teachers' professional profiles.

Study II

The aim of this study is to explore preschool teachers' views on factors affecting their decisions to organize children into subgroups in Swedish preschools. While the research has shown that working in subgroups throughout the day is associated with high quality practices (Slot et al., 2016, Sheridan et al., 2014), there is limited research, both nationally and internationally, on grouping practice in preschools. Further, there has been no detailed investigation on factors that may influence preschool teachers' decisions on group arrangements made in preschool. This research gap, coupled with the increased demands for more knowledge-oriented preschool and the large number of children enrolled in preschool, necessitates a closer investigation of grouping practice. The study addresses the following research question: "What are the latent decision-making factors that can be identified by preschool teachers' expressed considerations when they organize children into subgroups?"

By applying the CFA technique, this study analyzes preschool teachers' responses to a set of 15 manifest indicators selected to capture the complexity of their everyday working contexts. These indicators are related to three broad contextual dimensions: child group composition, preschool teachers' relational environment, and their organizational environment. Based on the study's theoretical standpoints (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Miller et al., 2012) and empirical findings (Sheridan et al., 2014), a hypothesized one-factor model was tested first and then re-specified taking into account the standardized residuals and modification indices for several indicators.

The CFA results revealed a three-factor model where two residual but distinct factors (*interrelational* and *structural*) were nested under one *general* factor. While the *general* factor comprises all the variables included in the analysis, the identification of the two residual factors conveys valuable details to the model structure. The *interrelational* factor consisted of indicators related to preschool teachers' relationships with children, caregivers, co-workers, and the head of the preschool. The *structural* factor consisted of indicators related to the preschool's structural aspects, such as the staff-to-child ratio, the teachers' working environment, and the preschool's physical ecology. On average, both of the residual factors explained 40% of the variances in their indicators. By confirming findings from other qualitative studies, the results convey two distinct dimensions of preschool teachers' considered decisions on group organizing: the preschool's organizational environment and the preschool

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teachers' interpersonal relationships. These results support the complexity of organizing children in subgroups as a practice in preschool that can be considered partly to be a negotiated collective practice and partly as closely connected to the complexities of the preschool's in situ situations. As the research supports the benefits of working in subgroups in preschools, the results of this study can be useful for enhancing quality in early childhood education programs and professional development efforts in preparing preschool teachers for developing effective classroom organization strategies.

Study III

This study aimed to explore profiles of Swedish preschool teachers' intentions involved in their grouping practice in preschool. The background positioning the research interest of this study is the same as that of Study II. The studies, however, are based on a distinction between factors that may affect preschool teachers' decisions to work in organizing children into subgroups and their pedagogical intentions that bring about such decisions. Thus, while Study II analyzed contextual factors, the focus in this study is on preschool teachers' intentions when they organize the whole child group into subgroups. Few studies to date have shown that subgroups in preschools are frequently randomly organized. Without purposeful planning and when dependent on preschool teachers' intentions with grouping practice, the preschool environment can be either of high or low quality (Alvestad et al., 2014; Sheridan et al., 2014; Wasik, 2008).

This study is guided by interactionist perspectives (Bergman et al., 2002; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986), ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986), and a pedagogical perspective on preschool quality (Sheridan, 2007, 2009). On the basis of these theoretical standpoints, preschool teachers' intentions with grouping practice are understood to be embedded in various aspects of the preschool system: preschool teachers' pedagogical and didactical approaches to children's well-being, learning and development; their professional background characteristics; and the preschool's organizational aspects. Based on this rationale, the underlying hypothesis for this study is that there is diversity among preschool teachers' intentions with grouping practice. The study addresses the following research question: "What latent intentional profiles can be identified based on preschool teachers' considerations involved in their grouping practice?"

CHAPTER 5

Applying LPA, the study intended to capture the hypothesized diversity embedded in preschool teachers' intentions with grouping practice and to identify latent profiles based on a set of indicators related to this particular practice. Exploring this potential diversity in preschool teachers' intentions, improves our understanding of group organizing practices, and provides the research community potential thresholds at from which the benefits of working in small groups can be further investigated. The analysis is directed toward preschool teachers' considerations of a set of intentional indicators involved in grouping practice related to conditions for creating a supportive classroom environment; opportunities for children's play, communication, and interactions; and preschool teachers' direct involvement in children's learning. Further, preschool teachers' graduation year, attendance in continuing professional development activities, and years of working experience in a preschool setting were examined as predictors for their membership in each profile. These professional background indicators were the most distinct differences among preschool teachers' professional profiles identified in Study I.

Two intentional profiles were identified: a *relational* profile and an *organizational* profile. The relational profile was by far the largest, accounting for 82.1% of respondents, indicating that children's interactions, play, and learning opportunities are fundamental for preschool teachers in this profile when organizing children into subgroups. In the organizational profile, the indicators of good sound level and calm working environment were more emphasized, suggesting that preschools' physical ecology is very likely to be an influential aspect that directs preschool teachers' actual practices and affects their intentions with grouping practices. Preschool teachers' consideration of grouping practice as appropriate for working with a specific learning object was equally emphasized in both profiles. The teachers' professional background indicators as predictors for individuals' latent profile membership were not statistically significant. These findings provide insights into preschool teachers' intentions with grouping practice and enhance our understanding of what they regard as valuable and appropriate learning experiences for children.

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Study IV

The aim of this study was twofold: (i) to analyze preschool teachers' considerations on their work with curriculum content areas, with a specific focus on the content areas they involve least in their daily work and their explanations for this lack of involvement, and (ii) to examine whether and how their professional competence and the group size in preschool interplay with their work with these content areas. Previous studies have pointed out that the successful implementation of the official curriculum is closely connected to preschool teachers' professional competence and supportive working conditions related to the staff–child ratio and group sizes in preschools (Bennett, 2005; Sylva et al., 2015). Recent research on group size in Swedish preschools has found that the increased requirements of the preschool curriculum in the last decade, combined with a lack of knowledge and didactic skills in different content areas, affect preschool teachers' work with curriculum content areas, especially when the number of children in the groups is increasing (Williams et al., 2019). Based on these premises, our assumption was that preschool teachers who are not confident with their level of content knowledge and/or who perceive the group size to be an obstacle in their daily work may avoid including certain content areas in activities provided children.

Like the other studies detailed in this thesis, Study IV is based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979, 1986) as extended by Miller et al. (2012). Preschool teachers' work with curriculum content areas is understood here to be constituted in several layers; as a mutual influence of policy intentions and guidelines changing over time, preschool teachers' professional competence and pedagogical approaches to children's learning and development, and as organizational conditions of the preschool. The research questions are:

1. What curriculum content areas do the preschool teachers state that they least involve in their daily work?
2. What is preschool teachers' argumentation for their least-emphasized curriculum content areas?
3. How do their arguments interplay with their professional competence and the group size in preschool?

CHAPTER 5

For the purpose of the present study, one question from the questionnaire was analyzed. The question is formulated as follows: “Which of the following curriculum content areas do you involve in your work with the children’s learning in preschool? Mark with a figure (1–5) which is closest to your way of working.” The question consists of 12 Likert-type rating scale variables related to preschool curriculum content areas. The question also involves two open-ended questions, asking those respondents who gave a low score to a specific content area if their lack of competence (open-ended question 1) or the group size (open-ended question 2) could explain these low ratings. The study applies both a descriptive statistical analysis and a thematic analysis. Both questions yielded a total of 235 responses providing preschool teachers’ explanations for their low ratings in any of the curriculum content areas.

The descriptive analysis showed that reading and writing were the least-emphasized content areas, whereas language, mathematics, art, play, and motor skills were the most emphasized. Thus, the thematic analysis is based on the set of responses related to low ratings in reading and writing in both open-ended questions (N: 128/235). Further, an examination of reading and writing showed a dispersion among preschool teachers’ responses in all three levels of emphasis (low, medium, and high). The results also showed that the level of emphasis on reading and writing has no significant relationship with preschool teachers’ professional background variables (graduation year from an early childhood education program, their experience and attendance in CPD activities) or the number of children in the group. Furthermore, the thematic analysis of the preschool teachers’ written arguments about their low emphasis on reading and writing highlighted a variety of interpretations of these curriculum content areas.

The thematic analysis identified five qualitatively different themes: a narrow interpretation of the curriculum approach, a cognitive developmental approach, a structural approach, an activity-oriented interpretation of the curriculum, and a holistic interpretation of the curriculum approach. Within these five themes, almost 35% of the responses comprised the theme “narrow interpretation of the curriculum,” involving answers in line with reading and writing not being included as part of preschool teachers’ professional assignments. Together with the theme that involves a cognitive developmental approach in which the preschool teachers’ answers revealed the children as too young to be exposed to reading and writing, these themes amount to almost 62% of all replies. In addition, a substantial number of responses related the low emphasis of these

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content areas to group size, in terms of a lack of time to work constructively in small groups with reading and writing. The activity-oriented theme included answers where activities were in the foreground and the learning aspect was less prominent. The last theme shows how the teachers intentionally work in a holistic interpretation of the intentions described in the curriculum, intertwined with their responsiveness and continuous interaction with the children.

The results of the current study provide important information for further research in examining the relationship between taken-for-granted beliefs, knowledge and practices related to these specific content areas. This is of vital importance as international research and national evaluation reports indicate large variation in the quality of literacy environments provided for children, which in turn affect children's equal opportunities for literacy development (Swedish School Inspectorate, 2018; Sylva et al., 2010). From this perspective, the results of this study have implications for the design and content of both early education programs and continuing professional development models.

Chapter 6

Discussion

The overarching aim with the present thesis has been to contribute with knowledge to the research field of early childhood education by exploring the intersection of recent policy reforms involving expectations of preschool teachers' professional competence and preschool teachers' pedagogical practices. Specifically, preschool teachers' considerations on two pedagogical practices are studied: (i) organizing children into subgroups and (ii) working with curriculum content areas for children's well-being, learning, and development. In order to fulfill this aim, two overall research questions were formulated, namely: (i) What is the relationship between preschool teachers' professional competence and their considerations on pedagogical practices? (ii) How do preschool teachers' considerations on organizing children into subgroups and on working with curriculum content areas interplay in their pedagogical practices? This chapter discusses and elaborates on how these questions are answered by combining the results of the four studies as they relate to the overarching aim of this thesis. The results are discussed as related to two interwoven themes: (i) a transactional approach to preschool teachers' professional competence and (ii) preschool teachers' pedagogical practices as systemic relational involvement. The chapter concludes with methodological considerations and implications for practice and further research.

A Transactional Approach to Preschool Teachers' Professional Competence

Study I found that preschool teachers' professional profiles differ in terms of their graduation year from early childhood education programs, their years of professional experience, and participation in continuing professional activities. Preschool teachers who were educated before the introduction of the national preschool curriculum in 1998, who thus have several years' experience, were more likely to have attended CDP activities (Profile 2, early educated), compared to those who were educated after the introduction of the preschool

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curriculum (Profile, 1 late educated). These results indicate the early educated preschool teachers' intensified needs for specialized knowledge, guidance, and professional development, in light of the introduction of the preschool curriculum, in which preschool's quality issues, and preschool teachers' professional knowledge, didactic competence and professional role were strengthened. Previous research has also shown that the policy expectations for preschool teachers' involvement as curriculum makers by interpreting and implementing the curriculum goals was followed by a general problematization of the schoolification of preschool and the complexity of curriculum implementation (e.g., Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2004; Vallberg Roth, 2006). In this regard, this finding provides insight into early educated preschool teachers' need to be updated with new knowledge and skills to meet curriculum goals. This result is also in line with research emphasizing the potential of CPD for renewal and the translation of new levels of understanding into sustainable practices and professional growth (Siraj et al., 2019; Sylva et al., 2015).

However, the results also reveal that the late educated preschool teachers (Profile 1), who acquired their professional knowledge and skills after the curriculum introduction and through the new preschool teacher education programs, are less likely to have attended CPD. This is an important finding, considering that these preschool teachers are also less experienced, which indicates the need for on-the-job pedagogical support to effectively actualize their acquired knowledge in practice. Research on teachers' professional development points out that teachers with less experience tend to have a great need for professional support when constructing their professional identity and facing the uncertainty of the realities of the profession (European Commission, 2010; McGillivray, 2011). Furthermore, as discussed in the background section, in recent decades, different reforms have been initiated to prepare the way for making preschool a part of the Swedish educational system (Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2004). The reforms were preceded by criticisms of teacher education as either too academic, abstract, and not well grounded in practice, or as too loosely connected to the academic tradition (Karlsson Lohmander, 2004; Lillvist & Sandberg, 2018).

Thus, on the basis of the differences between the two professional profiles identified in this study, it can be argued that it is essential to address the diverse needs for professional development among preschool teachers who work within a challenging microsystem framed by ever-changing policy intentions. The development of preschool teachers as professionals is constantly

undergoing changes that are influenced by societal changes across time and expressed by the political and educational intentions of preschool goals. At the same time, preschool teachers are part of a socio-ecological system that is increasingly complex, non-linear, and often contradictory (Miller et al., 2012; Sheridan et al., 2011; Vallberg Roth & Tallberg Broman, 2018b). Within this complex system, preschool teachers need the competence to visualize critical thinking and to be able to reflect on the changes that are taking place in the society and in curriculum revisions, to strengthen the quality of their pedagogical practices. The early childhood profession should be transformative-oriented; yet there is also a need to acknowledge the profession's situated nature where the knowledge is constructed in interactive and relational competencies (Miller et al., 2012).

Scrutinizing the results of preschool teachers' considerations on the two specific pedagogical practices, that is the grouping practice and the least-involved curriculum content areas in their daily work (Studies III and IV), two important findings have been revealed. First, in Study III, the examination of the differences between preschool teachers' professional profiles which were identified in Study I, in relation to preschool teachers' intentions when they organize the children into subgroups, did not result in any identified significant relationship. More specifically, it was found that preschool teachers' graduation year, experience, and attendance at CPD activities did not show a statistical significance for the prediction of membership in either of the intentional profiles identified in this study, the relational and organizational profiles. While the grouping practice in relation to preschool teachers' professional background indicators is as yet a relatively unexplored research area, this finding is supported by La Paro et al. (2009), who found that preschool teachers' education level and experience were inconsistently related to groupings and activities offered to children.

These results provide support for the view that whether and how preschool teachers organize children into subgroups is a collectively negotiated practice evolving on the basis of in situ situations and specific contexts, rather than linked by default to education and experience. However, earlier research has emphasized the importance of preschool teachers' competence in organizing and taking advantage of small group activities with the intention of creating optimal conditions for children's well-being, interactions, and learning opportunities (Sheridan et al., 2014). This implies that, if we want to enhance preschool teachers' competence in establishing constructive and effective

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practices in planning and organizing children's time in preschool, this should be a pivotal aspect of their education and professional development efforts. This is of great importance, as the organizational setting has a direct impact on what activities children will have access to and, ultimately, the conditions for their optimal learning and well-being (Sheridan, 2009; Sheridan et al., 2014). This is essential, given that recent Swedish reports and research (Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2019; Vallberg Roth & Tallberg Broman, 2018b; Williams et al., 2019) have emphasized changing and challenging conditions in Swedish preschools, including, among other things, the large group sizes and the lack of substitute personnel, which influence the optimal organization of children's time at school.

Second, in Study IV, the quantitative analysis showed no significant relationship between the level of emphasis on reading and writing and the preschool teachers' graduation year from an early childhood program, their experience, or attendance in CPD activities and the number of children in the group. While the results can be related to the type of statistical analyses applied in this study, the thematic analysis of preschool teachers' rationales for their least emphasis on these curriculum areas did not accentuate a lack of competence as an obstacle to providing children with reading and writing activities. Instead, the explanations mainly put forward the subordinated position of reading and writing in their daily work as objectives involving individual performance, which are not considered a part of their professional assignment in the preschool.

On the basis of these findings, preschool teachers, in this study, seem to be at the intersection of conflicting paradigmatic views on children's learning and development (Sheridan, Williams & Sandberg, 2013). The majority of preschool teachers' answers involved a play- and relationship-oriented understanding of preschool in their arguments, reflecting a social pedagogic approach (Bennet, 2005) that has a long tradition in Swedish preschool practice. In this approach, social values are emphasized and children's learning is grounded in reciprocal interactions, shared experiences, and participation in joint play. On the basis of preschool teachers' arguments, this approach is opposed to the view of preschool as a place for school readiness and preparation embedded in teaching children reading and writing. This finding indicates a workplace culture resistant to the requirements of a knowledge-oriented preschool (Vallberg Roth, 2014), where the youngest children should be protected from formal instruction. It also provides support for the view that past experiences and prevalent

knowledge, defined by Bronfenbrenner (1979) as demands and force characteristics, influence preschool teachers' professional development. Furthermore, given the priority of professional development investments in enhancing preschool teachers' theoretical knowledge and didactic competence in language, early literacy, and mathematics that have been made in recent decades, the results put forward a dilemma concerning how the interconnected aspects of *who*, *what*, and *how* professional development efforts have been taken into account (Buysse et al., 2009; Siraj et al., 2019). It is, however, important to note that professional development initiatives for enhancing preschool teachers' theoretical knowledge and didactic competence in these curriculum content areas have been intensified since the thesis' data production. Nevertheless, preschool teachers' uncertainties and shortage of content knowledge in these content areas remain evident, as seen in the Swedish School Inspectorate's most recent evaluation report (2018), and in research findings (Lillvist et al., 2014; Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2019) indicating long-lasting challenges. Research on the effectiveness of professional development initiatives indicates the necessity to determine not only the content knowledge provided to preschool teachers, but more important, the value they place on the acquisition of such knowledge, their willingness to reflect on their own taken-for-granted beliefs, and, ultimately, their preparedness for self-education and change (Cunningham, Zibulsky & Callahan, 2009; Oberhuemer, 2005; Sheridan et al., 2011).

The results of these three studies indicate the importance of the social co-construction of knowledge and practice as a complement to top-down approaches to preschool teachers' professional competence. Urban (2008, p. 141) describes the top-down approaches as a hierarchical relationship between theory and practice; "an epistemological hierarchy of distinct layers where the professional body of knowledge is produced (academic research, scholarly debate), transferred (professional preparation, pre- and in-service training), and applied (practice)". Being at the bottom of this hierarchy, the voices and experiences of professionals are weakened, even though, at the same time, they have to meet multiple expectations imposed on them. Actualizing in practice new knowledge acquired solely through top-down approaches by providing knowledge for practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) can be complicated for individual preschool teachers acting in a working context characterized by diversity in terms both of the preschool staff members' varying educational levels, their pedagogical approaches, responsibilities, and preconditions for

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their work. Applying this reading of epistemology to this investigation of preschool teachers' views on their pedagogical practices in relation to professional competence, the findings in the three studies imply that pedagogical practices need to be examined beyond the one-sided view of the preschool teacher as a professional expert. Considering preschool teachers' professional competence as an ongoing learning process (Egert et al., 2018; Jensen & Iannone, 2018; Sheridan et al., 2011; Siraj et al., 2019; Urban et al., 2012), rather than solely the acquisition of skills and specific knowledge in a specific period of time, requires addressing the importance of practice-based knowledge as an integral source for transformative goals with professional development initiatives. This implies that preschool teachers' professional development needs to be considered in interplay with challenges, dilemmas, and questions embedded in the immediate environments where they act. This also entails a bottom-up perspective of preschool teachers' professional development, paying attention to the socially situated nature of preschool practice (Osberg & Biesta, 2007) and the contextualized interpretations of preschool teachers' pedagogical practices in relation to policy principles and goals (Moss & Dahlberg, 2008).

Drawing on the perspective of the critical ecology of the profession (Miller et al., 2012) and on the basis of the findings described above, there is a need to provide opportunities for preschool teachers to develop, refine, and reflect collectively upon their practices. Promoting critical reflection on practice, connecting practice to theories and vice-versa, and goals linked to observation and documentation can inform all levels of the system, thereby enabling it to face the challenges of specific contexts (Jensen & Iannone, 2018). A transactional approach between top-down and bottom-up perspectives in which preschool teachers can be co-creators of new knowledge, rather than implementers and consumers of knowledge, can be an essential base for professional development initiatives toward quality improvements. Such an approach foregrounds collaborative action between professional preschool teachers and other stakeholders in the spirit of what Oberhuemer (2005) described as "democratic professionalism." CPD initiatives that are context-based and focused on the analysis of issues emerging from concrete and challenging situations make a twofold contribution to preschool teachers' professional development. On the one hand, they enhance preschool staff members' ability to make critical observations and identify content for improvement and knowledge to recognize what, why, and how to change. On

the other hand, they increase the culture of mutual learning through collaborative exchanges, which are fundamental in high quality practices.

Pedagogical Practices as Systemic Relational Involvement

Preschool teachers' views on their pedagogical practices (Studies II, III, and IV) bring into focus the importance of the interactional and relational aspects of their daily work as an ongoing engagement with human and material resources, pedagogical approaches, and policies (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986). This relationality is embedded in two interwoven realms in preschool practices: (i) the organizational preschool environment as conditional for their pedagogical practices (Studies II, III, and IV) and (ii) pedagogical approaches for supporting children's well-being, social interactions, play, and learning (Studies III and IV).

With respect to the organizational preschool environment, in Study II, the general and structural factors—including interconnected structural aspects of preschool teachers' working environment such as the preschool's physical ecology, the number of children in the group, a workload comprised of multiple supplementary tasks, and the pressure of time—point to an organizational workplace framework that can create either opportunities or boundaries for organizing children in subgroups. Additionally, the interrelational factor, comprising relations with children, other professionals, caregivers, and the head of the preschool, points to the grouping practice as closely connected to the importance of establishing a relationship-focused workplace culture (Sheridan et al., 2011; Woodrow, 2011). This reveals the importance of working resourcefully with others and with sensitivity to the views and values of those with whom they are working (Edwards, 2010). This implies an understanding of this practice as the result of collaborative knowledge work (Edwards, 2010), meaning a shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002) and transactional approach to making joint decisions about challenging circumstances toward shared goals (Sheridan et al., 2011). In Study III, the organizational profile of preschool teachers' intentions with the grouping practice, even though not as prominent as in Study II, points to the same direction of reasoning. Preschool teachers in this profile considered the grouping practice as a means for managing possible physical and structural restrictions for optimal classroom functioning, establishing an organized, calm, and supportive environment for children's well-being, learning, and development. In Study IV, the preschool

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teachers invoked structural factors such as group size and time as obstacles for them to involve the curriculum content areas of reading and writing in their daily work. They also referred to group size as a restricting condition on their ability to work constructively with these content areas in groups with only a few children.

Seen together, these results, which involve the complexity of preschool teachers' everyday working contexts encompassed by decisions in the exo-system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986), indicate these specific practices as derived from a *permanent attention* on challenges in their immediate setting and a constant *balancing* and *awareness* of pedagogical possibilities when they plan and organize children's learning environment (Miller et al., 2012; Sheridan et al., 2011; Urban, 2008). Furthermore, preschool teachers' relationships with the head of the preschool (Study II) provide insights into the interconnectedness between exo-, meso-, and microsystems. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), at the microsystem level, the affective relations occur within the same setting, while at the meso-system level they take place across settings' boundaries. Thus, organizing children into subgroups, seen as a decision influenced by preschool teachers' relationships with the head of the preschool (Study II), can be understood in terms of confidence and the perception of support for facilitating and encouraging preschool teachers in their daily tasks. This implies shared agreed tasks such as enhancing teamwork and clarifying responsibility areas for preschool staff; guiding curriculum work; managing and evaluating organizational conditions in the preschool, such as work shifts, routines, and the number of children in groups; and opportunities for continuing professional development (Nasiopoulou, 2019).

Focusing on preschool teachers' pedagogical intentions with their practices, the results point to a distinction between a child-centered and teacher-directed perspective. In Study II, the relationships between preschool teachers and children was a dimension that influenced their decisions on dividing children into subgroups, indicating that this pedagogical practice reflects a perspective of being in the "here and now" (Jonsson, 2013; Sheridan et al., 2011). This perspective involves attentiveness—in terms of either a planned pedagogical awareness or a situational emerging approach—seeking to listen to and understand children's interests, enhancing a secure socioemotional climate and support for their engagement in specific learning activities. Thus, despite the fact that organizing children into subgroups is, in this study, understood as a practice that embraces a teacher-directed perspective, the relational dimension

suggests that this practice evolves as an outcome of the intimate day-to-day knowledge of children's interests and needs. This makes the planning of this practice more open to possibilities (cf. Urban & Dali, 2012) and jointly constructed either between children and preschool teachers or among children (cf. Williams et al., 2019). Relatedly, in Study III, the prominence of the relational profile, accounting for 82.1% of respondents, highlights the value placed by preschool teachers on creating a communicative preschool context where children are given opportunities to collaborate and practice social knowledge. These findings are consistent with other studies, indicating the importance of working in subgroups to support children's emotional interconnectedness, sense of community, and enhance their engagement in learning (e.g., Sheridan et al., 2014; Sylva et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2019).

Despite the above, while the indicator *working with specific learning object* is equally emphasized in both profiles (relational and organizational), it was not ranked by preschool teachers as being of the highest importance. As discussed in Study III (Nasiopoulou, 2019), this finding puts forward a child-centered perspective involving a pedagogical approach to children's learning as dynamic and emergent through social interactions in a variety of learning opportunities throughout the day, rather than in teacher-directed practices (cf. Broström, 2017). This finding is also supported by national and international studies, indicating that child-initiated, free choice activities comprise a large amount of a preschool day, and intentional learning-oriented gatherings are short and infrequent in preschools (e.g., Fuligni et al., 2012; Salminen, Hännikäinen, Poikonen & Rasku-Puttonen, 2014; Sheridan et al., 2014; Wasik, 2008). However, research has shown the importance of the optimal allocation of children's time in preschool, with a well balanced approach between teacher-directed practices, particularly activities in small group settings (rather than whole groups), and child-initiated educational and play activities for children's optimal learning (Fuligni et al., 2012; Sheridan et al., 2014; Sylva et al., 2015). The results in Study IV converge, to an extent, on a similar reasoning. In most answers included in the themes, the preschool teachers' explanations for their least emphasis on reading and writing as involving social sensitivity and responsiveness to children's developmental needs and interest put forward a spur-of-the-moment pedagogical approach, rather than a deliberately planned learning-oriented approach.

On a macro-system level, preschool teachers' views on the two specific, pedagogical practices that have been explored in this thesis can be seen as

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reflecting various theoretical approaches on children's learning. Some are rooted in developmental and sociocultural theories, and others are influenced by a sociology of childhood, but all are strongly subscribed to the recognition of children as active knowledge-constructors and social actors. Also, these approaches can be seen as interwoven in human rights principles, which privilege the uniqueness of each person and on which Swedish society is based, guiding the broad principle of a child-centered education. This principle implies that educational and care practices should be responsive to each child's unique needs, abilities, and interests, explicitly emphasized in the preschool curriculum throughout the years (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011; 2018).

In the literature, the need to approach the perspective of the child and ultimately to reach sustained shared thinking is something that is continually emphasized (Pramling Samuelsson, Sommer & Hundeide, 2011; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). However, trying to interpret children's interests and needs to reach a shared understanding of a learning object embraces at least two dilemmas, which have been problematized by researchers (Pramling, Doverborg & Pramling Samuelsson, 2017; Sylva et al., 2015; Tallberg Broman, 2015; Vallberg Roth, 2018). First, there is a strong divergence of views and interpretations among professionals with various educational backgrounds, as well as pedagogical approaches, on what a young child needs, and what her or his individual interests are. This, in turn, can create fragmented and sometimes contradictory pedagogical practices. Second, it can be problematized in relation to quality and equivalence goals. This implies a dilemma of whether the interests of all children are sought and allowed to influence the direction of the planning and the initiation of something with which the children are unfamiliar (Vallberg Roth, 2018). Research has shown that integrating an intentional learning-oriented and child-centered perspective is a pivotal aspect of high quality preschool pedagogy (Sheridan & Williams, 2018; Sylva et al., 2015). High quality practices require that preschool teachers have the ability to proceed, both in spontaneous and planned activities, from children's experiences, interests, and curiosity for new knowledge while at the same time consciously orienting their interests toward specific learning objects (Sheridan & Williams, 2018).

Methodological Contributions and Suggestions for Further Research

From a methodological point of view, this thesis contributes to future educational research by investigating research questions through multiple analytical strategies. The complementary use of person- and variable-oriented analytical strategies along with quantitative and qualitative analytical strategies applied in my studies has provided a “synergistic” exploration of the research aim by linking findings from each study rather than applying merely one analytical approach (Hesse-Biber, 2015). Certainly, each of these analytical strategies applied in my research has limitations and strengths, which have been discussed in Chapter 4.

At this point, some further issues of consideration should be acknowledged by relating the analytical strategies to the thesis’ findings. First, with respect to the grouping practice, by applying a variable-centered analytical strategy in Study II, it was possible to identify a range of interconnected contextual factors of importance that may determine the preschool teachers’ decisions concerning whether or not to organize the children into small groups. However, the types of analyses applied in this work do not allow us to draw conclusions concerning how these factors are associated with each of the identified profiles in Study III. This could be an issue for further research applying, for example, structural equation modeling when investigating such possible associations. Also, as the grouping practice is a relatively unexplored area, observational and case studies focusing on specific contexts could provide further in-depth knowledge. This kind of knowledge would be valuable for teacher education programs and competence development efforts, leading to improved learning outcomes for children in preschool.

Second, with regard to Study IV, it should be recognized that the data production for this study took place between 2012 and 2013; it was not until the latest revision of the Swedish preschool curriculum (2018) that the content area of reading, along with the concept of teaching in preschool, was clarified and strengthened. The current preschool curriculum explicitly emphasizes the importance of providing children a stimulating environment with opportunities to develop their language by listening to reading aloud and discussing literature and other texts (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018). Furthermore, continuing professional development initiatives by the Swedish National Agency for Education were introduced in 2017 to improve preschool teachers’

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competence in working constructively with reading and writing in preschool. This implies that preschool teachers' considerations of reading and writing involved in their daily work most probably would have changed during the last few years, which obviously was not possible to capture in the present study. However, this can both be seen as a limitation of this study and a strength providing insights and inspirations for further research.

Conclusions

In a rapidly changing world, children need to be equipped with a repertoire of interconnected competences, including cognitive skills, socioemotional skills, attitudes, and values to actively engage, influence, and benefit the possibilities of future society and a readiness to deal with societal challenges. This implies that preschool teachers need a theoretical knowledge-base, in addition to didactic competence and methodological tools for supporting every child's development as a whole person in a play- and learning-oriented way. The overall results of this thesis point to the importance of addressing the diverse needs for professional development among preschool teachers in interplay with challenges, dilemmas, and questions embedded in the immediate environments in which they act. Against the background that new knowledge emerges on children's development and learning, and new policy demands are placed on preschool teachers' professional role, it is crucial that both research findings and proven practice experiences in cooperation identify strengths, weakness, and causalities in creating new knowledge that supports practice change and quality improvement.

The results concerning the teachers' grouping practice, display a collectively negotiated practice evolving on the basis of in situ situations embracing a child-centered approach for supporting children's socioemotional development, rather than a teacher-directed perspective focusing on a specific learning object. This result puts forward the importance of strengthening preschool teachers' competence in establishing constructive and effective practices for planning and organizing children's time in preschool, which would therefore be a pivotal aspect of preschool teachers' education and professional development efforts.

Additional results concerning the subordinated position of reading and writing point out two important findings: i) a play- and relationship-oriented understanding of preschool resistant to a knowledge-oriented approach embedded in teaching reading and writing, and ii) the group size as a restricting

CHAPTER 6

condition, in terms of a lack of time to work constructively with these content areas in groups with only a few children. These results imply the importance of acknowledging the interconnectedness of the content, process, and organizational support for continuing professional development efforts to enhance preschool teachers' professional competence.

To be in line with the development of the society, facing new challenges and demands as well as tensions and contradictions in guidelines, policy documents, and curriculum, the municipality and the heads of preschools are responsible for providing preschool teachers with further education and offering realistic working conditions. Well-educated preschool teachers have the potential to improve teaching and learning activities in preschools and to provide equity and equality for children from diverse backgrounds. Accordingly, preschool teachers' competence is a key factor that impacts the variation in preschools' quality. It's also important to highlight that preschool teachers' perspectives about their own working experiences can provide a valuable insider perspective.

To conclude, practice-oriented studies and professional development efforts anchored in research questions that are relevant to preschool practice are recommended. Such studies and professional development efforts have the possibility of making a difference and contributing to a higher quality preschool environment, benefitting both children as a group and individual children, and allowing improved working conditions for preschool teachers. A main suggestion derived from my results is thus a transactional approach to preschool teachers' professional competence that considers teachers' diverse competences intertwined with theoretical and practical knowledge.

Chapter 7

Swedish Summary

Avhandlingens forskningsintresse tar utgångspunkt dels i de senaste årens ökande policykrav på förskollärares professionella kompetens som en viktig kvalitetsaspekt i förskolan (Miller et al, 2012; Moss, 2010; Sheridan et al., 2011), dels i den komplexitet som inrymmer förskollärarnas pedagogiska praktiker att skapa optimala förutsättningar för barns välbefinnande och lärande (Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2019; Sheridan et al., 2014; Vallberg Roth & Tallberg Broman, 2018b; Williams et al., 2019). Avhandlingen innefattar fyra delstudier där förskollärares överväganden i relation till gruppindelning och arbetet med läroplanens innehållsområden utgör exempel på pedagogiska praktiker. Min avhandling är en del av ett svenskt forskningsprojekt finansierat av Vetenskapsrådet med titeln ”Gruppstorlekens betydelse för barns möjligheter att lära och utvecklas i förskolan” (Williams et al., 2012). Projektet består både av en webbaserad enkät och intervjuer med förskollärare, med målsättningen att genom en kombination av kvantitativa och kvalitativa analysmetoder beforska förskollärares perspektiv på barngruppsstorlek i förskolan. De fyra delstudierna som ligger till grund för avhandlingen bygger på analyser av projektets webbaserade enkät som besvarades av 698 förskollärare i 46 kommuner i Sverige.

Syfte och forskningsfrågor

Syftet med avhandlingen är att undersöka och analysera relationen mellan förskollärares professionella kompetens och de överväganden som de gör i relation till sina pedagogiska praktiker. Två specifika praktiker har studerats: barngruppsindelning och arbetet med läroplanens innehållsområden. Följande forskningsfrågor har varit vägledande för analys och diskussion:

- Vilken relation finns det mellan förskollärarnas professionella kompetens och deras överväganden om pedagogiska praktiker?

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- Hur samverkar förskollärares överväganden i relation till gruppindelning och arbetet med läroplanens innehållsområden med deras pedagogiska praktiker?

Den första forskningsfrågan behandlas i delstudierna I, III och IV. I studie I har förskollärarnas professionella profiler i olika förskolor från 46 kommuner i Sverige varit i fokus. Studien ligger till grund för en kartläggning av förskollärarnas professionella profiler baserade på ett antal indikatorer relaterat till deras utbildningsbakgrund, karaktäristik som ålder, kön och modersmål, samt deras arbetsförhållande. Kartläggningen syftade till att få en övergripande bild som sedan kunde användas som utgångspunkt för specifika frågor i de efterföljande studierna. Differenserna mellan förskollärarnas distinkta professionella profiler, som identifierades i studie I, användes således sedan i studier III och IV, för att ytterligare undersöka eventuella relationer mellan dessa differenser och de överväganden förskollärarna gör i relation till de två specifika pedagogiska praktikerna; gruppindelning och arbete med läroplanens innehållsområden.

Den andra forskningsfrågan behandlas i delstudierna II, III och IV. I studierna II och III undersöktes gruppindelningens praktik på två sätt. Dels förskollärarnas överväganden i relation till kontextuella faktorer som avgörande för deras beslut att organisera barngruppen i mindre grupper (studie II), dels förskollärarnas pedagogiska intentioner med gruppindelningen (studie III). Den andra forskningsfrågan behandlas också i studie IV där undersöks eventuella relationer mellan förskollärares övervägande kring läroplanens innehållsområden som de arbetar minst med i sitt dagliga arbete, samt deras professionella bakgrund och gruppstorleken i förskolan.

Bakgrund

Under det senaste decenniet är gruppstorleken i svensk förskola en framträdande och återkommande fråga både inom forskning och i politiska diskussioner samt inte minst i mediedebatter. Under denna period har förskollärarnas professionalisering mot en förskola av hög kvalitet, varit ett centralt mål i flera policyreformer. De reformer som ligger till grund för denna avhandling inkluderar införandet av förskolans läroplan (1998) och dess revideringar (2006, 2010, 2016 och 2018), samt förändringar i förskolläraryrket (2001, 2011) där nya innehållsområden har introducerats och

krav på förskollärarnas professionella kompetens har betonats i allt högre grad. Avhandlingen fokuserar huvudsakligen på de två första revideringarna av läroplanen, eftersom delstudierna som avhandlingen innefattar genomfördes innan de två senaste revideringarna. I linje med dessa policy- och läroplans-reformer befinner sig förskollärarprofession i Sverige i en process av dynamisk förändring (Sheridan et al., 2011). Förskollärare förväntas ha en tydlig ledarroll i det målinriktade arbetet i förskolan, som arbetslaget gemensamt ska genomföra. Förutom teoretiska kunskaper om barns lärande och utveckling, ska förskollärare ha innehållsliga och didaktiska kunskaper för att kunna planera och genomföra en pedagogisk praktik av hög kvalitet (Sheridan et al., 2011; Williams & Sheridan, 2016). Det innefattar också förmågan att reflektera över, att granska och utveckla aktiviteter som tar utgångspunkt i barns olika kunskaper, intressen och behov, samt att kunna dokumentera och utvärdera verksamheten i förskolan för att säkerställa att läroplanens riktlinjer följs (Kuisma & Sandberg, 2012; Vallberg Roth, 2014). Förskolläraryrket ska lägga grunden till förskollärares kunskaps- och kompetensutveckling.

Sett ur ett internationellt perspektiv har kravet på förskollärares professionella kompetens, relaterat till en förskola av hög kvalitet fått stor uppmärksamhet i olika förordningar och riktlinjer i flera länder (European Commission, 2019; OECD, 2019). I många länder, inklusive Sverige, sker förskollärares professionalisering inom ett regelverk som innefattar krav på formella kvalifikationer inklusive hög utbildningsnivå och kontinuerlig kompetensutveckling. Forskning visar att förskollärares formella kvalifikationer är sammankopplade med en verksamhet av hög kvalitet (t.ex. Cameron & Moss, 2007; Early et al., 2007; Peeters & Vandenberg, 2011; Sylva et al., 2010). Kritik har dock uttalats mot en förståelse av professionell kompetens enbart som den enskilda förskollärares egenskaper. Istället förespråkas ett holistiskt och systemiskt perspektiv där den professionella kompetensen konceptualiseras som en flerdimensionell, relationell och kontinuerlig lärandeprocess, nära kopplad till komplexiteten i den dagliga verksamheten (Miller et al., 2012; Sheridan et al., 2011; Siraj, et al., 2019; Urban et al., 2012). En sådan holistisk utgångspunkt, innebär att förskollärare förstås som professionellt agerande genom att de aktualiserar sina förvärvade teoretiska kunskaper i de pedagogiska praktikerna, vilket görs i relation till alla involverade och utifrån de faktiska förhållanden som de befinner sig i. Flera samverkande faktorer inom systemet kan således skapa både möjliggörande och begränsande förutsättningar för förskollärares pedagogiska praktiker (Sylva et al., 2015).

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Komplexiteten mellan de ökade förväntningarna på förskolans uppdrag som manifesteras i policydokument och förskollärares upplevelser av uppdraget, som innebär att ständigt hålla sig uppdaterad med relevant forskning och samhällets syn på barn och lärande, poängteras i flera studier (Jonsson et al., 2017, Miller et al., 2012; Moss, 2010; Sheridan et al., 2014; Siraj et al., 2017; Urban 2008; Vallberg Roth & Tallberg Broman, 2018b). I dessa studier framhålls hur förskollärare behöver balansera mellan föreställda krav och nya uppgifter för att kunna genomföra sitt uppdrag. Flera nationella studier uttrycker en oro över spänningsförhållandet mellan förskollärares förtydligade, professionella ansvar och kompetens såsom det uttryckts i skollagen och förskolans läroplansmål och riktlinjer, och de begränsade förutsättningarna som finns för att fullfölja läroplanens intentioner (Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2019; Vallberg Roth & Tallberg Broman, 2018b; Williams et al., 2019). Studier inom det forskningsprojekt som denna avhandling är del av, visar att strukturella förutsättningar och arbetslagets kompetens är ömsesidigt beroende av varandra (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2015; Sheridan et al, 2014; Williams et al., 2018). Det innebär att även om det finns ett engagemang för uppdraget hos förskollärarna, ligger möjligheterna att påverka förutsättningarna utanför deras eget inflytande. Antalet barn i förskolans grupper och framför allt, möjligheter att kunna dela upp barngruppen under dagen, påverkar kvalitet och likvärdighet i förskolan med avseende på villkor för barnen att utveckla sin potential och för förskollärare i arbetslaget att följa barnen i deras lärandeprocesser. Förskollärares kompetens att organisera barn i mindre grupper är, enligt studierna, alltmer avgörande idag för att hantera olika begränsningar avhängigt antalet barn.

Nationella och internationella studier har visat att möjligheterna att dela in barnen i mindre grupper under hela dagen för olika aktiviteter, möjliggör för en mer hållbar förskolemiljö med en rad fördelar för barns välbefinnande, lärande och utveckling (t.ex. Alvestad et al., 2014; Ansari & Purtell, 2016; De Schipper, et al., 2006; Goble & Pianta, 2017; Sheridan et al., 2014; Slot, et al., 2016). Trots det, framkommer att gruppindelning som en pedagogisk praktik för att skapa optimala villkor för barns utveckling och lärande, sker sällan och oplanerat. Vilka faktorer som inverkar på förskollärares val att dela in barnen i mindre grupper, och intentioner med gruppindelningen, är fortfarande ett relativt outforskat område. Studierna inom denna avhandling (II och III) är därför baserade på behovet av att ytterligare undersöka denna praktik. Det nationellt

representativa urvalet av förskollärare som denna avhandling bygger på, strävar också mot att bidra med en bredare förståelse av denna specifika praktik.

Nationella studier visar att läroplanens ökade krav på en kunskapsorienterad förskola, i kombination med förskollärarnas upplevda brist på viss innehållskunskap och didaktiska kompetenser, uppfattas som stressande av förskollärarna, vilket får till följd att vissa innehållsområden väljs bort (Lillvist et al., 2014; Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2019). Det kan relateras till Sylvas et al. (2015) resultat i en studie om möjliggörande eller begränsande faktorer vid implementering av läroplansmål relativt elva europeiska länders officiella läroplaner. Trots flera, delade pedagogiska principer mellan länderna, fann studien stora kvalitetsvariationer i de pedagogiska praktikerna. Studien visade på liknade sätt som de svenska studierna, att oberoende av hur engagerad förskolepersonalen är att arbeta med läroplansmål, kräver högkvalitativa praktiker riktade kompetensutvecklingsinsatser och stödjande arbetsvillkor, inklusive optimal barngruppsstorlek och personaltäthet. Skolinspektionens rapport om kvalitetsuppfyllelse i svensk förskola (2018) visar att de kompetensutvecklingsinsatser som har genomförts de senaste åren för att stärka förskollärares kompetens inom specifika innehållsområden, varken motsvarar de behov som personalen på förskolorna anser att de har, eller kommer till nytta i det dagliga arbetet. Det är därför av vikt att studera vilka innehållsområden som förskollärarna beskriver att de minst involverar i sitt dagliga arbete samt eventuella relationen mellan dessa beskrivningar och deras kompetens samt gruppstorlekens betydelse för bortvalet (Studie IV). Ambitionen är att resultaten i denna studie ska ha relevans för design och innehåll i förskollärarytbildningen samt för riktade kompetensutvecklingsinsatser till personalen i förskolan, som i förlängningen kan bidra till hög kvalitet i förskolans verksamhet.

Teoretiska ramar

För att förstå förhållandet mellan individer och samhället utgör den ekologiska systemteorin (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) den teoretiska grunden för denna avhandling. Teorin innefattar ett föränderligt perspektiv, där individens utveckling sker genom ömsesidig interaktion med miljön. Miljön är definierad som fem, distinkta och interagerande system; mikro-, meso-, exo-, makro- och kronosystem. Bronfenbrenner definierar mikrosystemet som den mest proximala miljön, där individen är fysiskt

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närvarande och interagerar direkt med andra. Mikrosystemet omfattar aktiviteter, roller och interpersonella relationer som individer upplever inom denna miljö, med dess särskilda fysiska och materiella egenskaper. Relationer mellan olika närmiljöer skapar mesosystem. Exosystemet är relaterat till dessa miljöer där individen inte är direkt involverad men indirekt påverkas av vad som händer i dessa miljöer. Makrosystemet, som omfattar den övergripande ideologin, formas av övergripande politiska, sociala, ekonomiska värderingar och förhållanden inom en kultur, medan krono-systemet visar hur dessa förändras över tid. Ömsesidighet är en grundläggande utgångspunkt i den ekologiska systemteorin, vilket innebär att det som sker i ett system, påverkas av vad som sker i andra system i ett kontinuerligt samspel. Individen betraktas som en växande, dynamisk enhet, som successivt utvecklas och påverkar miljön där den befinner sig. På samma sätt utövar miljön inflytande på individen, vilket kräver en ömsesidig anpassning.

Den ekologiska systemteorin har utvecklats och breddats av Miller et al., (2012), som föreslår en kritisk ekologi för att förstå förskolläraryrket, inte bara i relation till individens praktiker utan i relation till hela systemet. Den kritiska ekologin utgår ifrån att frågor och svar söks inom och över alla system, relativt förskolläraryrket, för att förstå hur förskolläraernas pedagogiska praktiker, som en systemisk strävan, påverkas av mer än den omedelbara miljön som de agerar i (Miller et al., 2012). Från det kritiska ekologiska perspektivet, konceptualiseras förskolläraryrket som en praktikgemenskap. Således utgör den ekologiska systemteorin ett teoretiskt ramverk i de fyra delstudierna, för att förstå och diskutera förhållandena mellan de olika ekologiska systemen som är inbäddade i de överväganden förskollärarna gör relativt sina pedagogiska praktiker.

Metod

Data

I avhandlingens fyra delstudier analyseras data som genererats från projektets webbaserade enkät som distribuerades hösten 2012 och våren 2013. Enkäten besvarades av totalt 698 förskollärare från 46 kommuner i Sverige. I studie I, analyseras data, relaterad till förskolläraernas bakgrund som ålder, kön, modersmål, arbetslivserfarenhet från förskolan eller andra skolformer,

utbildningsbakgrund, eventuell fortbildning samt till frågor rörande respondenternas arbetsmiljö. I studie II och III analyseras data som genererats från två frågor relaterade till förskollärarnas överväganden om gruppindelningen i förskolan. Studie IV analyserar en fråga från enkäten, gällande förskollärarnas överväganden av sitt arbete med läroplanens innehållsområden.

Genomgående i de fyra studierna har Vetenskapsrådets (2017) forsknings-etiska principer för humaniora och samhällsvetenskap följts.

Analytiska strategier

De fyra studierna tillämpar olika analytiska strategier, såsom latent variabelmodellering, konfirmativ faktoranalys samt beskrivande statistisk analys och kvalitativ tematisk analys. Utgångspunkten till valet av att använda ett flertal analytiska strategier är de olika forskningsfrågorna som behandlas i varje studie. Studie I, syftade till att utforska förskollärarnas professionella profiler genom latent variabelmodellering (Latent klassanalys; Hagenaars & McCutcheon, 2002; Collins & Lanza, 2010), för att fånga individuella skillnader och identifiera homogena undergrupper av förskollärare med liknande karaktäristik. Skillnaderna mellan dessa profiler användes sedan i delstudierna III och IV för att ytterligare undersöka förskollärarnas överväganden kring gruppindelning och arbetet med läroplanens innehållsområden som var syftet i respektive studie. I studie II och III undersöktes och analyserades förskollärarnas överväganden att organisera barn i mindre grupper genom olika, men komplementära perspektiv och analytiska strategier. Studie II fokuserar på förskollärarnas överväganden relativt kontextuella faktorer som avgörande för deras beslut när de organiserar barn i mindre grupper. Studien tillämpar konfirmativ faktoranalys (Brown, 2015) för att identifiera latent faktorer som står för variationen och samvariationen bland en uppsättning av variabler. Studie III har fokus på förskollärares intentioner när de organiserar barnen i mindre grupper. Denna studie tillämpar, på liknande sätt som i studie I, latent variabelmodellering för att fånga skillnader i förskollärares intentioner med gruppindelningen och identifiera homogena avsiktliga profiler. Studie IV syftar till att undersöka förskollärarnas överväganden av läroplanens innehållsområden som de involverar minst i sitt arbete. På grundval av de beskrivningar som förskollärarna ger, analyseras eventuella samband med deras utbildningsbakgrund, erfarenhet och kompetens satt i relation till den gruppstorlek de arbetar med på sin förskola. Studien utgår från en mixed-methods analytisk

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design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) och tillämpar såväl kvantitativ (beskrivande statistik) som kvalitativ, tematisk analytisk strategi (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017).

Sammanfattningar av de empiriska studierna

Studie I

I Studie I undersöks förskollärarnas professionella profiler i olika förskolor i Sverige. Utgångspunkten för denna explorativa studie är ett antagande om att förskollärarnas professionella profiler varierar avsevärt och är kopplade både till sociohistoriska och politiska sammanhang samt till specifika, lokala arbetsförhållande. Internationella, gränsöverskridande studier (t.ex. Cameron & Moss, 2007; Oberhuemer et al., 2010; Urban et al., 2011) har påvisat en variation i förskollärares professionella profiler med avseende på deras utbildningsbakgrund, pedagogiska perspektiv, arbetsförhållande och professionella roll. I den svenska förskolekontexten är det dock fortfarande oklart hur, och i vilken utsträckning denna mångfald representeras. Studie I utgick från forskningsfrågan: Vilka är förskollärarnas professionella profiler relaterade till deras utbildningsbakgrund, deras personliga karaktäristik och deras arbetsförhållande? Nio professionella indikatorer användes för att mäta förskollärarnas professionella profiler, inklusive utbildningsbakgrund (examensår, vidareutbildning och kompetensutveckling), personliga karaktäristik (antal år av yrkeserfarenhet i förskola eller annan skolform, ålder och modersmål) samt förskollärarnas arbetsförhållanden (arbetsschema, arbetsbelastning och ansvarsområde i förskolan).

Analysen identifierade två professionella profiler för förskollärare, enligt respondenternas svarsmönster relativt studiens professionella indikatorer; sent utbildade (profil 1, förskollärare utbildade efter 1998, när förskolans läroplan trädde i kraft), och tidigt utbildade (profil 2, förskollärare utbildade före 1998). Mönstret för examensår, erfarenhet, kontinuerlig kompetensutveckling och specifikt ansvarsområde i förskolan var det mest distinkta mönstret mellan de två profilerna. Resultaten visade att de tidigt utbildade förskollärarna, jämfört med sent utbildade, förutom att de var mer erfarna, oftare hade deltagit i kompetensutvecklingsaktiviteter och hade mer ansvar för flera specifika uppdrag inom förskolans verksamhet. Dessa uppdrag inkluderade bland annat

ansvar för att stödja ett kollegialt lärande i läroplanens innehållsområden som språk, kultur, teknik eller matematik.

Studie II

Syftet med studie II var att undersöka förskollärares överväganden om faktorer av betydelse för deras beslut att organisera barnen i mindre grupper. Bakgrunden är att forskning har visat att arbete i grupper med färre barn ofta är relaterat till högkvalitativa praktiker (t.ex. Slot et al., 2016, Sheridan et al., 2014). Emellertid finns det endast begränsad forskning i Sverige, om gruppindelningen i förskolan. Likaså saknas detaljerade studier relativt de faktorer som kan vara avgörande för förskollärares beslut att dela in barnen i mindre grupper. Bristen på forskning, tillsammans med ökade, statliga krav på en mer kunskapsorienterad förskola och det faktum att fler barn går i förskolan, gör att mer forskning av denna pedagogiska praktik är nödvändig. I studien ställs följande forskningsfråga: Vilka är de latenta faktorerna som kan identifieras utifrån förskollärares överväganden när de organiserar grupper med färre barn?

Grundat i studiens teoretiska ram (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986), såväl som utifrån tidigare forskningsresultat om gruppindelningen i förskolan (Sheridan et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2019), testades först en en-faktormodell baserat på femton variabler relaterade till tre, breda kontextuella dimensionerna; barngruppens sammansättning, förskollärares relationella och organisatoriska miljö. Modellen specificerades därefter med hänsyn till de standardiserade residualer och modifieringsindex.

Resultaten visade en tre-faktormodell bestående av en allmän faktor och två resterande, distinkta faktorer under den allmänna faktorn; nämligen a) en interrelationell faktor som bestod av variabler relaterade till förskollärares relationer med barn, föräldrar, medarbetare och förskolechef, och b) en strukturell faktor som bestod av variabler relaterade till förskolans strukturella aspekter som till exempel personalsammansättning i förhållande till antal barn, förskollärares arbetsmiljö samt förskolans fysiska ekologi. I genomsnitt förklarade båda distinkta faktorerna 40 procent av variationerna i deras variabler. Genom att bekräfta resultat från andra kvalitativa studier, visar denna studie två distinkta omfattande faktorer relativt förskollärares överväganden när det gäller gruppindelning. Dessa är: förskolans organisatoriska miljö och förskollärares interpersonella relationer.

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Studie III

Studie III, syftade till att utforska profiler relativt förskollärares intentioner involverade i gruppindelingspraktiken i förskolan. Bakgrunden för denna studie är liknande den som skrivs fram i studie II. Studierna bygger dock på en skillnad mellan faktorer som kan påverka förskollärares beslut att arbeta med att organisera barn i mindre grupper (Studie II) och de pedagogiska intentioner som ligger till grund för sådana beslut (Studie III). Det underliggande antagandet för denna skillnad är att förskollärares pedagogiska praktiker inte enbart kan förstås som en del av individernas pedagogiska intentioner, utan även satt i relation till hela förskolesystemet och komplexiteten i förskolans dagliga verksamhet (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1986; Miller et al., 2012). I studien ställs följande forskningsfråga: Vilka latenta avsiktliga profiler kan identifieras utifrån förskollärares överväganden relativt gruppindelning?

Analysen i denna studie är inriktad mot förskollärares överväganden relativt en uppsättning av elva avsiktliga indikatorer som är involverade i gruppindelningens pedagogiska praktik. Dessa indikatorer innefattar förutsättningar för stödjande förskolemiljö, möjligheter för barns lek, kommunikation och interaktion, samt förskollärares direkta engagemang i barns lärande. Vidare har de professionella bakgrundsindikatorer som var de mest tydliga skillnaderna i förskollärares professionella profiler i studie I, använts som prediktorvariabler för förskollärares latenta profiltillhörighet. Dessa bakgrundsindikatorer var förskollärares examensår, deltagande i kompetensutveckling och antal år av yrkeserfarenhet inom förskolan.

I analysen identifierades två avsiktliga profiler: en relationell profil och en organisatorisk profil. Den relationella profilen bestod av 82,1 procent av förskollärarna, vilket indikerar att barns interaktion, lek och lärandemöjligheter är grundläggande för förskollärarna i denna profil, när de organiserar barn i mindre grupper. I den organisatoriska profilen betonades indikatorer som är relaterade till god ljudnivå och lugn arbetsmiljö vilket som tyder på att förskolans fysiska miljö är avgörande för förskollärarna i denna profil när de delar in barnen i mindre grupper. Förskollärares övervägande när det gällde att använda gruppindelning som en pedagogisk strategi för att kunna arbeta med ett specifikt lärandeobjekt, betonades lika mycket i båda profilerna. Förskollärares professionella bakgrundsindikatorer som prediktorer för förskollärares tillhörande i respektive profil var dock inte statistiskt signifikanta.

Studie IV

Syftet med studie IV var tvåfaldigt: (i) att analysera förskollärares överväganden relativt sitt arbete med läroplanens innehållsområden, med ett specifikt fokus på de innehållsområden de anser att de minst involverar i sitt dagliga arbete, och (ii) att undersöka om och hur förskollärares professionella kompetens och gruppstorlek i förskolan samverkar med deras arbete med dessa, minst involverade innehållsområden. Bakgrunden till denna studie är att tidigare forskning har visat att effektiv implementering av läroplanens innehållsområden är direkt relaterad till såväl förskollärares professionella kompetens som optimala förutsättningar för arbetets genomförande, inklusive bland annat personaltäthet i förhållande till antal barn och gruppstorlek i förskolan (t.ex. Sylva et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2019). Utifrån denna utgångspunkt är antagandet i studie IV, att förskollärare som upplever en osäkerhet gällande sina kunskaper inom specifika innehållsområden och/eller uppfattar gruppstorlek som ett hinder i praktiken, eventuellt undviker att inkludera vissa innehållsområden i sitt dagliga arbete med barnen.

Forskningsfrågorna i denna studie var: a) Vilka av läroplanens innehållsområden anger förskollärarna att de minst involverar i sitt dagliga arbete? b) Vad är förskollärares argumentation för att de inte involverar dessa innehållsområden? c) Hur samverkar förskollärares argumentation med deras professionella kompetens och gruppstorleken i förskolan där de arbetar?

Data-analysen genomfördes stegvis. Först utfördes en beskrivande statistisk analys där tolv variabler relaterade till läroplanens innehållsområden analyserades. En femgradig Likert-skala på alla variabler användes för att mäta förskollärares övervägande relativt dessa innehållsområden. Den beskrivande, statistiska analysen visade att läsa och skriva var de minst betonade innehållsområdena, medan språk, matematik, lek och motorik var de mest betonade. Resultaten visade även en spridning i förskollärares svar på alla tre nivåer av betoning (låg, medel och hög). Utifrån dessa resultat, tillämpades sedan en korstabuleringsanalys för att undersöka eventuella samband mellan de minst involverade innehållsområdena och förskollärares utbildningsbakgrund, antal år av yrkeserfarenhet i förskolan, deltagande i kompetensutvecklande aktiviteter och gruppstorlek i förskolan. Dock hittades inga statistiskt signifikanta samband. Förskollärares argumentering för de minst involverade innehållsområdena läsa och skriva, analyserades i ett andra steg via kvalitativ tematisk analys. Analysen identifierade fem kvalitativa olika teman: 1) en

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begränsad tolkning av läroplanens intention relativt läsa och skriva, 2) ett utvecklingsperspektiv, 3) ett strukturellt perspektiv, 4) en aktivitetsorienterad tolkning och 5) en holistisk tolkning av läroplanens innehållsområden läsa och skriva. Resultatet visar att nästan 35 procent av förskollärarnas svar hamnar inom det första temat, dvs. i svaren uttrycks att läsa och skriva inte är innehållsområden som ingår i deras uppdrag. Tillsammans med det andra temat som inbegriper ett utvecklingsperspektiv där förskollärarnas svar innefattar att barnen är för unga för att undervisas i läsning och i skrivande aktiviteter, uppgår dessa båda teman till nästan 62 procent. Flera svar relaterar det låga involverandet av läsande och skrivande aktiviteter till gruppstorlek, det vill säga att ju fler barn i gruppen, desto svårare är det att arbeta konstruktivt med sådana aktiviteter. Det fjärde, aktivitetsorienterade temat innehåller svar där görande-aktiviteter ligger i förgrunden och där lärandeaspekten är mindre framträdande. Det femte, holistiska temat, däremot, visar att förskollärarna anser att det är en del av deras uppdrag att medvetet arbeta med dessa innehållsområden på grundval av de mål som skrivs fram i läroplanen och som vävs samman med deras kompetens och lyhördhet i den dagliga interaktionen med barnen.

Diskussion

Resultaten från de fyra delstudierna diskuteras med hänsyn till avhandlingens forskningsfrågor i två olika, men sammanflätade teman: ett transaktionellt perspektiv på förskollärarnas professionella kompetens, och förskollärares pedagogiska praktiker som ett systemiskt relationellt engagemang.

I det första temat, tar diskussionen framför allt utgångspunkt i skillnaderna mellan de två professionella profilerna som identifierats i studie I. I studien visas att förskollärarnas professionella profiler skiljer sig åt i förhållande till deras examensår från förskollärarytbildningen (innan1998/efter1998) och när det gäller deras erfarenhet av och deltagande i kontinuerlig kompetensutveckling. Dessa resultat indikerar, å ena sidan, de tidigt utbildade förskollärarnas intensifierade behov av teoretisk kunskap, vägledning och professionell utveckling mot bakgrund av läroplanens införande, där förskolans uppdrag för barns livslångt lärande, kvalitetsfrågor och förskollärares didaktiska kompetens stärktes. Å andra sidan, poängterar studien de senare utbildade förskollärarnas behov av pedagogiskt stöd i sitt arbete för att implementera sina teoretiska kunskaper i praktiken. Dock visade resultatet att dessa skillnader mellan förskollärarnas professionella profiler, i förhållande till deras överväganden när

de organiserar barnen i mindre grupper (studie III) inte visade någon identifierad signifikant relation för förskollärarnas klassificering i den relationella eller organisatoriska profilen. Det tyder på att om och hur förskollärarna delar in barnen i mindre grupper, snarare är en kollektivt, förhandlad pedagogisk praktik som utgår från de faktiska situationer som dagligen uppstår i verksamheten, än kopplad till förskollärarnas utbildning och beprövad erfarenhet. Inga signifikanta samband hittades heller mellan de minst involverade innehållsområdena (läsa och skriva) och förskollärarnas utbildningsbakgrund, antal år av yrkeserfarenhet i förskolan, deltagande i kompetensutvecklande aktiviteter eller gruppstorleken i förskolan (studie IV). Den tematiska analysen visar vidare att förskollärarnas argumentation för bortvalet av dessa innehållsområden, inte handlade om en brist på kompetens. Istället, argumenterades exempelvis för att innehållsområden som att läsa och skriva inte ingår i förskollärarnas professionella uppdrag i förskolan, utan snarare hör till skolans domäner och att barnen är för unga för läsande och skrivande aktiviteter. Resultaten indikerar en arbetsplatskultur som ställer sig skeptisk till en kunskapsorienterad förskola. Det tyder på en problematik med hänsyn till olika kompetensutvecklingsinsatser efter läroplanens införande och under de första två revideringarna, samt en skepticism gällande förskollärarytbildningens innehåll och förskollärarnas föreställningar om barns litteracitet. Sett ur en sådan synvinkel, kan det hävdas att förskollärarnas tidigare erfarenheter och rådande kunskap, vilket med stöd av Bronfenbrenner (1979) definieras som maktkaraktäristika, kan inverka på individens utveckling. Resultaten ger indikationer på vikten av riktade kompetensutvecklingsinsatser som tar utgångspunkt i förskollärares behov av innehållskunskap och kunskaper kring hur de kan realisera detta arbete i praktiken.

Med utgångspunkt i det kritiska ekologiska perspektivet på förskolläraryrket (Miller et al., 2012) visar de sammantagna resultaten på vikten av att ge förskollärare möjligheter att utveckla, förfina och reflektera kollektivt över sina praktiker. Det innebär att förskollärarnas professionella utveckling behöver iscensättas i samspel med förskollärare och med de utmaningar, dilemman och frågor som finns i den faktiska miljö där de arbetar. Ett transaktionellt synsätt som integrerar top-down och bottom-up perspektiv, där förskollärare kan vara medskapare, snarare än att enbart tillämpa och konsumera ny kunskap, kan således vara en viktig utgångspunkt för professionella utvecklingsinsatser och kvalitetsförbättringar.

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Detta synsätt kan även relateras till det andra temat i diskussionen när man granskar resultaten från förskollärarnas överväganden relativt de två, specifika, pedagogiska praktiker som har undersökts i studierna II, III och IV. Förskollärarnas övervägande om sin pedagogiska praktik riktar fokus mot vikten av de interaktiva och relationella aspekterna i deras dagliga arbete. Denna relationalitet är inbäddad i två sammanvävda aspekter i förskoleverksamheten; dels den organisatoriska förskolemiljö som villkorad för förskollärarnas övervägande relativt deras pedagogiska praktiker (Studier II, III och IV), dels deras pedagogiska förhållningssätt för att stödja barns välbefinnande, sociala interaktioner, lek och lärande (Studie III och IV). Sett från mikro- och mesosystemet (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1986), accentueras, å ena sidan, gruppindelningens praktik i studie II som ett beslut som härrör från fyra sammanvävda villkorande dimensioner; förskollärarnas relationer med barn, kollegor, föräldrar och rektor. Å andra sidan, de identifierade, sammanvävda, strukturella förutsättningar för förskollärarnas arbetsmiljö omfattade av beslut i exosystemet (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1986) pekar på en arbetsplatsram som i sin tur kan skapa antingen möjligheter eller begränsningar för förskollärares genomförande av gruppindelningen. På liknande sätt, i studie, III och IV, poängterar förskollärarna förskolans strukturella förutsättningar, även om det inte är lika framträdande som i studie II, som avgörande, både för sina intentioner med gruppindelningen och för de villkor de uttrycker som en grund för arbetet med läroplanens innehållsområden läsa och skriva. Sett från makrosystemet kan förskollärarnas överväganden om de två, specifika, pedagogiska praktiker som har utforskats i denna avhandling, ses som återspeglade av olika teoretiska perspektiv på barns utveckling och lärande. Några, som är förankrade i utvecklings- och sociokulturella teorier, och andra som influerade av en barndomssociologi, däremot framkom att alla såg barn som sociala aktörer och aktiva agenter relativt sitt eget lärande.

Ett huvudförslag som härrör från dessa tema är ett transaktionellt perspektiv på förskollärares professionella kompetens som betraktar förskollärarnas olika kompetenser sammanflätade med teoretisk och praktisk kunskap. Utifrån de sammantagna resultaten är ett av bidragen från min avhandling att praktikorienterade studier och professionella utvecklingsinsatser bör vara förankrade i forskningsfrågor som är relevanta och aktuella för förskoleverksamheten. Sådana studier och kompetensutvecklingsinsatser har möjligheter att göra en skillnad och bidra till en högre kvalitet, vilket gynnar både barnen som grupp

CHAPTER 7

och enskilda barn, samt kan medverka till förbättrade arbetsvillkor för
försollärare.

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