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Pedagogical Quality in Preschool

An issue of perspectives

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ISBN etc.

*To my dearest loved ones:
my husband Joseph,
my daughter Tina
and my son Tony*

Abstract

Title: Pedagogical Quality in Preschool – An issue of perspectives
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The main aims of this thesis on the pedagogical quality in preschool are: to define and describe a pedagogical concept of quality; to explore how quality is experienced and valued from different perspectives; to find out what characterises a pedagogical environment of high quality; and to discuss how those characteristics can be used to improve the quality of preschool.

The thesis comprises four studies, a meta-perspective of the results of these and a theoretical framework. Two studies were part of a project, which aimed to improve the pedagogical quality in 20 preschools. The use of both external and self-evaluations of quality with ECERS gave an opportunity to compare these evaluations with one another as well as using the results to plan the content of a targeted development programme. In the third study, three preschools evaluated to be of low quality and three of good quality were selected for in-depth studies. Thirty-nine five-year-old children were interviewed about their conceptions of decision-making and how they experienced their possibilities for exercising influence in their own preschool. In a comparative study between Germany and Sweden, researchers made parallel and independent evaluations of the quality with ECERS in 20 preschools, 10 in each country. The underlying perceptual process was documented and reconstructed and presented in the form of five different themes.

From a meta-perspective of the results, the concept of pedagogical quality is defined and described on a primary level, which can be seen as one step in the development of a theory of pedagogical quality. The results confirm that high quality in preschool is related to the competence of the teacher and show that activities in the participating preschools are rarely learning-orientated. This indicates that there is a difference between the children's experience of exercising influence and the level of quality and shows that it is vital for the children to be involved in decision-making. The results clearly show that external and self-evaluations of quality differ, and that there is a tendency for teachers in low-quality preschools to overrate their own quality, while teachers in high-quality preschools seem to evaluate their quality lower than the external evaluator. The results confirm that structural aspects are no guarantee for high quality and show that low-quality preschools are more vulnerable to decreases in resources. Further, the results show that the quality in preschool can be enhanced through competence development even while organisational changes and financial cutbacks are taking place. To allow these conditions to exist and develop, at least four perspectives must be focused on during research on quality and in the development work, that is: the quality of interactions, the perspective of the teacher, the perspective of the child, and the perspective of society.

The study suggests that a theory of pedagogical quality needs to be developed, to define the concept further, and that the complexity of pedagogical quality requires broad research approaches and an inclusion of different perspectives.

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Section one

INTRODUCTION

Quality is a discursive and value-laden concept. Throughout history the concept of quality has been used in relation to different meanings and areas and debated as being either an objective or a subjective entity. Its history of divided meanings can be traced back to the old Greek and Roman times and even further, as quality in one way or another has always been an important aspect of human life (Juran, 1995). Still one of the main issues concerning quality is if there is a common core of values and objectives, or if the meaning of quality purely depends on the situation and the context in which it is used and/or on the perspective of the user. Or, as expressed by Moss and Pence, "in the eye of the beholder" (op. cit., 1994, p. 172).

However, the concept of quality does not need to be fitted entirely within one of these two perspectives. The present study emanates from a pedagogical perspective of quality, and from this perspective quality takes shape and develops in the relation between the object and the subject rather than in one or the other. For that reason, quality is not limited to the qualities of the object and/or the subjective experience of the user, but rather to the relation between them and how they interact with one another. From this perspective, quality is both objective, in terms of characteristics, and subjective, in terms of views (Woodhead, 1996). From my point of view, it is to be seen as an interactive perspective, as it originates from the understanding that quality is constituted in the interplay between the individual (the child) and the environment. From their first day of life, children are engaged in communication and interaction with the surrounding world, which they both influence and are influenced by. They constantly learn by experiencing, and when, through new experiences, they conceive something in another way than before, they have learned something (Pramling, 1994). A pedagogical perspective of quality focuses not only on how the environment in preschool¹ is constituted to meet, extend and challenge the experiences, intentions and goals of the child, but also on how the child can influence and form both the overall environment and his or her own learning process. This perspective of quality underlies both the theoretical approach and the empirical studies presented in this thesis.

¹ Preschool is in my thesis used for children's full time care and education that in most countries is named as daycare.

The social context of quality

Throughout the twentieth century the concept of quality has been an integrated aspect of the general debate on economy, industry and education. Today the concept of quality appears to be used more than ever in both the private and the public sector of modern society. The issue of quality within the public sector focuses on how education should be organised to promote a child's learning and development, what contents are of importance to learn and the best way to bring children up to become active, participating citizens of a democratic society.

In Sweden discussions about quality were intensified during the 1990s, a period in which the public sector became decentralised, governed by goals in combination with cutbacks and managing with fewer resources (SOU, 2000:3). Harsh times of decreasing economy and worsened conditions within the public sector were experienced as a threat towards its quality, especially as the process of reduction took place in parallel with findings in research emphasising the importance of high quality in preschool. The pressure for quality improvement has increased with the growing acknowledgement of the valid and rigorously tested research evidence, which shows that high-quality early childhood education can have a significant and long-term effect on children's learning, can lead to improvements in educational achievement throughout schooling, and can lead to better social behaviour and more productive citizenship (Sylva & Wiltshire, 1993). This created a necessity for evaluations of quality as a way to control that individual preschools fulfil the stipulated requirements, and to guarantee an equal standard of quality. The search for evaluating methods drew attention to the enormous amount of research that had been done on quality within the American preschool and school system. This is how influences from two different points of view, the private and the public sector, came to have an impact on research and evaluations of quality in Swedish preschools (Skolverket, 1998a).

In USA preschools are mainly private and the variation of quality between them is vast. The majority of young children attend institutions that are at best mediocre and more often than not of poor quality (OECD, 2000). To guarantee children's right to safety, health, a good education and care, different indicators and systems for quality assurance were developed. An accreditation system was constructed on the basis of research findings, and today this system is used in many countries to enhance the quality in preschool, for example USA, Australia and New Zealand (Phillips, & Howes, 1987; Phillips, Scarr & McCartney, 1987; Phillips, McCartney & Scarr, 1987; NAEYC, 1991; Kärrby, 1992; Ebbeck, 1998).

The development of quality in school in USA, was influenced by the philosophy and values from the field of economy and industry, and their demands for efficiency and quality assurance are mirrored in evaluating methods such as the Total Quality Management (TQM). This philosophy has also

influenced the development of quality within the Swedish school system (Skolverket, 1998a). The influence has been so strong that even traditional concepts in school have been replaced by concepts from those fields. For example, children and parents are described as users and customers, all activities have to be customer oriented and characterised by efficiency and high productivity. Visions and efficiency are also the mark of leadership, and the headmaster has to be both the “manager” and the “pedagogical leader,” who directs development towards the overall goals (Skolverket, 1998b).

This view of quality has been strongly criticised (Stern, 1997; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999). Preschool and school should be seen as institutions for learning. They are based on completely different relations, values and goals than the ones that belong to industry and the field of economy. At the same time, preschools and schools depend on an organisation that creates conditions for children’s learning and participation in society. The concept of quality and the meaning of quality within preschool and school are therefore partly constituted by other qualities. These qualities are manifested in pedagogical processes that are specific for preschool and school, and quality depends on how well the overall goals are achieved (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a, 1998b).

The task of preschool is to make it possible for children to learn and develop abilities so they can live a good life, both today as children and tomorrow as grown-ups. The progression of modern society is a complex mixture of increasing differences in children’s living conditions and an acceleration of globalisation and constant change. This makes it hard to predict what competence children will need in the future. Marton and Booth (1997) say that the more unknown the future is, the more variation children must experience in their daily life, in order to face challenges in the future. Learning is viewed as a process, in which the child continuously sees and discerns new dimensions. To constitute new knowledge the child needs to experience variation, to see a more complex whole, discern patterns and distinctive features in the interaction with both people and objects. Variation is therefore one of the main cores of learning. It entails/brings about a learning in which the learner simultaneously and consciously discerns different aspects of a phenomenon, object or situation in a way s/he has not done before. By experiencing it in another way s/he has learned something. Variation can be spontaneously experienced or systematically explored from different perspectives, in order to see a comprehensive whole and/or to discover an unknown whole by its well-known parts (Marton & Booth, 2000, pp. 187-200). To adapt the education system to the requirements of modern society, most European countries have agreed that it is of importance for children to develop every-day life skills, such as the ability to co-operate, to be responsible, active, creative, communicative, flexible, reflective, to solve problems, take the initiative, think critically and learn how to learn (EU, 1996).

High quality in preschool is therefore related to children's possibilities to learn and develop skills through variation in direction of the overall goals.

In the debate and use of the concept of quality in early childhood education, the primary issue to consider is what we want to express by using the concept, and what meaning we give to it. The next question should be how the concept of quality can be used to improve conditions in preschool and children's chances of making a good start in life. The reason for this is that the time spent in preschool is an extremely important period in a child's life and research findings prove that preschool attendance has an unquestioned impact on a child's self-esteem, academic achievements and attitude towards lifelong learning. It is mainly the indirect effects of preschool that seem to be important in the long run (Sylva, 1994). Since the pedagogical environment in preschool (and school) has such a great influence on children's wellbeing and their possibilities for learning and developing, the main issues must be to define what characterises a pedagogical environment of high quality, how these characteristics can be made visible, how they are valued from different perspectives and how that knowledge can be used to improve the quality of early childhood education.

A study of pedagogical quality

The present study emanates from a pedagogical perspective of quality. The focus of research from this perspective is on the approach of the teacher, the learning process of the child, and how they interact with one another in relation to the overall goals. The aim of this thesis is to define and describe a pedagogical concept of quality, to explore how quality is experienced from different perspectives, and how quality can be enhanced in preschool.

The study has been done in the context of preschool, and the focal point is on what meaning quality is given from the "subjective" perspective of the teachers and the children, what characteristics of quality are important to them in relation to the "objective" perspective of quality as defined and evaluated by the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS). ECERS² is a method that evaluates the overall quality in a preschool setting without focusing on individual teachers or children. In my thesis ECERS is used as a tool for research, external and self-evaluation and improvement of quality in preschool, and to explore how quality is conceived from different perspectives. The meaning given the concept of pedagogical quality originates, both from an outside and an inside perspective. The first perspective is based on external evaluations of quality. The second is based on the perspective of teachers in preschool, making self-evaluations of quality using ECERS. The underlying

² ECERS is a method to evaluate and enhance quality in preschool. The evaluating method was published by Harms and Clifford in 1980. In my thesis, a national adaptation of ECERS was used, translated by Kärrby in 1989.

assumption is that a person coming from the "outside" has another kind of understanding and a distance to things that goes on in a preschool setting than teachers who work there on an everyday basis. They are embedded in the preschool's culture, codes, routines and habits, which in time are often taken for granted (Blixt, et. al., 1995). This taken for granted attitude must be visualised, problematised and reflected on to make a change occur (Pramling, 1994). Even if the inside knowledge of the teachers brings about a deeper understanding it often makes it difficult for them to distance themselves when evaluating the quality of their own work. As the two perspectives mirror different aspects of knowledge, external and self-evaluations of quality have been used in the present study to evaluate and improve the quality in preschool, and as contents in development work³.

High quality in early childhood education is often characterised by interaction, communication, co-operation and participation (NAEYC, 1991; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999). Researchers into quality in preschool have listed some indicators of quality as more important than others in relation to children's outcomes. The approach of the teacher is regarded as the most important indicator of quality (NAEYC, 1991). The underlying assumption of my thesis is that the creation of a pedagogical environment of high quality requires competent teachers. This means teachers who challenge children to learn and experience through variation and direction of the overall goals (Pramling, 1994). Teachers who give children the chance to exercise real influence and participate in the creation of the overall environment in preschool as well as in their own learning process. Teachers who create opportunities, in which children can think, reflect and solve problems and who listen, are sensitive and involved as they engage the children in activities in which they can play, co-operate, communicate and learn together with both peers and adults (Williams, Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). Last but not least, teachers who create a positive environment, which allows children to argue and develop their own standpoints and, in time, to embrace the fundamental values of a democratic society (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a).

The main task of preschool is to promote children's learning and in that process the perspective of the child must not be overlooked. In both the UN Convention (1989) on the rights of the child and the Swedish curriculum for preschool (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a) children's right to participate and exercise influence is emphasised. In relation to external and self-evaluations of quality, a group of children were interviewed about how they conceive their possibilities to participate and exercise influence in preschool.

The results of this thesis derive from four separate studies (Articles 1 to 4, see attached and pp. 65-76), which are partly integrated with one another, since

³ In- service training is compatible to competence development and development work.

they share the same approach to quality issues and methods for evaluation and enhancement of quality in preschool. The results are expected to deepen the understanding of the concept of pedagogical quality and improve children's opportunities for learning in a rich, enjoyable environment. Questions asked within the study are: What characterises high pedagogical quality in preschool and in what way does the level of quality manifest itself in various pedagogical processes? How do teachers and children experience, express and value the pedagogical quality in preschool in relation to quality as evaluated with ECERS? How can a competence development programme be directed towards those aspects of quality that are crucial for the overall quality in preschool, in relation to the national goals? How can children's participation in democratic processes, as one aspect of pedagogical quality, and influence in preschool, as another, be enhanced?

The present study focuses on three concepts. They are: pedagogical quality, evaluation and improvement of quality as competence development. Each one of them is complex and constitutes a field of research on its own. To be able to discuss at least one of them in a deeper sense, I have decided to focus mainly on the concept of pedagogical quality in this presentation of my research. The first reason for this is that this concept has not been defined and described previously in a comprehensive way. The second reason is that this perspective of quality underlies the characteristics that have been evaluated as either high or low quality in the participating preschools, and it brings out/points to the direction for quality improvement. The thorough description of the concept and of how it is concretised in practice are to be used as the content of competence development. This emphasis on pedagogical quality may also be seen as an attempt to develop a deeper understanding of the concept of quality and how it manifests itself in various pedagogical processes in preschool. I fully agree with Woodhead, who says that, "The challenge is to establish quality standards that are both universal and which sufficiently reflect the diversity of childhood, viewed within broad cultural and historical context" (Woodhead, 1999, p. 28).

The design of the present study is as follows: The *first* section begins with a presentation of the overall aims followed by a description of a relative and an objective approach to quality and previous research on quality in preschool and school. The *second* section begins with an introduction to a pedagogical perspective of quality, the theoretical framework, and how quality is visualised through evaluation. The quality was evaluated with ECERS, and a description of ECERS as a tool for evaluation is followed by an analysis of how the criteria in ECERS are related to the goals and intentions in the Swedish curriculum. A short description of methods and analyses that have been used in the four studies is followed by a summary of these. The concept of pedagogical quality is both deconstructed and reconstructed with the assistance of four dimensions of quality. That is, the quality of the structural aspect, the attitude, the process and the outcome. The results of the four studies are then integrated into a meta-

perspective. The *third* section is presented as a general discussion of the study as a whole, its results and conclusions.

The overall aims

The present work both describes the theoretical framework of the first four studies (presented in articles 1 to 4) and, from a meta-perspective, relates the results of these four studies both to one another and to theories of learning, previous research on quality, and to the values and goals in the Swedish curriculum for preschool (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a). The present work and its inclusion of the four studies will from now on be referred to as my thesis/my study.

The first aim of my thesis is, from a meta-perspective on the four studies, to define and describe what characteristics and values were used in these studies to evaluate pedagogical quality. In relation to this process my intention is to highlight some characteristics of high quality and describe how different levels of quality manifest themselves in various pedagogical processes in preschool.

The second aim is to deepen the understanding of quality by exploring how different aspects of quality are experienced, expressed and valued from diverse perspectives, i.e. those of the external evaluator, the teachers and the children in preschool. Their evaluations and experiences will be related to quality as defined and evaluated in ECERS, to research findings on quality, to the values and goals of the Swedish national curriculum for preschool, and to modern theories of learning and development.

The third aim is to develop approaches and methods to enhance the quality in preschool and school and to make them available to researchers, administrators and teachers. My intention in this process is to visualise what is important to consider for an improvement in quality by competence development.

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES OF QUALITY

The two dominant perspectives, a relative and an objective approach to quality, are discussed in this section as an introduction to a pedagogical approach to quality. A pedagogical perspective of quality has its base in the objective approach, which means that quality can be defined and evaluated. To understand the complexity of aspects and processes that influence the quality in preschool and school, a pedagogical perspective includes the subjective experience of the teacher and the child. This approach to quality will be defined and described in the second section of this thesis.

Some researchers believe that high or low quality in early childhood education is a subjective, contextual and cultural experience and not an objective reality, as definitions of quality must evolve over time (Balageur, Mestres & Penn, 1993; Johansson, 1993; Moss & Pence, 1994; Pence, 1998; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Moss, Dahlberg & Pence, 2000; etc.). Other researchers think that it is possible to come to an agreement on indicators that characterise good or poor quality in preschool and school (Harms & Clifford, 1980, 1983; Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998; Rossbach, Clifford & Harms, 1991; Sylva, 1994; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons & Siraj-Blatchford, 1999; Kärrby, 1997; Kärrby & Giota, 1994, 1995; Kärrby, Giota, Sheridan & Däversjö Ogefelt, 1995; Tietze, Cryer, Barrio, Palacios & Wetzel, 1996; Andersson, M., 1995, 1999). Those two perspectives of quality focus partly on different dimensions or aspects of quality. Both have their strengths and their limitations. The main difference between them is that the relative approach is based on visions of society, political and philosophical perspectives, while the objective approach is grounded in and based on research on theories of learning and development and on practical experience of preschool and school.

A relative approach

The relative approach emanates from quality perceived as a relative and dynamic concept, which is always associated with a particular situation, a particular period of time and a specific social and cultural context. A relative approach to quality is often based on an ecological framework in which micro-systems (family), meso-systems (preschool and school) and macro-systems (economic and social policies) of cultures and societies influence and affect

children's development. All systems must be taken into consideration to fully understand children's experiences and possibilities for learning in early childhood education (Siraj-Blatchford, 1999a). Speakers in favour of this perspective of quality say that, "definitions of quality reflect the values and beliefs, needs and agendas, influence and empowerment of various 'stakeholder' groups having an interest in these services" (Moss & Pence, 1994, p. 1). They also argue that the quality of early childhood education cannot be determined and evaluated because the meaning of quality is the subject of debate. "What is 'good' and 'bad' pedagogical practice in institutions for young children can only be answered in a communicative context, in encounter and dialogue with others" (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999, p. 42). It is the process of goal-setting that is the very process of defining quality, and what is to be defined as high quality must constantly be negotiated among the involved stakeholder groups, for example politicians, administrators, teachers, parents and children. From this perspective, defining quality is a political process, which involves interplay and negotiations and possible conflicts among the stakeholders as their different perspectives have to be incorporated. Furthermore, they state that "early childhood institutions and the pedagogical work in which they engage are arbitrarily and socially constructed; from possible alternative constructions, we always have to make choices which are both produced by constructions of the young child and are productive in turn of these constructions" (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999, p. 42).

This perspective of quality can be regarded as a *democratic-societal perspective* of quality, as the focus is on the involved stakeholders' rights to participate in the process of goal-setting and their possibility of influencing how that process proceeds – a process that will vary depending on the specific culture and society in which it takes place. Quality from this perspective means that there should be a variety of preschools and schools to choose from. The stakeholders should not only have the chance to select preschools with various programmes, but their common subjective view on quality in preschool should also determine the content and form of the programme. This would have to change constantly in accordance with the stakeholders' interests and preferences.

The relative perspective of quality has its limitations, and several of them are pointed out by Siraj-Blatchford (1999a). The major disadvantage of a relative approach to quality is the emphasis on subjectivity and dynamism, which means that views will change over time. As a consequence, no national or local standards of quality can be instituted, and the absence of recognised external quality standards might lead to the acceptance of poor standards. This dilemma prompted Woodhead (1996) to propose a framework of how to define quality. The framework should be based on fixed input, process and outcome indicators, and on the views of stakeholders. This framework implies that quality is at the same time both objective, in terms of characteristics and subjective, in terms of

views (Siraj-Blatchford, 1999a, p. 6). In relation to the discussion on whether or not to have national goals, it is interesting to point to the results of the OECD evaluation of 1999. When the quality of European preschool settings and early childhood education programmes was evaluated, the right of various stakeholder groups to influence and participate was highly valued by the OECD group. When the systems of the participating countries were compared, the Swedish preschool system was evaluated as having the highest level of quality in this specific aspect (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1999). This is rather interesting, as Sweden is one of few countries with a national curriculum for preschool and a long tradition of guidelines presented as recommendations in the pedagogical programme for preschool. Despite, or maybe because of, overall goals and/or a tradition of guidelines, Swedish preschool teachers seemed to involve various stakeholders and implement their views in the work of preschool to a greater extent than teachers in other countries were able to do.

A second limitation is that the relative approach can only work in a society that promotes democracy at the level of the individual (Siraj-Blatchford, 1999a). In most groups there are stronger and weaker voices, and some individuals more or less elect themselves to speak for the others. Which parents are, for example, formally or informally elected to speak for the whole group of parents, what interests are put forward, and whose interests are legitimate? What about the weak voices: i.e. the ones that dare not speak up and make their voices heard, especially if they are in the minority and/or in opposition? Who talks for them, and out of what interest will they do so? Or the other way round, if the strong voices come from a minority putting their own interests forward, what will then happen? These issues are important, especially as Siraj-Blatchford (1999a) emphasises that "A democratic process of consultation does not necessarily ensure that a representative view of what quality means in early childhood education is achieved" (op. cit., p. 7).

This raises the question: Who shall speak for the very young children and determine what they shall learn? Therefore, the third limitation of the relative approach to quality concerns the learning process of the child and what children are expected to learn. The questions addressed are: First, is there any overall direction of learning in this approach to quality? If not, the second is, is everything of the same value and can whatever is suggested be included as long as it is negotiated and agreed upon among the stakeholders? If there is an overall direction, the third question is, who determines this direction and on what grounds and according to what values are those decisions made?

This means that the theoretical disadvantage of this perspective is that the very process for goal-setting and defining quality might lead to unwanted compromises and/or a combination of goals that are based on a variety of theoretical assumptions of children's learning and development. Those goals and definitions of quality can thereby be based on underlying theories of learning that either coincide or contradict one another. The process is in itself also both

time-consuming and complex, as negotiations have to be re-opened and new agreements reached as soon as circumstances or the group of stakeholders change. The advantage and strength of this perspective is the democratic attempt of making all voices heard in the process of defining quality, the focus of diversity and the respect of subjective values.

An objective approach

The objective approach to quality emanates from the standpoint that there can be a common core of qualities and a shared knowledge of characteristics that constitute the concept of quality. To define what is meant by good quality, it is necessary to develop a shared understanding of what those qualities are and reach a consensus on how they are rooted in pedagogical processes in early childhood education. A shared understanding that is built on knowledge, which originates both from gathered research into theories of learning and proven experience in preschool, and that is based on theoretical and practical knowledge of what characterises a high quality environment for children's learning and development. This knowledge can be distinguished and formulated as overall goals for what children should have the opportunity to learn in preschool, and as various strategies for how to do it. In contrast to a relative perspective of quality, this approach can be both defined and evaluated. The level of quality is valued in relation to the impact a certain programme's content and working methods has on children's possibilities for learning and developing in the direction of its overall goals. To do national as well as cross-national evaluations and comparisons of quality in early childhood education, a shared understanding of the concept of quality is required (Harms & Clifford, 1980, 1983; Sylva, 1994; Kärrby, 1989, 1992, 1997; Kärrby & Giota, 1994, 1995; Kärrby, Giota, Sheridan & Däversjö Ogefelt, 1995; Tietze, Cryer, Barrio, Palacios & Wetzel, 1996; Sheridan, 1997; Tietze & Giota, manuscript; Andersson, 1995, 1999).

The second perspective of quality can be interpreted as an *educational perspective of quality*, as the focus is on the system of education. The research interest concerns how this system is organised to promote a child's learning and development into an active and democratic member of society. The role of education was strongly debated by Dewey (1916). He argued for the importance of education as a way to strengthen and develop democracy as a life form. He believed that education is the tool of society to incorporate the growing generation into a specific culture – that society uses education to form itself the way it wants, but also that society is formed by its people, and that it is through education that children become part of mankind's social development. The education system as a whole should therefore be seen as an integrated part of society, embracing its history, values, knowledge, traditions and culture.

According to the objective approach to quality, there can also be a diversity of preschools and schools within an educational system, and they can be organised in various ways. The difference from a relative approach to quality is the demand for an equal level of quality and certain standards. Independent of a preschool's (or a school's) profile, its content and pedagogical approach should lead to children feeling good, developing self-esteem, having fun, learning and developing in the direction of the overall goals. The extent to which this occurs distinguishes the level of quality in that specific preschool or school.

The strongest criticism against this perspective from someone with a relative approach to quality is "The assumption that there is an entity or essence of *quality*, which is knowable, objective and certain truth waiting 'out there' to be discovered and described" (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999, p. 93). In my view, the limitations of this perspective are both theoretical and methodological, that is, the process of defining quality and how these definitions are transformed into methods for evaluating the quality in preschool and school. The concept of quality is constituted of a conglomerate of characteristics that must be both visualised and scrutinised, and there must be no doubt of its underlying values and theoretical approach. A severe deficiency is the neglect to define what indicators characterise and constitute the concept of quality and/or the danger of using those characteristics as a uniform, narrow, closed, standardised and static 'truth' of characteristics of quality in the education system. There are also methodological difficulties. For a concept of quality to be used in research, to evaluate and to enhance the quality in preschool and school, its defined constitution must be split into independent variables, and once again be put together in a method, instrument or tool, by which the concept of quality as a whole can be valued and measured. This is a very delicate process, which requires both skill and knowledge on the part of the constructor and the user of the tool.

However, the process of defining quality is not static, and it must be open to change, redefinition and reconstruction, because this perspective of quality does not mean that the general and common knowledge of what is defined as high or low quality in preschool is static, and given once and for all. Rather, it is the other way round; this perspective of quality is in harmony with the approach to knowledge as something that is continuously reorganised, expanding and/or changing (Carlgren, 1994). In accordance with new research, theories of learning, goals and values of society, the process of defining quality and the development of methods to evaluate it must continue in a never-ending process.

RESEARCH IN PRESCHOOL

The importance of high quality in preschool and school has been proven by an enormous amount of research within this area. To give an overall picture of this would be both impossible and irrelevant. I shall refer instead to a few studies, in order to visualise the complexity of aspects that influence the quality in a preschool and to highlight what knowledge these studies have contributed to the overall research on quality and how it has been used to improve quality in preschool.

Four stages of research on quality

The subject of quality has always been an important issue in the debate of how an educational system ought to be constructed to promote a child's learning and development and to implement the fundamental values of society. However, the interest in research in preschool and school has varied during different periods of time. Clarke-Stewart (1987a) and Kärby (1997) claim that there have been different waves of research on quality.

In the *first* stage, during the fifties, the focus of research on quality, or rather the question of the best place to bring young children up in, was, if care and fostering should be at home or in day-care. The dominant opinion was that the best environment for a young child to grow up in was at home, under the care and protection of the mother. Care of young children outside the home was regarded with scepticism. To separate a young child from his or her mother could even be dangerous, and some researchers believed that care outside the home could damage the next generation's social and emotional development (Bowlby, 1953).

During the next decade an enormous expansion of industry and technological inventions required women in the workforce. Care outside the home became a necessity, which culminated in Sweden during the seventies. Preschool settings were built according to strict standards and regulated by detailed norms. In the *second* stage the focus of research was on the structural aspects of quality, such as space, the amount of materials, ventilation, the staff-child ratio, etc. Today these are often named key indicators, which are easily followed up and evaluated according to agreed norms and standards. Those aspects of quality can easily be compared, both from a national and an international perspective.

In time, longitudinal research on quality in preschool indicated that attendance at preschool was associated with benefits for the children (Sylva &

Wiltshire, 1993). Children who had spent time in care outside the home had developed their social competence and cognitive abilities more than children who had only been brought up at home (Stukát, 1966; Andersson, B-E., 1989; Clarke-Stewart & Fein, 1983; Clarke-Stewart, 1987a, 1987b). Research also showed that preschool settings with similar material conditions functioned very differently from a perspective of quality. This led to a growing insight that structural aspects of quality are necessary but not enough to provide high quality in preschool. High quality related to children's possibilities for learning and developing competence in vast areas requires more than good space and material conditions.

Research on quality in the *third* stage came to focus on the inner pedagogical processes in preschool, e.g. all that goes on in preschool. The research concentrated around questions such as: How do the teachers meet and interact with children? What experiences will children encounter in preschool? What values do children develop and what do they learn? From what view of knowledge and from which fundamental values do activities in preschool emanate? To what extent are adults engaged in and sensitive to children's needs, rights and interests? What opportunities do children have to learn and develop, both in relation to their own learning goals and the goals of society? The focus of research was mainly on the professionalism and competence of the teachers: how the teachers interact with the children and on their competence to create an environment in preschool that stimulates children to a joyful learning (Pascal & Bertram, 1994; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Kärrby, 1992, 1997; Sheridan, 1997).

The *fourth* stage means that research on quality has taken a further step ahead. It is not enough to concentrate on what goes on inside the walls of a preschool, and to look upon the time children spend there as an isolated activity. Pedagogical quality in preschool must be seen in the light of its specific culture, the social conditions in which children are brought up and attitudes to upbringing and to the fundamental values of that society in which the preschool exist. Society is in itself under constant change and development, and what goes on in preschool must be related to the changes in society (Bruner, 1996; House of Mandag Morgen, 1999; Säljö, 2000). Of importance to the quality is whether the children are in phase with the development within society. They must be able to embrace and critically analyse what they have learnt by using all tools of society (Bruner, 1996) and search for information with the help of modern information and communication technology.

Despite comprehensive research findings indicating that preschool promotes a child's learning and development, the research on quality at the end of the twentieth century is still marked by controversy about care at home or in preschool for the youngest children (Sylva, 1994). In Sweden, Andersson (1992) followed a group of 128 children from their first year in daycare to the age of 13. He found that children who had started preschool before the age of one

performed better in school, adapted more easily and developed their social competence to a greater extent than children who only grew up at home. Research in other countries has come to other and more negative results concerning young children and preschool attendance (Sylva & Wiltshire, 1993). These contradictory results indicate that there still is a great need for more research on quality in preschool.

In summary, it can be stated that regulation was once an expression for quality, while the key words today are decentralisation, diversity and local initiatives. The four stages of research on quality show how the research has gone from the question of care inside or outside the home to problematising the complexity of aspects that influence the quality in a preschool. To understand how the quality of structural aspects, pedagogical processes, attitudes and expected outcomes are related to the overall goals and values within and between cultures. From years of research on quality in preschool, it can be stated that participation in pedagogical practice is no guarantee for positive learning and development outcomes. Decisive for what and how children learn and develop is the quality of the pedagogical practice (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons & Siraj-Blatchford, 1999). It is in preschools of high quality that children can develop abilities, habits and qualities that will help them to solve problems and to interact and co-operate with other people in a positive way.

Programme approaches and children's outcomes

Quality is essential to the effectiveness of preschool programmes (Schweinhart, Barnes & Weikart, 1993, p. 17) and a large amount of the research on quality in preschool and school has focused on the effects various programmes have on children's outcomes. Some of these programmes challenge children's desire to learn, while others undermine it. Issues involved in those studies can be expressed as aims and goals of the programme, e.g. academic learning versus personal-social development, teacher-directed versus child-initiated and the content and nature of the activities offered (Katz, 1999).

Despite clear findings in favour of some programmes, the debate on quality is still marked by intense controversy concerning the appropriate curriculum, teaching methods and goals in early childhood education. Katz states that the traditional polarisation between programmes with formal academic instruction or non-academic programmes has led both to negligence in addressing the most important question, that is, what approach will most sufficiently support children's development, and disregard for alternative views. "To capitalise on and to strengthen these in-born intellectual dispositions, early childhood curriculum and methods must provide contexts in which they can be manifested, appreciated, and thereby further developed (op. cit., p. 77), and she continues,

”that it is not very useful to have skills if the dispositions to use them are undermined in the process of acquiring them” (Katz, 1999, p. 80). An analysis of five early childhood programmes, the Reggio Emilia, High/Scope, The Movimento da Escola Moderna Curriculum, Te Whāriki and Quality in Diversity in Early Learning, shows that the role of the teacher in relation to a development of children’s dispositions needs to be problematised in further research (Siraj-Blatchford, 1999c).

Two of the programmes referred to most are the American Head-Start project and the High/Scope programme. The Head-Start project is government-funded and has gone on for decades. The main aim of this project is to break the cycle of poverty for disadvantaged children. Sylva’s reviews (1993, 1994) of studies made of Head Start over the years show that initial evaluations of Head Start seriously underestimated the value of the programme by focusing on measures of intelligence as the main outcome. More recent evaluations have used other research models and looked at a wider array of child outcomes. Results from these studies showed that Head Start had immediate, positive effects on children’s cognitive ability, short-term positive effects on children’s self-esteem, academic achievement, motivation and social behaviour, advantages that disappeared within a few years. Sylva argues that even those findings are questionable. They are based on a review of 210 studies evaluating the impact of Head Start. The studies were designed very differently from each other, many of them lacked adequate assessment of pre-intervention differences in children’s ability, and few had control groups. Some smaller and better-controlled studies of the effects of Head Start showed that Head Start children often begin with a lower level of functioning, as they come from homes with serious social disadvantages. The results now showed that the Head Start children had *large gains* on measures of cognitive and social functioning, and that Head Start is most effective for the most economically disadvantaged children (Sylva & Wiltshire, 1993; Sylva, 1994).

The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project is a study assessing whether high quality active learning programmes can provide both short and long-term benefits for disadvantaged children (Schweinhart, Barnes & Weikart, 1993). The lives of 123 children have been followed for almost three decades. The children were randomly divided into a high quality active learning programme group and a no programme group. Evaluations of the effects of the programme showed that the initial I.Q. gains had disappeared by the time they entered secondary school. However, at the age of 27, the High/Scope children compared to the control group had: significantly higher monthly earnings, a significantly higher percentage of home ownership and second car ownership, a significantly higher level of schooling completed, a significantly lower percentage receiving social services at some time in the past 10 years and significantly fewer arrests. The lasting change in those disadvantaged children can be explained in different ways, such as: ”It was the development of specific personal and social

dispositions that enabled a high-quality early childhood education programme to significantly influence participant's adult performance" (op. cit., p. 227), and "The essential process connecting early childhood experience to patterns of improved success in school and the community seemed to be the development of dispositions that allowed the child to interact positively with other people and with tasks" (Schweinhart, Barnes & Weikart, 1993, p. 230).

In a British longitudinal study, Osborn and Milbank (1987) followed 15000 children from birth in 1970 and tested their cognitive, verbal and mathematical ability at the age of five and ten. The result showed that children who had participated in child-centred preschool programmes had higher points on tests than children who had no preschool experiences or had attended "nursery-classes," which can be regarded as equivalent to using formal and traditional learning methods.

In Portugal, Nabuco (1995) studied the effects of three different preschool curricula, the High Scope, the João de Deus and Movimento da Escola Moderna on children's entry into primary school. The sample consisted of 223 children, followed longitudinally from preschool to primary school. She found that the type of preschool curriculum had a differential impact on children's learning and self-perception in primary school. The teachers were instructing most in the João de Deus. They involved the children in school-influenced activities and the programme left the children with very little choice. The result showed that the social acceptance among children was lower in the João de Deus programme compared to the other two. The teachers were caring and helping most in the Movimento da Escola Moderna, and in this programme the children spent most of their time in activities of free choice. The teachers in the High Scope programme were observed to extend the child's play, and the result showed that attendance in this programme was associated with higher scores on curricular outcomes of reading and writing. The High Scope programme with its balance between choice and guidance, between cultural play and problem-solving and between playing in small groups and sharing with others in the whole group gave children a better start in primary school.

In the review, *The impact of Early Learning on Children's Later Development* by Sylva and Wiltshire (1993) the following conclusions (or in place of a conclusion) are made: 1) Preschool education leads to immediate, measurable gains in educational and social development; 2) High quality early education leads to lasting cognitive and social benefits in children; 3) The impact of early childhood education is found in children from all social groups, but is strongest in children from disadvantaged backgrounds; 4) Investment in high quality early education "pays off" in terms of later economic savings to society; and the most important, 5) Learning in preschool concerns aspiration, task commitment, social skills and feelings of efficacy (op. cit., p. 36-37).

Sylva's review (1994) of *School Influences on Children's Development* shows that social cognitions and feelings are also influenced by school (pre-school) and that these might be just as powerful in predicting later outcomes as intelligence or school curriculum. "Such indirect effects of school are more elusive because they are mediated by children's motivation to learn or avoid learning, their conceptions of themselves as learners, and the attributes they create for explaining success and failure. Cognitive and motivational mediators of indirect effects continue to exert influence on individual development outside and beyond school" (op. cit., p. 135).

The reviews show that lasting benefits from preschool are not guaranteed, but that early childhood education can change the course of children's lives, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The differences in lasting effects and benefits from programmes can be explained by their orientation. Programmes that are oriented towards education, with a balanced structure of guidance and child initiative, were of more benefit to children than programmes that either focus too much on instruction or free play and care. Most important to future school and life achievements are how preschool affects children's attitudes to learning, their self-esteem and their task orientation. She finishes her review by saying, "It is tempting to say that the legacy of effective preschool education is the 'will and skill to do'" (Sylva, 1994, p. 163).

The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project is a large-scale, longitudinal study of the progress and development of 3000 children in various types of preschool education and reception classes. The project, which started in 1997 and will continue until 2003, focuses specifically on the effectiveness of early years education. The study is intended to explore the characteristics of different kinds of early years provision and will examine children's development in preschool education and influences on their later adjustment and progress at infant school up to the National Assessment at age seven. The research involves preschool centres in six regions (five in England and one in Northern Ireland) and investigates six main types of preschool provision attended by three to four-year-olds: playgroups, nursery classes, private day nurseries, nursery schools, combined centres and local authority centres. The study will provide information about the measurable effects of different types of preschool education on children's later progress, development and adjustment to school, descriptions of good practice, guidance for trainers of preschool educators, information about what kinds of preschool learning are most beneficial for different groups of children and information for parents on good preschool practice.

There will be a series of 12 technical papers. Papers 6 and 6a focus on the characteristics of the 141 preschools in the EPPE sample. All preschools were evaluated with ECERS - R (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998) and ECERS - E, which is an additional scale devised by the EPPE research team, based upon desirable learning outcomes. Evaluations with ECERS - R showed that the

average quality was good, while ECERS - E showed that the learning opportunities in maths and science were limited and sometimes inadequate. Considering the type of provision, the LEA centres (nursery schools, nursery classes and nursery school combined with care) had scores in the range of good to excellent. Social services' day-care fell within the range of good, and play-groups and private nurseries were found to have scores in the minimal/adequate range. The result also showed great variations in pedagogical strategies seen in interactions between children and teachers and in the resources available for children's play and learning. Comparisons between types of preschools showed that a high staff/child ratio is no guarantee for high quality in itself, but is associated with the qualifications of teachers. One conclusion is that small groups of children did not compensate for teacher competence, and another conclusion is that training of all teachers influences the level of quality (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons & Siraj-Blatchford, 1999).

Siraj-Blatchford (1999b) believes that a curriculum cannot be seen in isolation. It cannot exist without a strong and well-developed framework of support, the social and institutional context in which the curriculum exists. To develop a sound curriculum, the teachers must have knowledge about child development, the culture, subject knowledge and appropriate ways of teaching young children. To be able to work in the same direction, the teachers must also have time to develop a shared understanding of children, curriculum, learning and the role of adults in supporting learning. Teacher involvement seems to be related to a consistent school-based approach to the curriculum and a shared philosophy. Siraj-Blatchford argues for the importance of teachers working together towards a quality curriculum pursuing and understanding: curriculum knowledge, active learning through scaffolding and play, equal opportunities, family and community partnerships primary educators/key persons, interactions with adults and peers, assessment, observation and record keeping, staff development, environment factors, multi-disciplinary teams, management matters.

She argues for a curriculum that offers breadth, balance and variety in subject matters, needs and teaching, and with relevance to the lives of young children, a curriculum that extends each child's development and builds on their interests and prior understandings and rests on a philosophy of combined care and education. Siraj-Blatchford also focuses on children's active learning and the construction of their cultural identity. She believes that we have to extend children's identity as active learners and break down stereotypes about gender, ethnic belonging, religion and culture. Children enter preschool with a wealth of preferences and prejudices and with knowledge and experiences associated with language, maths, science technology, sociability, etc. The way children articulate and reflect upon this knowledge and experience will depend on the expectations held by those around them (Siraj-Blatchford, 1999b).

The results of the above studies can be summarised as follows: programmes that are learning-orientated and have a balanced structure, e.g. both teacher and child are active, engaged and involved, are best for children's learning and development. They emphasise the importance of children being able to take their own initiative, to participate and influence what goes on in preschool.

Research of quality with ECERS

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) has become a common and widely used instrument in research, as the evaluation method reflects a broad understanding of quality in early childhood education. The American version has not only been applied in the USA, but also in various other English-speaking countries, including Canada, the Bermuda Islands, Bahrain, Australia, the Philippines, Hongkong-Singapore and the UK. In addition, translated national adaptations are available in Germany, Italy, Spain, Greece and Sweden. In a number of studies throughout various countries, ECERS has been used both for research and as an evaluation instrument for comparative purposes, as well as for investigations of the relationship between process quality and the various conditions of early childhood education provision (Phillips, 1987; Scarr, Eisenberg & Deater-Deckard, 1994; Rossbach, Clifford, & Harms, 1991; Kärby & Giota, 1994, 1995; Tietze, Cryer, Barrio, Palacios & Wetzel, 1996; etc.) In Sweden, ECERS has also been used as an instrument for self-evaluation and as a base for development work and improvement of quality in early childhood education (Sheridan, 1997; Andersson, M., 1999).

The Bermuda study by Phillips, Scarr and McCartney (1987) is the first large-scale study in which ECERS was used as a method to evaluate the quality in preschool. The study was conducted in nine preschool settings with 166 children aged 36 to 68 months. The main result is that high quality, as evaluated by ECERS, was related to a better language development of the children. The children's social competence and ability to complete a task on standardised tests and observations in preschools evaluated as having a high quality were compared to those in preschools evaluated as having a low quality. Results from another large-scale study, Cost, Quality and Outcomes in Child Care conducted by Peisner-Feinberg and Burchinal (1995) are based on a stratified random sample of 100 programmes in each of the participating states, California, Colorado, Connecticut and North Carolina. Development outcomes were gathered from individual assessments of the children. Again the result shows that children in better quality care evidenced better cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes across the variety of domains studied: the children had a more positive view of their preschool situation and themselves, they had better relationships with their teachers and had more advanced social skills. The

teachers in higher quality preschool settings viewed their relationship with the children more positively and rated the children as more creative, more independent, more task-oriented, more communicative, and as having a more advanced language and pre-mathematical skills. White (1989) used ECERS to categorise preschool settings as being of high or a low quality. He found that the children who had participated in high quality preschool centres exhibited a larger proportion of positive interactions with peers and fewer incidents of negative behaviour than did children from preschool centres evaluated as being of low quality by ECERS.

The comparative International Child Care and Education Project (ICCE) was initiated in 1993 and continued in Portugal, Spain, Germany, Austria and USA (Tietze, Cryer, Barrio, Palacios & Wetzel, 1996). The aims of the project were to examine process quality within a cross-national perspective and to describe some major features of process quality in the five countries. The authors argue that despite obvious cultural differences among the Western countries, there appears to be a core of basic elements that are recognised as being necessary for children's positive development. When quality definitions are closely inspected, the themes of these core elements appear repeatedly, with only the various details differing. They point out that NAEYC's criteria (1991) overlap with the view of process quality presented in both the European Union's work and the World Health Organisation's Child Care Facility Schedule in 1990 (see Tietze, Cryer, Barrio, Palacios & Wetzel, 1996).

Common elements that are considered important are safe care, developmentally appropriate stimulation, positive interactions with adults and peers, encouragement of individual emotional growth, and promotion of positive relations with other children.

The ICCE study focuses on aspects of process quality that relate to the children's health and safety, interactions with teachers, learning and social opportunities. The process quality was evaluated with both ECERS and CIS (the Caregiver Interaction Scale). The means of the process quality according to ECERS ranged from 4.06 in Spain to 4.70 in Austria. None of the countries had excellent quality. The explanation is, that even if Germany and Austria had the highest total means, they could not reach a higher mean score, as their programmes do not fully reflect the intentions of ECERS. Both programmes over-emphasise less formal teaching methods, and academically oriented activities are deliberately excluded. Compared to the criteria in ECERS, a scoring on the highest level of quality requires more planning and teacher input/scaffolding than prescribed in their preschool programmes. Common to all five countries was high quality in the interaction between the teacher and the child as evaluated by the CIS. That means that the teachers were sensitive, involved and had a high level of acceptance in the interaction with the children. The result was interpreted to mean that all five countries seemed to have a common understanding of what is meant by a pedagogical approach in the interaction with

children. Spain had the lowest quality as evaluated by ECERS, a result that was explained by the country's more traditional and school-oriented working methods (Tietze, Cryer, Barrio, Palacios & Wetzel, 1996).

In a joint project between 1988 and 1991, the Department of Education and the Department of National Economics at Gothenburg University conducted research in 200 preschool settings in order to study the relation between cost effectiveness and quality. Statistically there was no correlation between cost effectiveness and quality as evaluated by ECERS, except in socio-economic problem areas. There a correlation was found between staff-child ratio and quality. However, the result from this study also indicates that the more cost-effective preschools had a better professional capacity. They had more detailed and long-term goal documents, which appeared to indicate that the teachers spent more time on planning their work. The number of preschool teachers was also higher in those preschool units compared to low cost-effective preschool units (Bjurek, Gustafsson, Kjulin & Kärby, 1992).

When quality is evaluated in preschool, the perspective of parents must not be overlooked. In a follow-up study by Kärby and Giota (1995), 40 preschool settings, randomly selected from the original 200, were studied. Once again the result was the same; no correlation between cost effectiveness and quality was found. However, in this study data on parents' view of quality was also obtained. The parents of the children in the evaluated preschool units were asked to fill out a questionnaire. The results show that 81.5 percent of the parents found the preschool to be a stimulating environment for children's learning, and they said that the highest indicator of quality was the personnel and professional competence of the teachers, their engagement and flexibility. The parents' conception of quality was also compared to the external evaluations of quality with ECERS. The statistical analysis showed a high correlation between the parents and the external evaluations of preschool settings (Kärby & Giota, 1995). In a study conducted in five states in USA, 2400 parents valued the quality from the same point of view as found in ECERS. The result showed that it was difficult for the parents to evaluate the pedagogical work that was going on in a preschool, and that most parents overestimated the quality compared to external evaluators. Parents and teachers valued the same characteristics as important to quality, but experienced them differently because of "imperfect information". The conclusion is that parents have insufficient knowledge of the pedagogical processes in the preschool setting, even though they think they have chosen a preschool service from a pedagogical point of view (Cryer & Burchinal, 1997).

Andersson (1999) studied if teachers can enhance the quality in their own preschool units with the help of self-evaluations of quality using ECERS. Participating in the study were 27 working teams, divided into control, information, and intervention groups. All of the groups were evaluated before and after the project with ECERS. In between, the teachers in the information and

intervention groups made independent self-evaluations of quality, which were followed by common discussions and actions for improvements. The quality had improved in the preschool units with working teams from the information and the intervention groups. For the control group there was no difference in quality. The results of this study clearly show that ECERS can be used by the teachers in order to become aware of what is going on in pedagogical practice and that this knowledge can be used to change and to improve the quality (Andersson, M., 1995, 1999).

The quality in Swedish preschools is often conceived as high, even and equal all over the country (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1999). However, several evaluations with ECERS show a variety within and between communities (Kärrby, 1992; Kärrby & Giota, 1994, 1995; Däversjö Ogefelt, 1996; Sheridan, 1997; Andersson, M., 1995, 1999). In the follow-up study of the 40 preschool units, Kärrby found that the quality of the 40 preschool units varied and the range of the preschool unit's total mean was from 2.79-5.64 with an average total mean of 4.36 (a minimum is 1.00 and a maximum is 7.00). Studies of 27 preschool units in Stockholm showed a range from 3.20-4.70 in the final evaluation (Andersson, 1995, 1999). When Däversjö Ogefelt (1996) evaluated 40 preschool units in Skövde with the help of ECERS, she found a range from 2.00-5.01, with an average total mean of 4.10. In Lerum, 20 preschool units evaluated with ECERS showed a range of 3.79-5.71 and an average total mean of 4.52 (Sheridan, 1997). All of these studies show a similar pattern, leading to the conclusion that there is a great variation in quality in the Swedish preschool, both within and between communities.

To summarise, evaluations of quality with ECERS show that the quality of preschool units varies considerably, both within and between countries (Kärrby & Giota, 1994; Andersson, M., 1995, 1999; Tietze, Cryer, Barrio, Palacios & Wetzel, 1996). Research findings show that children in high quality preschool settings, as evaluated with ECERS, have better results on tests that evaluates the child's language ability, academic achievements, attitudes towards the preschool, conceptions about their own ability, relations to teachers and social competence (Phillips, Scarr & McCartney, 1987; Peisner-Feinberg & Burchinal, 1995).

Studies of children's conceptions and learning

In this part children's conceptions are studied. Most studies on quality take the perspective of the adult and not of the child. Seldom is the child's subjective experience of quality in preschool asked for or studied. Further, "the omission of complex and rich lifeworlds of children has created gaps in our understandings of how children experience quality within day care settings" (Hoskins, Pence &

Chambers, 1999, p. 52). So, if we do not consider the perspective of the child, important knowledge of what constitutes quality in preschool will be lost. When researchers and teachers interpret and evaluate various situations and pedagogical processes in preschool, the point of departure should therefore be the meaning given to them by the children themselves (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Pramling Samuelsson, 2000).

The Victoria Day Care Research Project (VDCRP) is a longitudinal study that began with three-year-old children and followed their development until the age of 18. Children were interviewed using a qualitative approach to supplement and extend quantitative data. Children were interviewed and assessed for cognitive, emotional and social development during three periods of time, at the age 3, 12 and 18. Data on 126 children and their families, caregivers and caregiving arrangements were collected. The children were divided into groups defined as high and low-risk groups. High risk meant that the child was from a low-resource family and was attending a low-quality day care centre. Low risk meant that the child was from a high-resource family and was attending a high-quality day care centre. Family resource level was based on the mothers' level of education, occupational status and family income. Quality of day care was based on assessments using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (Harms & Clifford, 1980) and the Family Day Care Rating Scale (Clifford & Padan-Belkin, 1983, in Hoskins, Pence & Chambers, 1999). The finding of phase one of the study was that low-resource families were over-represented in lower-quality day care programmes. Two variables distinguished one group of children from another: low-income families and limited access/choice. A third variable was that single parenthood was also associated with low-resource families.

Within the framework of the VDCRP longitudinal project, an in-depth study was conducted that includes voices of children who recalled early childhood memories at ages 11-12 and again at ages 17-18 (Hoskins, Pence & Chambers, 1999). Four female participants were selected, two considered to be from the high-risk category and two from the low-risk category. At age 11 the children provided vivid descriptions of their day care environment, activities and names of other children and their caregivers. However, what was important at age 11 does not have a lasting impact; nor, is the interpretation retained. At age 17, these memories have faded. The children were now living in different times, a different context, and they constructed their narratives differently. The interviews with the four girls revealed similar themes: When they recalled significant life events from the vantage point of age 17 they had all seemingly left their day care experiences behind. Other life events had risen in importance, and they seemed more interested in following the threads of family stresses and disruptions through their lives. Each adolescent made meaning of their experiences in unique ways. The authors saw their narratives as fluid, multiple, fragmented and co-constructed in relationships with others. It becomes increasingly difficult to ascertain the impact of early day care memories on the

construction of the self-identities of these young women. The authors conclude that the current discourse of day care reflect the dominance of consumerism, i.e., quality, safety, affordability, availability, which is a use and throw away discourse. They believe that preschool must be structured to reflect a discourse of community i.e., connections, continuity, co-operation, sharing and caring (Hoskins, Pence & Chambers, 1999).

The New Zealand early childhood sector is a very diverse one. There is diversity on cultural, philosophical and organisational grounds. Within this diverse context the task of ensuring quality is a complex one (Dalli, 2000). From 1995-1997, the Project for Assessment of Children's Experiences were based at the University of Waikato and directed by Margaret Carr. Using the approach of action research, Carr worked within a range of different early childhood centres to develop assessment procedures for the national early childhood curriculum, known as Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996). The New Zealand curriculum, Te Whāriki, summarises learning outcomes for children as 'working theories' (learning about the world and how to interact with it) and 'dispositions to learn' (learning about learning).

As the project developed, children-in-action developed into learning stories and emerging learning narratives. In phase one of the project the learning story framework was set up and described by five steps, or parts to the learning stories related to the goals in the curriculum. During this phase of the project, it appeared that children's dispositions and learning strategies are not 'free-floating'. They are linked together in chains or event structures. A useful way to describe and assess these chains is as narratives about learning or learning stories. These stories will be changed or developed through children's learning experiences in early childhood and throughout life. When a story is reflected in many experiences, it develops the quality of a 'template'. In phase two, researchers and practitioners worked together in five early childhood settings to test the learning story framework. In phase three, a professional development package was developed for practitioners (Carr & VideoCampus, 1998, in Carr, 1999).

The project, Learning and Teaching Stories (1998-1999) was used as a base in the development of methods to implement and evaluate the implementation of Te Whāriki (Carr, May & Podmore, 1999). The action research project, Implementing Te Whāriki in Pacific Island Centres, was used to describe the current levels of coverage and understanding of Te Whāriki at all of the Pacific Islands Early Childhood Centres (PIECC). The aim of the project was to develop an assessment and evaluation framework using the strands and goals of the Te Whāriki. The action research project was placed within the context of current policy, research and implementation provisions in early childhood education in New Zealand. Parents, caregivers, representatives from a range of PIECCs and staff involved in professional development of implementing the five strands of Te Whāriki were involved in the project. The pacific languages and cultural

values of all ethnic groups were to be used in the evaluation and implementation work. The results showed that the teachers used a thematic approach as their starting point when they planned and implemented the curriculum. The themes were related to the strands and goals of the Te Whāriki. The results also showed the importance of engaging the whole working team of teachers in the development work and allowing teachers enough time to plan, discuss and reflect over the development process (Mara, 1999).

In the BASUN project, which is a comparative study involving the five Nordic countries, five-year-old children were both observed and interviewed about their daily lives at home and in preschool. One of the most important differences between home and preschool, for the children, was the degree to which they were allowed to decide for themselves. The children accepted the fact that adults decide more at the preschool than at home and their explanation was that too many children in preschool made it difficult for them to participate in decision-making (Langsted, 1994, pp. 28-42).

An ongoing longitudinal study in Denmark is following 6000 children born in 1995. The aim of the study is to elucidate under what conditions children grow up and what conditions are important for children's growth. In the beginning of the project a variety of background variables concerning the mother, father, grandparents, etc., were collected and stored in a database. The mothers were interviewed when the children were at the age of 4 to 5 months, while the fathers answered a questionnaire. The next follow-up will include the children's childcare arrangements when they are at the age of 3 to 4 years (Nygaard Christoffersen, 1998).

In summary, studies of children's conceptions and learning are mostly longitudinal. The subjective experience of the child is often seen in relation to the child's conditions for growth.

Evaluation and improvement of quality

This part focuses on how evaluations are used to improve the quality in preschool and school. The national research and development project, the Effective Early Learning Research Project (the EEL Project) focuses on the improvement of the teacher style (Pascal & Bertram, 1994). The EEL Project developed from the growing need for procedures to facilitate quality evaluation and improvement in the wide and diverse range of childcare settings in which children under five years are educated in England. Research in many countries had shown that certain types or styles of the teacher are related to increased learning of the child. The underlying principle of the project was, therefore, that the way in which the teacher intervenes is a crucial factor in the quality of learning experienced by the child (Bertram, 1995, p. 82). The project was divided into three steps and stretched over a period of three years, 1993-1996. It

focused on two key factors in the quality and effectiveness of early learning: the way the child engages in the process of learning (involvement) and the way in which the teachers support and facilitate that learning (engagement). The project started and ended with evaluations of quality using the two scales that were developed by Laevers, 1) The Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children and 2) The Adult Style Observation Schedule for Early Childhood Education. The teachers also used these scales throughout the development work.

The process of evaluation and development was divided into four steps: 1) Evaluation – together the researcher and the teachers evaluated and documented the quality of the preschool unit by collecting evidence about ten dimensions of quality in learning (Pascal & Bertram, 1991). All the qualitative and quantitative data collected were gathered into a detailed and carefully structured "Case study" and then fed back to the teachers in the preschool setting for validation by the contributors. 2) Action Planning – the participant created a plan of action, based on identified areas for improvement. 3) Development – the plan of action was implemented and 4) Reflection – the teachers reflected over the evaluation and the development process. The result was a clear and documented enhancement of the quality in the participating preschools (Pascal & Bertram, 1994).

The impact of the Effective Early Learning was also employed on a voluntary sector playgroup. The quality evaluation and development process was successful. It enhanced the professional development of the teachers, who became empowered by the process. This had a very positive effect on their practice and on the quality of the children's learning. The collaborative action approach worked well where the process was open and not imposed (Ramsden, 1997).

In Sweden the responsibility for development work has passed from the teacher alone to the government, and today it is the responsibility of the community (Rönnerman, 1996). Preschool and school are governed by goals and should function as learning organisations. Development in a learning organisation centres on the competence of the teachers, and they should be seen as producers and not just as consumers of knowledge. In a learning organisation it is essential that the teachers acquire knowledge about their own practice through analysis of needs. Further, that they describe and reflect over their own practice in order to understand and develop it and spread their experience to colleagues, leaders of schools and researchers. The teachers need tools and concepts to help them in the above process. They also need to create various forums for dialogues and a sharing of experiences (Rönnerman, 1996).

Ekholm and Lander (1994) stress that the aim of both evaluation and competence development is to improve activities in school that promote children's learning and development and to enhance the competence of teachers. They emphasise that all kinds of competence development should be preceded

by an analysis of needs, and from that point of view it would be natural to use evaluation as a base for competence development. However, proven experience has shown that it is not easy to combine the two. One explanation is the dual aim of evaluation, namely control and development.

The type of evaluation method mostly used in preschool and school is probably self-evaluation. In addition, there exist a number of self-evaluation methods that are more or less structured (Ekholm & Hedin, 1988, 1991, 1993, 1995; Franke Wikberg, 1992; Rubinstein Reich & Weséns, 1992; Holmlund & Rönnerman, 1990, 1995; Andersson, M., 1995, 1999). Some of these evaluation methods use a qualitative approach without identifying quality indicators in advance, such as Franke Wikberg's method. The Umeå model was adapted for preschool by Holmlund and Rönnerman (1990). The teachers use this method to describe the ongoing activities and make an analysis of the situation. Parents and colleagues from outside the preschool unit follow up the self-evaluations, and the results of the evaluations are used as a basis for a three-year planning period. Local models, such as peer reviews and school-based reviews, are possible ways to combine the need of internal long-term control systems within school, with the demand for insight and development on the part of society (Ekholm & Lander, 1994).

The project Research on Local Evaluation set out to discover how much schools are governed by evaluation. It aims to describe and analyse manifest and latent models of evaluation used by communities and schools. The reason for this is the large number of evaluation models on the local and national market. These models are often a combination of methodological descriptions, epistemological assumptions and recommendations concerning the relation between the evaluator and the subjects of evaluation. Several kinds of studies emanated from the project: 1) Municipalities were studied in order to see what kind of evaluation and assessment models they relied on, both in Sweden (Granström & Lander, 1997) and in Norway (Bredvold et. al., 1999). 2) A representative questionnaire was sent to teachers in the Swedish comprehensive schools asking them about their governing culture, i.e. use of planning and evaluation (Granström & Lander, 2000). 3) Models of school inspection in Sweden and England were studied (Lander & Granström, 2000). 4) National evaluation models in Sweden and how they influence schools were reviewed by Lander and Ekholm (1998). To understand the importance of an evaluation, it is necessary to know in what context the evaluation took place. The results of the project are to be used to enlighten and inform teachers, headmasters, politicians, administrators and researchers. They are expected to lead to a more professional use of local evaluation, which means the ability to use a more adequate technology, to acquire an understanding of the situation for evaluation and knowledge of how to choose between models that are better and easier to use.

Adopting the approach of action research, Rönnerman (1996, 1998, 2000) has carried out several studies in preschool and school. Experiences from these

studies have developed into following conclusions: It is the teachers themselves who should identify a problem, and from experience, previous knowledge and reflection, plan and conduct the development work. The development work should emanate from an analysis of needs and it should be extended over a long period of time. Pedagogical tools, such as observation, diary-writing, and reflection over documentation, guidance and participation of the whole working team are crucial aspects for the development work. As part of the development process the teachers are to study current literature and research within the field, share their knowledge among them and collaborate with researchers. Characteristic of this kind of development work is that the teachers learn in and from their own practice (Rönnerman, 1996, 1998, 2000).

To conclude this review of studies done in preschool I would like to draw attention to Stukát's study of 1966. He found small differences between children who had attended preschool and those who had just been at home, except for areas in which the teachers clearly had guided the preschool children. The preschool children had better results on tests that evaluated their vocabulary and language ability compared to the home children. His conclusions are of real interest today. He questioned the tradition of preschool, that activities to a large extent are child-initiated, not learning-orientated and not guided by a teacher. Forty years ago he argued for a public preschool, for explicit goals, a coherent educational system that includes preschool and a common education for teachers in preschool and school (Stukát, 1966). He argued for a development that has become top priority in Sweden in the year 2001.

To sum up, a common feature of the studies reviewed is that they focus on important aspects of children's life, learning and development, but mainly from one perspective. For example, researchers study the effect of a preschool programme in relation to children's outcomes. Through approaches of action research, the teacher's perspective is highlighted and studies based on the perspective of the child are not always related to the context and quality of preschool. The quality of preschool and school is either externally evaluated or based on self-evaluations. The continuous research on quality has broadened the focus of what aspects of quality are important to study. This is, however, not enough. To understand the complexity of pedagogical quality and how it is experienced from different perspectives also requires a more comprehensive research approach. My thesis makes a novel contribution to quality research and evaluation in preschool in that it takes the perspective of the researcher, the teacher and the child on the same issues and aspects of quality, and by that, another kind of understanding appears.

Section two

A PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF QUALITY

In this section a pedagogical perspective of quality is defined and described. This general foreword introduces the reader to the concept of pedagogical quality and how it is related to an objective approach and the theoretical framework is then presented. To visualise quality through evaluation, a summary of how data were collected and analysed precedes a short summary of the four studies. From a meta-perspective, the concept of quality is then deconstructed and reconstructed and the section ends with a description of what essential aspects of quality constitute both the content and the form of a model for competence development.

To be able to live a good life today and tomorrow, a child needs to learn and develop a multitude of competencies and skills in an educational setting together with peers, meeting norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes held by society. The main task of preschool and school is to help children to constitute knowledge and to develop strategies to master the variety of situations and experiences they will encounter in life. In preschool and school a child's learning should be directed towards the overall goals and the quality depends on how well these goals are achieved (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a, 1998b).

My thesis emanates from a pedagogical perspective of quality, which takes the perspective of the child and focuses on what is best for a child's learning and development. The interpretation of what is best for a child is based on the values and goals as presented in the curriculum, modern theories of learning and research on quality in preschool and school. Or in other words, our shared knowledge and understanding of conditions that benefit children's learning and growth, an understanding that has been reached in modern time, culture and context. The focus of research from this perspective is the learning process of the child and the approach of the teacher as concretised/manifested in interactions and communications, in pedagogical processes in preschool in relation to the overall goals.

A pedagogical perspective of quality has its base in the objective approach to quality, as it originates from research and proven experience in preschool and school, inferring that certain aspects of quality benefit a child's learning and development more than others do. These characteristics of quality can be defined and evaluated. It is a broad perspective that takes into account the

norms, values, traditions, cultural specifics, contextual specifics and heritage of society. At the same time, it closes in and focuses on how various pedagogical processes in preschool and school are composed to grip the right of the child to learn, to participate, to be respected, listened to and counted on as a worthy member of society. A pedagogical perspective of quality is also open to, takes the perspective of, and includes the subjective experience of teachers, children and parents. The perspective of pedagogical quality is therefore to be seen as both *educational* and *democratic*.

However, a child's possibilities for learning in preschool and school can either be promoted or hindered, depending on external conditions, access or lack of various resources and the competence and awareness of the teachers to use all available resources, including themselves, to promote a child's learning. From this perspective of quality, the pedagogical awareness and competence of the teacher to create an environment in which each child can encounter a variety of rich learning experiences together with adults and peers is therefore essential – an environment in which children can play, communicate, participate, influence, co-operate, think, reflect, solve problems and learn the fundamental values of society and its ways of thinking. To do this teachers need both theoretical and practical knowledge of how children learn and develop, an awareness of their own values and attitudes and the ability to engage, become involved, be sensitive, and feel happiness and joy in their work with the children. They also need to regard themselves as individuals who never stop learning (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2000).

In practice, the level of quality is determined by what the teachers do in preschool and how they use both physical conditions and themselves to motivate children to learn, to support and challenge them to explore new areas. For example, in my study, high pedagogical quality is not only dependent on the presence of space and material resources, but on how and why they are used and how the child experiences this. Learning is always learning about something, and how children learn is inseparable from the content, that is, what they learn. From this perspective, it is therefore vital that teachers are aware of what they want children to learn and how they can enable children to learn through variation in the direction of the overall goals. Further, it is crucial that the teacher is interested in how the child has understood a certain phenomenon, object or situation, and, finally, how the child experiences various activities in preschool and school.

The core of pedagogical quality is in the interaction as it is constituted in, takes shape and develops in the meeting between the child and the teacher and between the children. How this meeting crystallises (turns out) depends on the competence of the teacher to positively combine the short and long-term goals

of society (the property of society⁴) with the child's own interests and goals for learning (the property of the child). The challenge is to combine them in such a way that the child maintains his or her curiosity to explore the world and develops an urge for life-long learning.

The theoretical framework of pedagogical quality

The theoretical framework of pedagogical quality takes its point of departure in the theories of Piaget and Vygotskij. The translation of the works of Piaget and Vygotskij has led to a debate about the differences and similarities between the two theories. Here the focus is on if and how these theories can be developed into an alternative theory, and whether such a theory can explain the complexity of pedagogical quality in preschool and school.

Bruner (1997, p.70) refers to Niels Bohr's maxim "the opposite of great truths may also be true" as he contrasts the theories of Piaget and Vygotskij with one another. He meant that one is seeking to explain and the other to interpret human growth and the human condition. Bruner argues that the two approaches constitute two incommensurate ways in which human beings make sense of the world. Instead of reducing their differences, he highlights their unique contributions to research. Piaget's contribution was to recognize the fundamental role of logic-like operations in human mental activity, and his theory can be described as a theory of the direction of growth. Vygotskij's was to recognize that individual human intellectual power depended upon our capacity to appropriate human culture and history as tools of the mind (Bruner, 1997).

DeVries (1997), on the other hand, argues that it is an error to see Piaget as emphasising the primacy of individual cognitive processes in contrast to Vygotskij's view of the primacy of social and cultural factors. Piaget focused on the problem of the development of knowledge – especially scientific knowledge, but also on the development of the child. When Piaget spoke about child development, he always talked about social factors, and in Piaget's view a child's intellectual adaptation is as much an adaptation to the social environment as to the physical. He stated that adult – child relations influence all aspects of development, and that peer interactions are crucial to a child's construction of social and moral feelings, values and social and intellectual competence. The interaction should be based on co-operation, which means striving to attain a common goal while coordinating one's own feelings and perspective with a consciousness of another's feelings and perspective. For Piaget co-operation is a

⁴ The two goals defined as "Property of society and child" by Dencik on the OMEP:s Conference in Copenhagen, 1998.

social interaction among individuals who regard themselves as equal and treat each other as such. In turn, a co-operative teacher considers the child's point of view and encourages the child to consider others' points of view. A relationship that is characterised by mutual respect and co-operation opens the way for children to develop minds capable of thinking independently and creatively and to develop moral feelings and convictions that take into account the best interests of all parties.

According to DeVries, the position of Piaget is that every scheme (psychologically organised action) has both cognitive and affective elements, and that these are indissociable. Children construct schemes of social reaction just as they construct schemes relating to the world of objects. In relation to a reconstruction of feelings, Piaget commented that it is not the feeling alone that is conserved, but a certain scheme of interaction with other people. Piaget's statement is that cognitive development is as much due to social experiences as social relations and development are due to cognition (Piaget, 1954/1981, p. 64 in DeVries, 1997).

In a review of radical constructivism, social constructivism, and socio-cultural perspectives, Confrey (1995) discusses a number of possible characteristics of an alternative theory. He believes that it is important to consider both social interaction patterns and individual constructive activity. Confrey's argument is that the description of all interaction as social can lead to the neglect of other forms of interaction. The danger of human curiosity about objects becomes underestimated, and one's environment becomes overpopulated with human beings.

The theories of Piaget and Vygotskij are applied mainly in teaching (Confrey, 1995). However, while Piaget focuses on the interaction between the child and the physical environment, Vygotskij focuses on the interaction itself. For Vygotskij teaching is important as a particular form of interaction between a more knowledgeable other and a novice. Confrey argues that this is mainly an activity initiated by the adult (or a more knowledgeable peer) and undertaken as an unequal partnership with one person guiding and the other following. The object in this kind of interaction is to assist the child in creating a performance and then to see how participating in the activity can lead towards competence. The aim is not to enhance the child's existing understanding and operations, but to introduce new territory and to modify the child's perspective into the expert's methods. Confrey argues that this leaves little room for the acknowledgment of what children teach to adults and for invention, creativity and dissent. He claims that the Vygotskian approach can turn out to be authoritarian, as it lacks ways to find out the child's own methods. One needs to rely on the child's actions as well as the child's words. To avoid this Confrey emphasises the importance of the adult gaining insight into children's goals and he argues that the compelling task of the teacher is to strive to understand the learner's view of the problem. Without a Piagetian analysis of the conceptual development, Vygotskij's more

knowledgeable other is unable to select appropriate approaches from among the possible pedagogical routes.

For Piaget teaching is achieved by presenting the child with appropriate challenges and tasks. Progress in perceptual development lies in the child's co-ordination of action movements, from physical action to more abstract mental operations and structures, use of a variety of representational systems in accomplishing the internalisation, and reflective abstraction of the ideas. Confrey states that a child also needs teachers that go beyond the present and challenge them to learn about the unknown. This requires knowledge of the child's present understanding within a certain area and expertise of how that knowledge can be extended. In this process understanding of the Vygotskian zone of proximal development could be crucial (Vygotskij, 1978). This means that if a child is placed in a situation in which s/he has to co-operate with a more competent peer or adult, this co-operation could make it possible for a child to potentially enter new areas. What a child cannot do by him or herself s/he can accomplish together with a more experienced and competent other.

Confrey argues for a theory that is neither Piagetian nor Vygotskian but draws heavily on both (op.cit., p. 188). That is, an alternative theory that proposes a much stronger and more detailed description of how the individual development and the sociocultural activities of the child are linked, allowing for the complexity of each, (op.cit., p. 189). The challenge is to view knowledge as it evolves in relation to our interactions with nonliving objects and our interactions and interconnections with other human beings, and the interactions between these two types of interactions. In seeking an alternative theory to Vygotskij and Piaget, we need to recognise that individual and social development shape each other and to seek an appropriate balance of each. Our forms of interactions and our tools are key constituents of this co-shaping process in which experience and context intermingle.

Confrey discusses a number of possible characteristics of an alternative theory. Several of them are relevant to a pedagogical perspective of quality. They include: to reject a simplistic view of an accessible reality, education involves knowledge about interactions with objects and with others, to recognize the importance of children's own actions in solving problems, their engagement with a variety of tools and materials in such activities, the importance of reflection as a method of transforming physical actions into mental operations, to recognise communicating one's ideas to others as equally a part of knowing as coming to know, to recognize the presence of multiple cultures within any homogeneity, and to support a multicultural view of development while recognising in our diversity a shared humanity. Confrey states that the key arena/issue for investigation is how to obtain an appropriate balance between encouraging children's active construction, recognizing and legitimising diversity in their efforts, and placing such constructive activity within the framework of guidance and encouragement from more experienced others (Confrey, 1995, p. 224).

The view of learning underlying my thesis is defined as “a change in people’s ways of experiencing a phenomenon in, or aspect of, the world around them” (Bowden & Marton, 1998 , p. 30) and that the world is constituted as an internal relation between the child and the world (Marton & Booth, 2000, p. 30). The origin of knowledge is in activities, and the meanings of these activities derive in turn from prior states of knowledge (Davidson, 1992). According to Davidson, knowledge can be divided into at least three categories or levels. They are: *phylogenetic knowledge*, comprising instincts and other behavioral predispositions that are a species’ evolutionary inheritance; *sociogenetic knowledge*, which refers to a specialised know-how, wisdom, and other culturally bound cognitive tools and *ontogenetic knowledge*, consisting of organised patterns of actions or meanings acquired through individual experience (Davidson, 1992, p. 20). The focus of a pedagogical perspective of quality in preschool and school is on the sociogenetic and ontogenetic levels of knowledge. Davidson also argues that social knowledge is that which directly pertains to the substance of social interaction and is directly constituted by that interaction. Social interaction therefore gives rise, not only to representations of social content, but also constitutes certain cognitive tools. Conversely, because of the specialised properties of social interactions, they are less suited for constituting various other cognitive tools, such as logical and mathematical concepts (op. cit., p. 25).

Pedagogical quality is based on an interactive perspective in which individual and social development shape each other, and the key constituents in this co-shaping process are our forms of interactions and our tools. Experience and context intermingle in such a way that ”social processes guide and direct development and/or how developmental processes contribute to a reorganisation of social processes” (Winegar & Valsiner, 1992, p.7).

This means that it is the child that constitutes his or her own knowledge by interacting with the environment – learning that is both individual and social. The process of interaction can be described as an inseparable, intertwined, intangible interplay between a child, seen as rich and competent, and an environment, which are constantly influencing one another. That means that a child’s own capacity and skills develop while s/he is interacting with an environment that in one way or another will be influenced by the child and respond to it. In the same way, the environment will set the frame of what is possible for the child to experience, learn and explore. It is an environment that consists of conditions that constantly change in accordance with parallel processes of continuous change in society.

An interactive perspective related to the concept of pedagogical quality means that the level of quality depends not only on how the environment is constituted to meet, extend and challenge the experience and intentions of the child, but also on how the child can influence and form both the overall environment and his or her own learning process. Characteristic of pedagogical

quality is: the teacher's knowledge about the basic conditions for knowledge formation that is, of how children learn and develop strategies to master the variety of situations they will experience during a lifetime (Kärrby, 1997). Therefore, the concept of pedagogical quality is embedded in, takes shape and develops in a complicated relationship between the child and the environment, a process in which the child and the environment are completely interdependent. Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson (manuscript) claim that a pedagogical perspective of learning should be regarded as separate from a perspective of psychology and sociology. They argue that the main focus should not be on a description of how things are, but on what education should contribute to a child's learning process. Incorporating this idea into a pedagogical perspective of quality, it means that an evaluation of the actual level of quality should be seen in the light of how it ought to be in relation to the overall goals for preschool and school.

From an interactive perspective, pedagogical quality should be defined as the awareness shown in the teacher's strivings to create a pedagogical practice which offers optimal possibilities for the child's own striving to learn, for personal development and wellbeing. Pedagogical quality in preschool and school must therefore be seen both in the light of the child's individual goals for learning and the goals of society (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a, 1998b).

TO VISUALISE QUALITY THROUGH EVALUATION

The main task of preschool is to promote children's learning towards the overall goals and values. To find out if and in what way preschool has promoted children's learning and what children have learned by being there, we have to evaluate. As the area of evaluation is vast and multiple in approach, it would be impossible to penetrate its complexity in a few pages. Instead, I will discuss some principles of evaluation that are important to my thesis, issues that are related to ECERS, which has been used for research, to evaluate, analyse and improve the quality in the preschools that have participated.

In this part, I focus on: 1) A description of how ECERS is constructed. 2) An analysis of the criteria in ECERS in comparison with the goals and guidelines in the Pedagogical Program for Preschool (Socialstyrelsen, 1987:3) and the Swedish Curriculum, Lpfö-98 (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a). 3) A short summary of how the data have been collected and analysed in the four studies.

Methods for evaluation of quality

The following parts will describe how ECERS is constructed and how the method is related to the intentions, values and goals stated in the Swedish curriculum.

The two main functions of evaluation are control and development. Research into quality is often based on evaluations of quality, and an evaluation is always some kind of definition of quality, in which the quality of a process is valued afterwards in relation to certain goals or criteria (Franke-Wikberg & Lundgren, 1982). Before any evaluation is carried out, it is important to ask the following questions: Why do we evaluate? What knowledge do we seek? What is the aim of the evaluation? Who is doing it? What method is used, how is it used and what values and theoretical standpoints is the method representing?

The complexity of the concept of quality has become obvious through continuous research on quality in preschool and school. This knowledge has also broadened the understanding of what aspects of quality that are important to study and encouraged the development of a variety of methods to be used in this process. There is a host of evaluation models on the market. These models are often a combination of methodological descriptions, epistemological

assumptions and recommendations concerning the relation between the evaluator and those to be evaluated (Granström & Lander, 1997). Some of these methods may be considered 'good' in the sense that there is a sincere ambition to capture different characteristics of quality, to visualise pedagogical processes, to control an acceptable standard and equality and to improve quality. Others are simple checklists to meet demands from various groups and organisations in society that seem to have an interest in controlling that a minimal standard is held. Some methods are embedded in implicit values, and it is important to analyse the method used for evaluation critically, to visualise its underlying values and theories of learning. A critical approach must also be adopted towards methods that are constructed to assess quality in a simplified way, that is, methods without clear definitions of theoretical approaches, with hidden values and no clear indication as to how the evaluation is to be used (Penn, 1994).

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS)

Haug (1992) once said that a change in preschool requires tools of various kinds. In my thesis ECERS has been used as a tool for research, external and self-evaluation and improvement of quality in preschool.

ECERS is a method that evaluates the overall quality in a preschool setting without focusing on individual teachers or children. The method was developed in USA by Thelma Harms and Richard Clifford in 1980. The rationale underlying ECERS is that common dynamics, materials, etc., must be present to make developmentally appropriate gains possible, physically, socially, intellectually and emotionally (Harms & Clifford, 1980, 1983).

ECERS consists of 37 items, which define different levels of quality in typical situations of early childhood education. These items are combined within seven subscales. They are: personal care routines of children, furnishings and display for children, language reasoning experiences, fine and gross motor activities, creative activities, social development and adult needs. The items are presented as a seven-point scale with quality descriptors under one (inadequate), three (minimal), five (good) and seven (excellent). A score of 4 is given when everything on number 3 is accomplished and half on number 5. Evaluations are based on one full day's observations, from approximately 7.30 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. Each item is rated individually, using criteria from basic physical conditions, such as space and materials to teacher competence and ability in the creation of an environment conducive to children's learning and development. Each item is constructed as in the following example:

Item 14. Informal use of language

- | | | | | | | |
|---|----|---|----|---|----|---|
| 1. Language outside of group times, primarily used by staff to control children's behavior. | 2. | 3. Staff sometimes talk with children in conversation, but children are asked primarily "yes/no" or short answer questions. Children's talk not encouraged. | 4. | 5. Staff/child conversations are frequent. Language is primarily used by staff to exchange information with children and for social interaction. Children are asked "why, how, what if" questions, requiring longer and more complex answers. | 6. | 7. Staff makes conscious effort to have an informal conversation with each child every day. Staff verbally expands on ideas presented by children (Ex. adds information, asks questions to encourage child to talk more). |
|---|----|---|----|---|----|---|

A preschool unit's total score can vary from a minimum score of $1 \times 28 = 28$ points to a maximum score of $7 \times 28 = 196$ points (Kärrby, 1989). The ratings are based on both easily observable conditions, such as room display and sufficiency of materials, and information obtained from interviews with the teachers and directors, as well as impressions that must be interpreted or implied from observed communication and social interaction. In order to rate the quality of an early childhood setting with ECERS, the total environment must be observed: that is, space, equipment, material inside and outside, surroundings, documents, the atmosphere, the interaction between teacher and child, the social climate and educational style. Significant for the lower levels of quality is a focus on space and material resources. In the criteria on the excellent level is a more or less implicit or explicit focus on interaction, that is, how the teachers should interact with the children and use all resources including themselves to promote children's learning.

The decision to use ECERS in my thesis as an instrument for research, to evaluate and improve the quality in early childhood education is that ECERS takes a child's perspective, and that its values and goals are mirrored in the Swedish curriculum for preschool. Further, the criteria are defined in such a way that ratings of quality in different early childhood education settings are comparable in a national as well as a cross-national perspective. Important is also that it is the process that is evaluated, and that the evaluation of quality is not based on individual teachers and children, but on what experiences a child has during a day in preschool.

ECERS and the Swedish curriculum for preschool

This part analyses the criteria in ECERS in relation to the goals and guidelines in the Pedagogical Program for Preschool (Socialstyrelsen, 1987:3) and the Swedish curriculum for preschool (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a). The pedagogical program for preschool was valid during the

time of the first data collection, and the Swedish curriculum for preschool during the last data collection. The criteria of the two highest levels of quality, level 5 (good quality) and level 7 (excellent quality) as regards to each of the 37 items in the original scale (Harms & Clifford, 1980) and the 28 items of the translated version of ECERS (Kärrby, 1989) have been compared to the content and guidelines of the pedagogical program and to the fundamental values, the tasks of preschool and goals to aim at in the curriculum for preschool. The results of this analysis will be presented from its main points.

The criteria of ECERS originate from years of research into children's learning and development and from practical experience in preschool. The criteria focus on basic and general conditions for a child's learning, such as being active, participating, communicating and co-operating with others and the possibility of developing his/her own interests and goals for learning. These criteria of quality are based on assumptions of what constitutes quality in early childhood education and how different levels of quality are rooted in pedagogical processes. A broad definition of environment is used in ECERS, and the goals and principles underlying the evaluation method are: to provide for proper nutrition, rest, safety and personal hygiene through routine care. To provide time, space, equipment and guidance for physical activities (exercise). To promote social interactions between staff and child and among the children by providing alternatives to conflicts and competition, for example, to promote positive interactions, independence and cultural awareness. Further, to develop language and reasoning skills through interaction and to provide stimulating play material and, finally, to develop a positive self-image and dependence on as well as independence from adults, etc.

The basic educational orientation could be described as follow: Children are active learners, they learn through their activity, through what they do, see, hear, experience and think. Children learn through verbal and non-verbal interactions with others. The physical environment should be organised and function so that children can be maximally independent. Children need warmth, softness, protected space and predictable routines. Pedagogical practice should be characterised by interaction, discussion and enjoyment (Harms & Clifford, 1986).

Kärrby translated ECERS in 1989, and the aim was to follow the original version as closely as possible. However, the translation of ECERS into Swedish and to Swedish conditions resulted in minor adaptations (Kärrby & Giota, 1995). Certain words, concepts and expressions had to be modified according to differences in conceptual connotations. For example, the translation of supervision was translated in terms of adult/child interaction and guidance. Four gross motor items were combined into one, two items of fine motor activities and two items on adults' space were combined into one each. One item was not applicable (diapering) and two were excluded (sand and water and personal grooming). As a consequence, the Swedish version used in the present study consists of 28 of the original 37 items. For further reading concerning the inter-

rater agreement (83%), the reliability (Cronbach's alpha .92) and the validity of the Swedish version as tested by factor analysis, see Kärby and Giota (1995). ECERS was translated and published once again by Andersson and Löfgren in 1994. The Kärby version was used in my thesis.

The pedagogical program for preschool and ECERS were developed during the same period of time, ECERS being published in 1980 and the pedagogical program in 1987. The similarities between them are striking, although they were developed within different cultures and languages. The interpretation is that both ECERS and the Swedish pedagogical program have been inspired by the research into quality and the theories of learning that predominated during that period, for example, Bronfenbrenner, Elkind, Erikson, Piaget, Vygotskij, etc.

The introductory section of the Swedish curriculum for preschool (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a, p. 2) deals with the foundations, values and tasks of the preschool. The goals and guidelines that follow thereafter are to be understood against this background. The goals are set up as goals to aim at. They set out directions for the work of the preschool and contain targets for quality development in the preschool. When the principles underlying ECERS and the criteria for levels 5 and 7 of all 37 (and 28) items were analysed and compared with the present curriculum, many similarities were found, but also notable differences. No detectable explicit or implicit contradictions between the fundamental values of the curriculum and ECERS were found. On the contrary, the fundamental values that are so clearly expressed in the Swedish curriculum are implicitly embedded in the criteria for the higher levels of quality in ECERS and in the underlying principles.

The tasks of the preschool, as expressed in the curriculum, are very similar to the goals and the criteria in ECERS, especially concerning certain areas in which the task of the preschool is expressed as follows: preschool shall be enjoyable and rich in learning; shall provide "good" pedagogical activities; encourage co-operation with the parents; activities shall be related to the needs of all children; children shall create meaning out of their own experience; the adults shall give children support in developing trust and self-confidence. Further, the child's curiosity, ambitions and interest shall be encouraged and their will and desire to learn stimulated; preschool shall provide children with a secure environment and encourage play and activity; adults shall involve themselves interactively with both the individual child and the group of children as a whole. ECERS and the Swedish curriculum emphasise the development of social skills, children's ability to communicate and participate in creative activities such as art, song, music, drama, rhythm, dance, building, constructing and play. These dimensions of quality are also confirmed by a factor analysis of ECERS, which indicates that most importance is attached to the quality of interaction and communication (see Kärby & Giota, 1994).

However, the Swedish curriculum also emphasises that children shall develop a mathematical understanding, become aware of and practice reading and writing as a way to communicate with others, participate in nature activities, science and technology. Children have also the right to participate in all matters of concern to them and actively exercise influence. These learning goals and aspects of quality are largely lacking in ECERS. Another subtle nuance difference is that children, according to the Swedish curriculum, shall be challenged, while, the focus in ECERS is on meeting the needs of the child. ECERS focuses, on the other hand, on the pedagogical environment and on conditions for learning, such as material and physical resources. Both focus on the importance of professional and competent teachers. There is also a slight influence from developmental psychology in ECERS as well as in the pedagogical program. The dominant perspective in the Swedish curriculum for preschool is, however, the socio-cultural one (Alvestad & Pramling Samuelsson, 1999).

All methods used for research, evaluation and enhancement of quality must be revised continuously and developed in accordance with new research on quality, to new theories of learning, and to changes in society concerning its values and overall goals. The original version of ECERS has been extended with 20 new items, covering literacy, mathematics, science and environment, and diversity. The extension is based on desirable learning outcomes and was developed by Sylva, Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart and Colman (1998). The original ECERS has also been revised, ECERS-R being published in 1998 (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998). However, this version has not yet been translated and proved within the Swedish preschool context.

The advantage of using methods for evaluation that are based on fixed criteria of quality is that the method can be both critically analysed as above and used for comparison of evaluations, as the four studies will show. It is also important to emphasise that ECERS is only one way of looking at quality and can preferably be combined with other methods.

Analysis used on the four studies

The present study is based mainly on the results of four partly separate studies. All studies have been done within the context of preschool, and the pedagogical quality has been evaluated by external and self-evaluations of quality with ECERS. Each study presents its own aim, research questions of interest, process of selection and method. The data for all four studies have been collected over a period of six years, from 1994 to 1999. Various methods were used to collect the data. The numerical ratings of quality in ECERS were complemented with rationales for scoring, which were given in an informal way. To capture the reflections of the teachers, a questionnaire was used in the second study, and in the third study interviews with children were related to the external evaluations

of quality. Below follows a short summary of the statistical and qualitative analysis of the data.

The validity and reliability of ECERS have been examined both in the USA (Harms & Clifford, 1983) and in other countries (Kärrby & Giota, 1994; Tietze, et. al., 1996) and good results have been obtained.

Factor analysis has been used in the present study to test the validity, to divide the preschool units into intervention and control groups and as a basis for competence development. The *interraterreliability* has been tested by parallel and independent evaluations of quality. The external evaluations of quality with ECERS were statistically analysed. The internal consistency was .86 according to *Cronbach's alpha*, and the *Kruskal-Wallis method* was used to reveal if there was a significant difference in quality between the nine preschool units in the intervention group. The statistical analysis, SPSS, *T-test* and *analysis of paired data* were used to test if the intervention and the control groups were equal at the start of the development programme and if the difference between them was significant after the development programme.

The statistical analysis provides a rather coarse measure of a preschool unit's quality. The quality in early childhood education according to ECERS is expressed in numbers (min. 1.00 - max. 7.00). What does this number mean to a person who is not familiar with ECERS? Even for a researcher using ECERS, it can be very hard to comprehend and visualise how different levels of quality manifest themselves in various pedagogical processes in early childhood education. Therefore, a qualitative approach was adopted to gain additional information from the different external evaluators, from the teachers' self-evaluations of quality, and from the children.

To be visualised and analysed, the perceptual process underlying the ratings of quality with ECERS was documented by the external evaluators and the teachers in the first and second study, and by the external evaluators in the fourth study (Pedhazur & Pedhazur Schmelkin, 1991). In addition to systematic evaluations of quality with ECERS, *the rationales for the scoring* were given. The documentation was analysed in different stages to explore various themes and pedagogical processes in early childhood education that are related to single or groups of items in ECERS. The questions in the *questionnaire* were formulated both as open questions and closed alternatives combined with a possibility of commenting further. The answers in the questionnaire have been analysed from the perspective of the teacher. The *interviews* with the children were semi-structured, conducted in the context of the preschool, and related to the subjective experience of each child, including the processes that characterise interdependent person/environment relationships (Winegar & Valsiner, 1992, p. 4). In the first stage the interviews were read over and over again and analysed as a whole and in detail. The *variation of the children's conceptions were categorised* in five qualitatively different categories. They originated from all the

various situations the children described in which decisions were made. In the second stage the analyses of the interviews were compared to each preschool unit's externally evaluated quality. For *validation* of the results, the interviews were read by two researchers within education, unfamiliar with the preschool units and unaware of the externally evaluated level of quality. For selection processes and other details, see each study.

To summarise, the data in those four studies were collected from different sources and analysed in different ways. The analyses converge as well as giving different information and knowledge. The reason for using different ways of data collection and analysis was mainly that different perspectives were included in the four studies, such as external evaluators, teachers and children from preschools evaluated as being of high or low quality. The aim was to visualise perspectives of quality in as many ways as possible and at the same time control the validity and reliability so that both the validity of the data and the analysis were strengthened through triangulation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

Statistical analysis has been used to the extent that the limited number of participating preschool units allowed. In the first stage of the qualitative analysis, both the comments from the teachers and the interviews with the children were read over and over again and analysed as a whole and in detail. They were related to the numerical evaluations of quality with ECERS, to theories of learning, and to the context of preschool. The process of analysis can therefore be described as an interplay between empirical data and theory, or as an analytical process of abduction (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 1994, p. 42).

The results of my thesis should be seen as exploratory. In some aspects they can be generalised as they confirm results of other studies, and the validity of the data and the analysis are strengthened through triangulation.

Ethical aspects of research have been considered, and anonymity was guaranteed to all participants. The parents of the interviewed children consented to the research project, and both teachers and children participated in the study from choice.

FOUR STUDIES OF PEDAGOGICAL QUALITY

The present study is based on the results of four partly separate studies. The four studies were carried out within the context of preschool, and the pedagogical quality has been evaluated by external and self-evaluations of quality using ECERS.

The first study

The aim of the first study, *A comparison of external and self-evaluations of quality in Early Childhood Education*, is to compare evaluations of quality between an external evaluator and the teachers' self-evaluations of quality in preschool, by using ECERS. The research question addressed is: Are external evaluations and self-evaluations of quality, as evaluated with ECERS, equal or will they differ? If so, in what ways? There is little knowledge of how external and self-evaluations are related to one another, and the assumption underlying the study is that they will differ.

The first study is part of a research project whose aim was to develop a Model of Competence Development. Thirty-one teachers from nine preschool units participated in the development programme that started with external and self-evaluations of quality using ECERS. Before self-evaluations of quality in their own preschool unit, the 31 teachers in the intervention group received a common and overall introduction to quality in general and to pedagogical quality as evaluated with ECERS.

The external and self-evaluations of quality are both statistically and qualitatively analysed in three different ways: The *first* analysis is a comparison of mean values of the total average score (28 items) of ECERS, followed by a comparison in percentage.⁵ The *second* analysis is a comparison of the average score of three dimensions of quality. The three dimensions of quality are: 1) Socialisation and Communication (10 items), 2) Space and Material (4 items) and 3) a dimension of quality of Mixed Aspects (4 items). The *third* analysis is based on the teachers' descriptions of their rationale for self-evaluation, which were analysed in relation to the numerical scoring.

⁵ The Swedish version of the ECERS consists of 28 items (Kärby & Giota, 1994).

The *main results* are: External and self-evaluations of quality differ. In general the teachers evaluate their own preschool unit's total average quality higher (4.76) than the external evaluator (4.50). There is a tendency for teachers in preschool units, externally evaluated as having low quality, to overrate their own quality, while teachers in preschool units of high quality seem to evaluate their quality lower, especially on the quality dimension, Socialisation and Communication, see article 1. On *item level* the teachers generally evaluate the quality higher on items, which pertain to mirror the quality of their own ability to interact with children as well as their working methods. On items that evaluate the quality of the amount and use of space, materials, furnishings, room arrangement etc. for learning experiences, the teachers rate the quality lower than the evaluator. There is a wide range of mean scores between the external evaluator and the teachers and between the teachers' evaluations within each working team. It is interesting to note that there was a higher agreement among working teams in preschool units that had been evaluated as being of high quality by the external evaluator.

A comparison of the evaluations on *the three dimensions of quality* showed a significant difference between the external evaluators' and the childcare attendants evaluations on the quality dimension Socialisation and Communication, as identified with the Kruskal Wallis method (Chi-square = 5.03 (df2), $p < 0.02$). On this factor, the preschool teachers and the external evaluator are in agreement. The items included can be interpreted as an expression of the main goals of preschool education, which means that the agreement may be an effect of the preschool teachers' academic education. Childcare attendants agree with the evaluator to a higher degree (expressed as a percentage) on the second quality dimension, which focuses on the quality of space and materials.

The *rationales for scoring* seem to mirror the teachers' approach as well as their degree of awareness of the quality in various pedagogical processes. There is an obvious difference between comments from preschool units evaluated as being of high quality and those evaluated to be of low quality. The content of their comments mirrors the numerical ratings made by the evaluator rather than by themselves. Teachers from the high-quality preschool units never mention large groups of children as a hindrance to carrying out the work as intended, and there seems to be no need for control by rigid rules, a strict structure etc. Instead the teachers communicate with the children in order to find out their thoughts, and to find ways to extend and stimulate the children's own ideas. Most interesting is that the teachers in the high-quality preschool unit do not mention problems in the organisation or lack of material resources as the cause of educational problems. They seek to solve problems by improving their own working methods, while the teachers in the low-quality preschool units explain that certain things cannot be done as they lack the means to do it.

This study shows that the level of agreement differs, both between the evaluator and the teachers and among team members of each working team. The

results clearly show that evaluations that are expected to lead to change and development must be a combination of external and self-evaluations of quality. It is in the meeting between those evaluations that quality enhancement ensues.

The second study

The aim of the second study, *Quality Evaluation and Quality Enhancement in Preschool – A Model of Competence Development*, is to develop a "Model of Competence Development" in order to enhance the pedagogical quality in preschool. The Model of Competence Development takes its point of departure from evaluations of quality as evaluated with ECERS. The researcher's and the pedagogues' evaluations of quality constitute the foundation for the planning of a directed development programme. The research question addressed by the study is: Can quality in preschool be enhanced through competence development at the same time as there are organisational changes and financial cut-backs?

The study was carried out in a small community outside Gothenburg, Sweden during a period of local expansion in childcare provision. This was expected to lead to fewer resources, larger groups of children, a lower staff-child ratio and more duties for site managers.

The project⁶ was initiated in order to support the teachers working in preschool units during those economic, organisational and pedagogic changes. The underlying idea and assumption was that, to improve the quality in their own pedagogical practice, the teachers had to be aware of what is meant by good quality and how quality manifests itself in various pedagogical processes. They also had to be aware of the current level of quality as well as knowing how to change and develop the quality in the direction of the national goals.

However, to enhance quality in preschool it is not enough to simply desire a change and know how to do it. A change also requires the use of different tools (Haug, 1992). Therefore, a variety of tools were used to document, evaluate and improve the quality in preschool. ECERS was one of the main tools, used both as an instrument to evaluate the quality and as a "tool" for reflection.

The focus of change and learning was the natural taken-for-granted attitude towards the surrounding world, which means that people experience the world without reflecting over how they experience it (Marton, 1981; Marton & Booth, 1997; Pramling, 1988, 1994). The pedagogical task undertaken by this

⁶ "Quality evaluation and Quality enhancement of Current Day-care provision" Development work in times of change with larger childgroups and lower staff-child ratios. The project was run in collaboration with the Department of Education at Göteborg University. It has been funded by the Department of Child and Adolescent Welfare of the Lerum district council and the Department of Social Health and Welfare in Sweden.

development work was to improve the quality in the direction of the national goals by providing opportunities for teachers to reflect over what they took for granted and to increase an awareness of the various ways one can look upon a situation or a phenomenon.

The Model of Competence Development is built on the assumption that reflection leads to a greater awareness of what goes on in various pedagogical processes in preschool (for reflection, see Bengtsson, 1994, for awareness, see Alexandersson, 1994). This kind of awareness is expected to grow as a result of competence development. The Model of Competence Development takes its point of departure from evaluations of quality, as evaluated with ECERS, and emanates from two different perspectives, an "inside" perspective and an "outside" perspective, that is the perspective of the teachers and that of the external evaluator. The meeting of these two perspectives is assumed to function as a catalyst for change, as the "inside" and "outside" approaches to quality are to be discussed and compared among the teachers and with the external evaluator throughout the development work. The evaluations of quality constitute the foundation for the planning of a directed development programme, and they are used as a tool with which the teachers can start the reflection process and become aware of what goes on in their own pedagogical practice. By sharing and discussing the evaluations of quality with one another, the teachers are expected to become aware of their own conceptions of pedagogical quality. At the same time they are confronted with the variation in how their colleagues value their common work in pedagogical practice. The comparison can thereby lead to a deeper understanding of the diverse ways of conceiving and solving a situation in order to reach shared goals.

The Model of Competence Development is structured in such a way that the content and procedure, containing three independent and parallel tracks, coincide, influence and interact with each other during a period of one year.

The *first track* of the Model of Competence Development is composed of a series of lectures and a review of relevant literature. The core of the lectures is to discuss the meaning behind the national goals, develop a shared understanding of how children learn and the important role of teachers in this process. The *second track* consists of a shift from independent practice to that of a learning organisation. During the development work the teachers in the intervention group are supposed to develop as a team and learning organisation. The *third track* consists of guidance from the researcher and "experts" in different areas. The aim of the guidance is to create possibilities for the teachers to develop themselves and their own ideas in relation to the national goals for preschool. The guidance and feedback shall motivate and challenge the teachers to ask questions and to work with their own development.

The development work both starts and ends with external and self-evaluations of quality with ECERS. During the development work the teachers docu-

ment what they think is of importance in a diary and use this for their own development as well as for the enhancement of quality in pedagogical practice. They trade work places with other teachers and they video-record each other in different interaction situations. The teachers are supposed to record and focus on situations that reinforce their strengths, to develop an awareness and to confirm their own professionalism. The aim is to make the teachers start to reflect over their own actions and approaches in interactions with children. At the end of the development programme each working team presents their development work to their colleagues in the intervention group, and as a written report to parents and management. With the support of the various parts of the Model of Competence Development, the teachers are expected to be active, involved, to constitute knowledge and change their working methods and approaches towards the children during the development work.

The study comprised four stages: In the *first* stage, 20 selected preschool units were externally evaluated with ECERS to assess the current level of quality. In the *second* stage, the 20 selected preschools were divided into an intervention and a control group to be able to evaluate the effects of the development programme. Of importance was to evaluate if the effects of the development work only embraced visible changes in the physical environment, or if there was a change in the attitudes and values of the teachers – a change that manifested itself in the approach towards the children, in actions and in various pedagogical processes. Therefore, the quality dimension Socialisation and Communication (see Kärby & Giota, 1994) was used both to divide the 20 participating preschool units into two equal groups and to evaluate the effects of the development work, e.g. how the teachers approached the children in emotional and communicative interaction. In the *third* stage a post-evaluation of the 20 selected preschool units was made by three external evaluators to determine the effect of the development programme. The Model of Competence Development was also evaluated by the teachers, who answered a participant questionnaire at the end of the development work. This was the fourth stage.

The *main* results are: The pre-evaluations of quality show that the intervention and the control group were equal to each other, 4.50 and 4.49 respectively (SPSS, T-test, analysis of paired data, $P = 0.897$). The post-evaluations of quality showed a significant difference in quality between the preschool units in the intervention and the control group, 4.98 and 4.18 ($p = 0.010$). It was the intervention group that had enhanced the quality from 4.50 to 4.98 ($P = 0.002$), while the control group showed a tendency to lower the level of quality from 4.49 to 4.18 (0.069). All of the 20 participating preschool units have had the same financial conditions and a comparison of staff-child ratio in the intervention and the control groups showed that there was no such variance that could explain the difference in quality between the two groups. The differences between the two groups can be explained by the massive and directed development input in the intervention group, which throughout the development

work continuously changed and evolved through the influence of the teachers themselves.

The research question of the study was if quality in preschool could be enhanced through competence development despite organisational changes and financial cutbacks. The answer is yes, provided that the competence development programme challenges the teachers to change their ways of thinking and understanding in the way the Model of Competence Development has done. To achieve this, the teachers had to become aware of the changes in and requirements of society, modern theories of how children learn, and the importance of their own role as teachers in this process. Through the evaluations of quality they also became aware of what was going on in various pedagogical processes in their own pedagogical practice and its current level of quality. Together the teachers developed ideas of how to improve the quality in relation to the national goals.

The third study

The aim of the third study, *Children's conceptions of participation and influence in preschool – A perspective on pedagogical quality*, is dual. The first aim is to take the perspective of the child and what s/he means by deciding and decision-making. Children's conceptions are related to their experience of exercising influence concerning their situation, their learning process, the content and the physical environment in preschool. The second aim is to relate the child's experience of influence to the preschool setting's level of pedagogical quality, as evaluated with ECERS. Interaction, communication and participation characterise a pedagogical practice of high quality (NAEYC, 1991; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Dahlgren, Moss & Pence, 1999). Therefore, it could be assumed that children in high quality preschool units have more opportunities to participate and to exercise influence than children in low-quality preschool units. The research questions addressed by this study are: How do children experience their possibility of exercising influence in preschool and how is this (or - is this) related to the preschool setting's evaluated level of pedagogical quality?

From a perspective of pedagogical quality, as well as from a legal perspective, children have the right to participate in all matters that are of concern to them and to influence both their own learning process as well as the overall environment in preschool (UN Convention, 1989; Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a). In the present study, external and self-evaluations of quality were made in 14 preschool units with the help of ECERS. From the total number of participating preschool units, the three that the external evaluations had shown to have the highest level of quality and the three of the lowest quality were selected for interviews with children. To avoid an influence of the level of

quality on grounds of differences in physical structure, such as space and materials, the quality dimension Socialisation and Communication, which was derived from a factor analysis, was used as the basis for this selection (Kärrby & Giota, 1994).

Thirty-nine five-year-old children were interviewed about how they conceived their possibility of influencing what goes on in the preschool setting. The children's conceptions were related to their experience of exercising influence over their situation, their learning processes, the content and the physical environment in preschool. The children's experience of influence was also related to the preschool setting's level of pedagogical quality, as evaluated with ECERS. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted in the context of the preschool, including the processes that characterise interdependent person/environment relationships (Winegar & Valsiner, 1992, p. 4).

In the first stage, the interviews were read over and over again and analysed as a whole and in detail. To interpret the meaning of decision-making from the child's perspective, the variation of conceptions and how they conceived their possibility of deciding in preschool were related both to the context, (e.g. self or teacher-initiated activity, peer interactions, teacher interactions, context of preschool and home, etc.) and to answers to specific questions. The analysis showed how the children experienced decision-making in preschool, what the teachers decided and what they themselves could decide. In some aspects a common and shared essence emerged, as the answers among the children were homogeneous. In other aspects a variation appeared. The variations in the conceptions were categorised in five qualitatively different categories. They originated from all the various situations in which the children described that decisions were made (Pramling, 1983). In the second stage the analysis of the interviews were compared to each preschool unit's externally evaluated quality.

The *main* results are: If children could decide by themselves in preschool, they would play, and it seems as if most of the children experienced that they have the freedom to play, even if they expressed that their play-time was disrupted by routines, planned activities, etc. Most of the children did not believe that the teachers knew what they liked to do in preschool. Explanations given were: "She can't know because she isn't with us, can't hear us, she can't see everything, she has so many other things to do, or, I have not told her what I like". These statements can be interpreted as indicators of low quality. However, continuing the conversation, many children made a distinction or expanded their answers concerning the activities they often took part in throughout the day. They then assumed that the teacher had seen them doing it and therefore she must know that they liked doing it. Statements concerning the children's beliefs, e.g. whether they believe that the teacher knows what they like to do or not, were compared to the preschool unit's evaluated level of quality. In high-quality preschool units more children believed that the teacher knew what they liked doing in comparison with preschool units evaluated as being of low quality.

The variation of the children's conceptions of the meaning of decision-making was presented in five qualitatively different categories of decision-making. Most of the children's conceptions fall into more than one category. These categories are: To do what you want to do, To allow or to forbid, To exercise power, To think out or to invent and To do what the majority wants to do. The meaning given to decision-making by the children seems to depend on who makes the decision and in what context it is made. For many of the children, 'to decide' means to do what you want to do when you are by yourself or with friends. To allow or to forbid is primarily related to the teachers who tell the children what to do or not to do. Most of the children's conceptions fall into these two categories. Apart from this, deciding had the meaning: to exercise power, which is related both to a leading position in play and in a profession. To think out or to invent is mainly related to qualities children give themselves, and to the theme of play. The last category, to do what the majority wants to do, was found in the preschool unit evaluated to be of the highest level of quality.

Among friends who are playing together decision-making seems to follow certain rules. Most of the children said that it was no one or every one that decided when they were playing together. From the children's statements it became obvious that they experienced that they participated in decision-making on equal terms if the situation was characterised by reciprocity, turn-taking and involvement. The children also experienced that they could decide more at home than in preschool. The reason for this is that at home they do not have to wait on their turn, and they have unlimited access to their own things. In preschool they must be considerate to each other and share things, toys and time with one another. To do this they must negotiate and argue for their rights. From a perspective of quality this can be interpreted as good, because it is in preschool that the children are practicing democracy to a larger extent than at home, even if this is not unproblematic.

The results of this study show that the interviewed children experience that they can decide over their own play, their own activities, their own things and to some extent, over themselves in preschool. This is quite a lot, considering how young these children are, and even more so since they seem to take this right for granted. However, a closer analysis shows that the children can decide primarily about activities and play initiated by themselves. They seldom seem to participate in and influence the overall organisation, routines, content and activities that are initiated by the teachers. This is against the intentions of both the UN Convention and the Swedish curriculum for preschool. To be evaluated as high quality, the practice of democracy should include most activities and processes that are going on in preschool and not just embrace what goes on between the children. For an enhancement of quality in preschool the children must therefore be able to exercise influence in a far wider area than they seem to do at present.

The study provides knowledge of how children experience their possibility of exercising influence in preschool. Important clues are the children's statements about the characteristics of situations in which they feel that they participate on equal terms and the meaning they give to the concept decide. Their differentiated view of deciding can be interpreted to mean that questions of participation and influence are part of these young children's daily life. This knowledge can help teachers to create situations of participating where these characteristics appear. It can also motivate them to give the children plenty of opportunity to express their views, develop their skill in arguing for their standpoints and, when possible, influence decisions that are to be made.

The results indicate that there is a difference between the children's experience of exercising influence depending on the level of quality in preschool. High-quality preschool units seem to have a more open atmosphere inviting children to participate and negotiate. However, the nuances are subtle, and they raise new questions of how high quality in interactions and communication is concretised in various situations and pedagogical processes in preschool.

The results also clearly show that an evaluation of the quality of early childhood education must include the voices of children. Otherwise an essential part of how children experience quality within various preschool settings, as well as an overall understanding of quality in early childhood education, will be missing.

The fourth study

The aim of the fourth study, *Evaluations of Pedagogical Quality in Early Childhood Education – A cross-national perspective*, is to find out how the concept of quality in ECERS is concretised in pedagogical processes in early childhood education, how those pedagogical processes can be made visible, and on the validity of evaluations of quality with ECERS in cross-national comparative studies. The research questions addressed are: How can various pedagogical processes in early childhood education become visible? How is quality embedded in various pedagogical processes in early childhood education, according to ECERS?

The study is embedded in a joint research project of quality in early childhood education between Germany and Sweden. Researchers⁷ from two different countries and cultures (Sweden and Germany) made parallel and independent evaluations of the quality in 20 preschool units, 10 in each country. Each preschool unit was visited twice, during a period of two consecutive weeks, by two

⁷ A German research team at the Free University of Berlin, professor Wolfgang Tietze, professor Käthe-Maria Schuster, PhD cand. Marita Stahnke and PhD cand. Martin Schlattmann and a Swedish research team at the University of Gothenburg, professor Gunni Kärrby, PhD cand. Joanna Giota, PhD cand. Sonja Sheridan and Md Anette Däversjö Ogefelt.

three-member observation teams, each team representing members from both countries. Altogether, each unit was evaluated by each of the six observers according to a predetermined schedule with a systematic variation of combinations. Both the German and the Swedish research groups used National adaptations⁸ of ECERS. No statistically significant differences were found amongst the team of observers from the two countries or between the Swedish and the German version of ECERS (Tietze & Giota, manuscript).

In this study, the procedure of the measurement of scores with ECERS has been combined with documentation of the perceptual process underlying the ratings of quality with ECERS. In addition to ECERS ratings, the observers gave the rationales for their scoring of selected items during an observation and described them in an informal way. A balanced design was developed, which ensured that each observer described the same subset of 3 items for a specific childcare centre. The perceptual process underlying the ratings of quality was thereafter analysed and reconstructed from a country-specific perspective. To describe and visualise observed pedagogical processes in early childhood education, the perceptual process underlying the evaluation of quality with ECERS was reconstructed (Pedhazur & Pedhazur Schmelkin, 1991). In this study, the definition of perceptions is extended to include the observers' thoughts, beliefs, values, experiences and feelings. The documentation was analysed in different stages to explore various themes and pedagogical processes in early childhood education that are related to single or groups of items in ECERS. These themes are chosen to mirror different dimensions of quality and pedagogical processes in early childhood education, as evaluated with ECERS.

The *main* results are: The reconstruction of the perceptual process is presented in the form of five different themes reflecting various pedagogical processes in early childhood education as evaluated with ECERS. *Inside space and equipment for children*: Both teams evaluate the quality of physical conditions higher in the ten Swedish childcare centres compared to the German centres. The emphasis of the German team's documentation was on the amount of space and materials in the Swedish childcare centres, while the Swedish team focused on limitations and the lack of space and equipment in the German childcare centres. *Goals and planned activities*: Planned activities are evidently expressed, concretised and implemented differently in German preschools compared to Swedish. In Germany the teacher seemed to plan on a daily basis, deciding to prepare short activities, for example, to make lanterns for Halloween or to visit a playground. In Sweden the tradition of making both long-term plans for the whole group or part groups and special plans to support each child's

⁸ The German version was published by Tietze, Schuster, and Rossbach in 1997 and consists of 37 items. Interrater agreement was assessed as kappa = .85 and the internal consistency of the scale, alpha .94 was found. The Swedish version was translated by Kärby in 1989 and consists of 28 items, 24 are original items and 4 are combined items. An interrater agreement range from .83 to .96 percent of the total agreement or a difference of one point. The internal consistency range from .89 to .96. (For further information about ECERS adaptations, see Tietze and Giota, manuscript).

development and learning was obvious. The planning also included a concrete goal concerning the phenomena the teachers wanted the children to develop an understanding of, and what experiences they ought to meet in order to achieve this. *Encouragement of language development*: A child's language development and the cultivation of the mother tongue were of greater importance in the ten Swedish childcare centres compared to the German centres. *Play*: Time for play differed between the German and Swedish childcare centres, as did the teacher's role in children's play. In Germany the children have more time to play by themselves but with less material, support and stimulation from the teacher. In Sweden there is less time for continuous play, but the teacher interacts more with the children during play and uses play as a learning opportunity. *The social climate and the educational style*: In Germany there was great variation in the social climate and the atmosphere amongst the ten childcare centres. In Sweden the educational style, social climate and atmosphere were more democratic and homogeneous among the observed preschools than in the German preschools.

Through the reconstruction of the perceptual process underlying the ratings of quality with ECERS, an overall picture appeared of the childcare centres' profiles and levels of quality in each country, as do differentiating characteristics of quality in a cross-national perspective. The reconstruction of the perceptual process also verified that the criteria in ECERS reflect pedagogical processes in early childhood education as well as different levels of quality in a distinct and modulated way. It clearly visualised how different levels and aspects of quality were concretised in pedagogical processes in early childhood education in a national, as well as a cross-national, perspective. The reconstruction showed that there was a far greater variation in and between the German childcare centres than in the Swedish centres. What especially caught the Swedish observers' attention was the difference in the teaching style between low and high-quality childcare centres in Germany.

In order to learn from each other, various pedagogical processes in early childhood education must become visible so that they can be reflected upon, critically analysed and improved. This approach to evaluations of quality with ECERS can thereby lead to a greater understanding of what constitutes quality in early childhood education and how it is concretised in various pedagogical processes – an understanding that is necessary if we want to discuss, compare and learn about quality issues from each other. ECERS combined with documentation of the rationales for scoring can therefore be a powerful tool in the development of teacher's awareness and professionalism as well as enlightening researchers, administrators and politicians seeking to guarantee the right of the child and the quality of early childhood education.

DECONSTRUCTING AND RECONSTRUCTING QUALITY

This part can be seen as one contribution to the development of a theory of pedagogical quality. To be defined, the concept of pedagogical quality needs to be deconstructed, and to develop a deeper understanding of its meaning, it needs to be reconstructed. In this part the evaluations of quality are related both to theories of learning and research on quality and used as an operational definition of the concept. The reconstruction of the concept is based on a meta-perspective of the results of the four studies and the analysis of these. A meta-perspective means that the results of the four studies are related to one another as well as to theories of learning, previous research on quality and to the values and goals in the curriculum.

In the English language the word quality has the meaning of qualities, that is, the objects characteristics, or its good or bad points. However, in common use the concept of quality is rather seen as a whole, e.g. a constitution of various qualities. This is more similar to the meaning of the Latin word "qualitas," which means how something is constituted (Skolverket, 1998a). Even if the concept of quality as a whole consists of a conglomerate of qualities, we talk about it from a comprehensive perspective without defining what aspects of quality we refer to. The aspects that constitute the concept of quality are often implicit, tacit, taken for granted and sometimes even unreflected. When we talk about quality in preschool, we must therefore start by deconstructing the concept of quality (Munton, Mooney & Rowland, 1995) and define what we mean by quality and the standpoint of our theoretical base. The deconstruction and reconstruction of pedagogical quality need to be preceded by a discussion of how a preschool is viewed on a practical and a theoretical level from this perspective. Valsiner and Winegar (1992) discuss the difference between contextual theories and contextualising theories. Contextual theories build in a consideration of context at a basic level in their theory construction, while contextualising theories follow a pattern of increasing enumeration and elaboration, at a theoretical level, of the factors that are seen as influencing the outcome of particular processes. A pedagogical perspective of quality embraces both of these theories.

At a practical level a preschool should be seen as a complex interdependent relationship between individuals and environment. An environment in preschool includes both the physical environment, that is, space, equipment, materials and how they are arranged and used, and all pedagogical processes that take place

throughout the day, such as: activities, content and interactions between child and teacher and between the children, the atmosphere and the attitude of the teacher. This is an environment that has a message to the child, an environment that set frames for learning and development by either creating possibilities or hindering them, an environment that can or cannot be influenced and changed by the child. The pedagogical quality of preschool and school depends on how various aspects of quality, as well as social and cultural values, traditions and overall goals for learning, interact with one another and in accordance with parallel changes in society. In practice (in an institution of learning), all these aspects are inseparable and constantly interact with one another.

At a theoretical level it is different. Research on quality has shown that some aspects are more important than others to quality as a whole, even if their value also depends on the context, situation, activity and content. The most important aspect affecting the quality in preschool, related to children's outcomes, is the approach of the teacher, closely followed by the presence of common goals and philosophical standpoints. Thereafter follows co-operation with the parents, the competence of the teachers and their opportunities for competence development, the management, the staff-child ratio, space, material resources, cost and evaluation (Phillips & Howes, 1987; NAEYC, 1991). Several other studies confirm that it is the competence and the approach of the teacher that seem to have a crucial impact on the quality in preschool (Kärrby, 1992; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons & Siraj-Blatchford, 1999; Asplund Carlsson, Pramling Samuelsson & Kärrby, manuscript, etc.). To study how different aspects of quality contribute to the level of quality as a whole, each one of them has to be made visible, measurable and defined. Therefore, pedagogical quality at a theoretical level should be seen as a collection of characteristics in the childcare environment that affect children's social and cognitive development in various ways (Siraj-Blatchford, 1999a).

In research, these indicators of quality are often categorised within four major dimensions of quality, which are defined as an attitude quality, structural quality, process quality and result (outcome). All except the quality of attitude, were first defined within the discipline of medical science by Donabedian (1980). A slightly different categorisation was suggested by Munton, Mooney and Rowland (1995): that is, at least six dimensions of quality and three basic dimensions, in which the quality of a preschool is described. The basic dimensions are structure, process and outcomes.

The four dimensions, the structure, the attitude, the process and the outcome are used in the following sections as a point of departure for defining and describing the characteristics and values used in my thesis to evaluate pedagogical quality. The quality dimensions, the structure, the attitude and part of the process are discussed at three levels: 1) A theoretical level that is based on relevant theories of learning and development and research on quality in preschool and school, 2) The level of deconstruction, which describes on what

characteristics and values of quality the evaluations are based, and 3) The level of reconstruction, which is based on a meta-perspective on the results of the four studies.

In practice, the quality as a whole depends on how various aspects and characteristics of quality are related and made to interact with one another, and on how they are experienced from different perspectives. The remaining parts of the process and the outcome focus on essential aspects of quality to be visualised in the development of a theory of pedagogical quality and to constitute the content and form of a model for competence development.

The quality of structural aspects

There is an ongoing debate in society, as well as within research, if and to what extent the structural aspects are of importance to the quality as a whole and in what way they contribute to the level of quality in a practice. The traditional focus of structural quality is mainly on the organisation and available resources. Examples of structural aspects in preschool and school are the formal competence required of the teachers, staff-child ratio, number of children in a group, economy, space, materials, etc. Premises are created at three levels: 1) An overall level, that is, the political, social and cultural conditions, 2) A community level, which determines the organisational conditions within a community, and 3) A local level, which includes staff conditions in a specific preschool (Ekholm & Hedin, 1993).

Palmérus and Hägglund (1987) studied the effect of the staff-to-child ratio on the quality in preschool. The results of this study show that when there was a decrease in the number of staff, they had to spend more time caring for the children and had less time for structured activities. There was less interaction between teachers and children and more among the children. They also found a correlation between the working hours of the staff and quality. In a study of preschool children's activities, language and group patterns, Kärby (1986) found that children in large child groups played more among themselves, while smaller groups of children and a high staff/child ratio led to higher interaction between the teachers and the children. Different effects of financial cutbacks were found by Kärby (1994) in a study of 17 preschools. The negative effects were mainly found on activities that required a high staff/child ratio, such as excursions of various kinds. In the daily work the teachers experienced less time with each child, less time for planning, and less time for dialogues with the parents when they came to leave or take the children home. The positive effects can be described as a higher teacher awareness and focus on the overall goals (Kärby, 1994). Howes (1997) found that teachers with a higher education were more sensitive and responsive towards the children, and that children in groups that had better qualified teachers performed better on tests. Despite this, the

results also indicated that a high standard of teacher education could not compensate a low staff/child ratio. She found that children's needs were best met in preschools that had highly educated teachers and a staff/child ratio according to the norms of NAEYC. Reviews of studies done in preschool emphasise that certain structural aspects are extremely important, especially for children who are disadvantaged in one way or another, for instance, those who have another home language and/or are from troubled socio-economic areas, etc. (Kärrby, 1992; Sylva & Wiltshire, 1993; Asplund Carlsson, Pramling Samuelsson & Kärrby, manuscript). The overall conclusion of the review by Asplund Carlsson, Pramling Samuelsson and Kärrby (op.cit.) is that: the younger the children are, the more important are the group size and the staff-child ratio. They also state that small groups of children are better than large groups of children combined with a high staff-child ratio, because small groups make it easier for the teacher to see and confirm each child, and in return the children are more focused and active. Small groups of children also create learning conditions in which the teacher more easily can vary and improvise teaching. In turn this seems to improve children's opportunities to develop basic skills in reading, writing and mathematics, which influence later learning in a positive way. However, the main condition for these effects to appear is that the teacher changes his or her way of teaching and take advantage of the benefits a smaller group of children gives (Asplund Carlsson, Pramling Samuelsson & Kärrby, manuscript).

In the external evaluations of my study the formal competence of the teacher was noted as an important indicator of quality. Even so, its contribution to the level of quality depended on how the teacher used his or her competence to approach the child, whether the child was made part of what was going on in preschool, and if the child was involved in the organisation of the physical environment. The same conditions applied when space and material resources were evaluated. These had little value in themselves. The value given to them depended on how they were used as tools to enrich, extend and deepen the child's experience and thereby the possibility of learning. For example, the preschools evaluated as being of high quality were those, in which the space was used and influenced by the children and where their influence and participation could be easily traced in the room arrangement. Externally evaluated as (material) resources were not just prefabricated toys, games, books, etc. Materials from nature were evaluated as having equal relevance when they were used to enhance children's understanding of various phenomena. Non-physical aspects, such as stories (narratives) and variation, patterns, causalities, etc., were evaluated in the same way. For example, evaluated, as high-quality situations were those in which children's understanding of a certain phenomenon and the variety of understanding were made visible to the children as a tool for learning. In the same way, various models and theories of learning were evaluated as tools when they were used for children to reflect upon and form opinions about.

In Swedish preschools two or three teachers work as a team, which enables them to divide children into subgroups. When the whole group of children were held together most of the day, the quality of the preschool was considered low. Preschool units in which the teachers divided the children into smaller groups were often evaluated as having higher quality (Article 4). The externally evaluated level of quality was then based on what intentions the group organisation had had, on the activity and its content and on the approach of the teacher. Most common was that the teachers divided the children into subgroups according to their age, and worked with them on a collective level and from an age development appropriate perspective. The content in these groups seemed to be based on an overall planning, lacking sensitivity for the interests and experience of individual children (Article 4). In preschool units evaluated to be of the highest quality, the teachers divided the children into smaller groups, depending on the activity and content in relation to the children's interest, previous experience and knowledge. There was also a visible awareness of what understanding the teachers wanted the children to develop. These characteristics of a development approach are more fully described in Pramling (1994).

A meta-perspective on the results of my thesis highlights the complexity between pedagogical quality and various structural aspects in ways that previous studies have not. It shows how dependable the quality is of the relation and interaction between different variables/indicators of quality. Even if some of the participating Swedish preschool units had a high staff child-ratio and were evaluated as having high quality on space and material conditions, the overall quality was low, while some of the German preschool units had high quality overall despite limited material resources and a low staff-child ratio (Articles 1 and 4). The results of my study show that the teachers in low-quality preschools seldom divided the children into subgroups. They did not change their working methods and approaches during days when few children were present in the child-group. Those teachers seemed to interact and communicate from a certain approach/educational style, independent of the numbers of children in the group. For teachers in high-quality preschools, it was the other way around. They tried to interact with the children in a positive way, even if there were plenty of children around them.

The results of my study also show that space and material resources were more important to the level of quality from the perspective of the teacher compared to the external evaluator. Interestingly, this applied especially to teachers from low-quality preschools. They valued the physical resources as very important indicators of quality, while teachers in high-quality preschool units believed that the value also depends on how they were used (Article 1). These results highlight the difference between teachers in preschools evaluated as being of high quality and those in units evaluated to be of low quality. They also show that, from a pedagogical perspective, structural aspects are no guarantee for quality in themselves. This does not mean that lack of material resources,

economising, large child-groups and a low staff-child ratio, etc., are seen as unimportant. It is rather the other way round, but their contribution to quality depends on how the available resources are used. Their importance to quality in preschool and school falls back utterly on the competence and creativeness of the teacher, and how s/he, at a very specific moment, sees what are the best tools and objects for visualising the phenomena to be experienced and what methods to use to guide and challenge children, while they learn about what is at the centre of their attention (object of interest).

The quality of the attitude

The quality of the attitude refers to the teachers' values, philosophical and theoretical perspectives of learning, understanding of the task of preschool and their awareness of how their own attitudes towards knowledge formation and life in general influences their work with the children.

The frame of fundamental values for preschool is clearly stated in the Swedish national curriculum. The focus is on what fundamental values are to be practiced and communicated in the teacher's actions and among the children. Democracy forms the foundation of the preschool, and everyone working there should promote respect for the intrinsic value of each person as well as respect for our shared environment. One of the main tasks of preschool is to establish and help children acquire the values on which our society is based. The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between the genders as well as solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are values that preschool shall actively promote in its work with the children. The foundations on which these values rest, express the ethical attitude that should characterise all preschool activity (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a).

How a child's time in preschool and school turns out depends to a large extent on the teacher's view of children, how they believe children learn, e.g. their own folk pedagogy (Bruner, 1996) and various theories of learning and what knowledge they value as important for a child to learn. Carr (1989) argues that what a teacher needs most of all is the knowledge of how to help others to learn, e.g. the theory of teaching. He argues that teaching is not a technical process, but an art that can not be separated from its moral, social, historical and political roots, and that it is in the very process of teaching that teachers transfer their own values together with the subject/content of interest. The quality in education can only be enhanced when teachers understand how their own values influence a child's process of learning, as it is in the context of preschool and school that teachers through actions transform their own pedagogical values into concrete pedagogical practice (Carr, 1989). Bruner (1996) brings this idea a step further, as he argues that the view we have of children will determine how we

approach them. Even further, Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi (1996) argue that the view teachers have of children and knowledge will form the foundation for what it is possible for children to become, learn and achieve within the frame of preschool and school. The consequence of this is that the way the teacher sees the child will to a large extent decide how s/he will respond to them and interpret their actions and utterances (Hundeide, draft, p. 17).

The quality of attitude does not only effect the implementation of the overall values and the child's possibility of learning, but also what areas children can learn about. Take, for example, the use of information and communication technology in preschool. Whether or not children can become skilful users of ICT in preschool is not only a question of having the right equipment and teachers that have acquired the technical knowledge of how to use it. It is even more a question of attitudes towards ICT and modern technology. Whether teachers think it is good or bad to use ICT in preschool is a question very closely related to values. These will determine whether the children will be able to use it, as well as the attitude children themselves will develop towards it. However, it is important to emphasise that attitude and knowledge are closely united in the sense that a growing knowledge within an area will influence the attitude towards it (Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, manuscript).

A meta-perspective of the results of my study visualises how the attitudes of the teachers are expressed in their approach and/or educational style. Different teacher approaches had various effects on the pedagogical practice, the implementation of the fundamental values, and the life of the children in preschool. How these were experienced depended on whose perspective was being considered, that of the external evaluator, the teachers or the children. The following examples mirror the complexity of a pedagogical perspective of quality and the importance of studying the relation between experiences from different perspectives.

Four educational styles were identified, the *laissez faire*, the authoritarian, the democratic (Article 4), and the democratic/pedagogical development approach. It was the democratic approaches that promoted interaction, communication and co-operation between the teachers and the children and among the children. Characteristic of this interaction was the mutual respect, trust, open-mindedness and reciprocity. Teachers with a democratic educational style encouraged the children to ask questions, to learn and participate, and the children seemed rather contented, helped each other and co-operated in various situations. The preschool units with this education style were evaluated as being of high quality. The other two educational styles seemed to either restrict or limit the children's possibilities for learning and experiencing. Significant was the attitude of harsh control and the demand for obedience, or no control at all. In these preschool units there were conflicts and less sharing among the children. There was little space for children's own initiatives and participation, and the quality was evaluated as low (Article 1 and 4).

The overall experience of the teachers is that they positively interact with the children throughout the day (Article 1). In situations where the teachers described difficulties in interacting and communicating in the way they wanted to, teachers from high and low-quality preschool units gave different reasons for this. The teachers from low-quality preschool units blamed some external factor. They said that it was the large number of children in the groups that prevented them from communicating with individual children. The teachers from high-quality preschool units held themselves responsible for missing opportunities to communicate, to extend children's learning, and to make children part of what was going on. They believed that they had to work with themselves to become more aware and observant.

From the perspective of five-year-old children another picture emerges (Article 3). The overall experience of the children was that their opportunities to participate in decisions and influence what went on in preschool were limited, except in their own activities and play. Interesting is that these five-year-olds characterised turn-taking and reciprocity as indicators of a democratic approach, that is, when no one decided, or rather the feeling that decisions should be made together, and that everyone should participate in the play on equal terms. Even if the overall experience of participation was limited, there was a clear tendency. The children from high-quality preschool units experienced participation and possibilities of exercising influence to a larger extent than the children from low-quality preschool units. Those children more often expressed that they were not seen, were not listened to, and that they could seldom influence what was going on in preschool.

The analysis of these results shows that the quality of attitude has a crucial impact on the level of pedagogical quality. It visualises that even if the teachers involve the children, they cannot take for granted that the children feel part of what goes on. To enhance the quality, this taking-things-for granted attitude needs to be problematised in the light of expressed differences of perspectives.

The quality of the process

When the quality of the process is defined and evaluated, the focus is both on the learning process of the child and on how the teachers approach and interact with the children, their pedagogical awareness and working methods in relation to the overall goals. The quality characteristics evaluated define what is meant by low and high quality in interactions.

From a meta-perspective of the results, it became obvious that at least four perspectives should be visualised and problematised to develop a theory of pedagogical quality, and to be used as a content in the competence development programme (Article 2). That is: 1) The quality of interactions, which is the awareness of the teachers of what goes on in the meeting between themselves

and the children, 2) The perspective of the teacher, that is, the meaning given by the teachers to their role in preschool, 3) The perspective of the child, which is how teachers view the children and the knowledge they have about how children learn, and 4) The perspective of society, which is knowledge about the changing intentions and requirements of public policy, the task of preschool, and how to improve the quality to achieve the overall goals.

The quality of interaction

The core of pedagogical quality is in the interaction, in the meeting, between the teacher and the child. Evaluations of interactive qualities that are assumed to be essential to the pedagogical quality are described from the perspectives of Bae, Hundeide, Klein and Pramling.

An indicator of high and low quality in the interaction is, according to Bae (1997), the emotional aspect of the meeting between the teacher and child. She characterises high quality in interactions by mutual recognition. On the basis of verbal and non-verbal cues, Bae defines mainly two patterns of interaction, which are termed spacious and narrow. In the spacious patterns the teacher has a focused attention, makes room for the child's contribution, confirms the child's experience, responds sensitively, listens intently and lets the child pursue his or her own line of reasoning without interrupting, etc. This approach makes the child experience that s/he is worth listening to, makes him or her more secure and open. Premises are created so that the child can feel free to ask questions and to share knowledge and ideas openly. The narrow pattern is the direct opposite. It is characterised by an unfocused attention of the teacher. S/he is emotionally remote or distant, does not confirm the child's experiences, and reacts to the content of what is being said and not to the way it is said, etc. This approach makes the child doubt whether his or her contribution is valid and worthy of attention, and s/he becomes reluctant to share his/her thoughts and feelings. The child's conception of learning and what it means to be a learner will be coloured by these disconfirming experiences (Bae, 1997, pp. 79-80).

Klein (1989) and Hundeide's (draft) focus on both emotional and cognitive aspects of quality in the meeting between the teacher and child, as indicators of high quality of interaction. They emphasise the importance of joint attention, involvement and mediated learning. The focus is on the teacher's ability to adjust to the child's intentionality so that they together achieve shared attention and meaning, that is, a shared focus of attention and "joint involvement" with the objects that are of interest. From this basis of shared attention, a child's initiative may be supported and expanded in different ways and directions, and it is this mediational-narrative support and enrichment which research suggests as decisive for a child's socio-cognitive development (Hundeide, draft, p. 3).

Hundeide describes the ideal of the emotional climate of preschool or school as "one of dialogue and exchange, respect and confirmation of the child

as a person of value to himself and to others, attentiveness to his initiatives, interests and activities, and willingness to support and expand them as far as that is possible inside the frames of an orderly [preschool] class-room” (Hundeide, draft, p. 4). The atmosphere depends on the reciprocal adjustment of teacher and children, who together create an intersubjective space, that is, the space between the participants that tacitly determines what is natural and plausible to express, both from the teacher and children’s point of view and position. The intersubjective space determines the emotional climate of inclusion and exclusion, what is plausible to say, and who is saying what.

To achieve this, the teacher must start by establishing a joint attention or focusing and giving meaning (Klein, 1989). It is by adjusting to the child’s initiatives that the teacher will discover the child’s intentions and thus become a partner inside the child’s world of meaning. According to Klein, “the pleasure of sharing with somebody who encourages and guides the child’s attention into the adult world of shared social meanings is like creating appetites for further understanding” (cited in Hundeide, draft, p. 8). The dialogue between teacher and child should then lead to the next point of mediation, that is, expansion beyond the present situation, by using either a narrative or logic-analytic approach. According to Hundeide, both these ways are important, as they prepare children for different fields of human culture, namely, the poetic-artistic and moral, on the one hand, and the scientific-technical and computational, on the other.

Hundeide (draft) argues that the strongest developmental effects are achieved when children are put into positions in which they are challenged and have to stretch their capacity to its limits. To do this, the teacher can also choose a more regulative approach by supporting, guiding, hinting and directing when challenging the child, and focus his or her attention on those aspects of the task that are just beyond the level of the child’s present competence. This means that the child has to stretch to reach the goal indicated. To go beyond takes the child to distance him or herself from the immediate experience through reconstruction and symbolic representation of what the child has experienced. This requires sensitivity to the child’s focus of attention, intentionality and capacity on the part of the teacher. The base to build on in interaction is joint attention and topical sharing, an issue focused on by Carr (1999), who argues that discussions within joint attention episodes highlight both partners of the elements of learning that are valued. Hundeide’s (draft) conclusion is that children’s own initiatives, unassisted, are not enough for optimal development. The ideal is reached through guided participation and co-operation, both with peers and more knowledgeable persons (such as teachers).

An important indicator of high quality is the learning aspect in the meeting between the teacher and the child, as focused on by Pramling (1994). The pedagogical development approach enhances children’s opportunities to learn in direction of the overall goals. The focal point of this approach is on the variation

in children's understanding and how to make this variation visible, both to themselves and others. High quality in interactions is characterised by mutual recognition and each child is met from a reciprocal approach in order to find out what the child is interested in, why s/he approaches friends, activities and things the way s/he does, that is, what the world looks like from the perspective of the child. The teacher follows the child's exploratory initiatives by naming, explaining and expanding.

If we want to see what is important from the child's perspective, we have to take the perspective of the child. Evaluated to be of the highest quality in my thesis were preschool units characterised by interaction patterns that focused both on emotional, social and learning aspects. Evaluated to be of average quality were those preschools that mainly focused on emotional and social aspects, and evaluated as being of low quality were preschools with narrow patterns.

The analysis of the teachers' self-evaluations showed that those preschool units who were externally evaluated to be of high quality, that is, spacious patterns, evaluated their own interaction lower than the external evaluator. For teachers in preschool units externally evaluated as having a narrow pattern, it was the other way around. They evaluated their own interactions with the children as being of high quality in the numerical scoring of ECERS and commented on it with descriptions similar to characteristics of the narrow pattern. The quality of interaction could be visualised by documenting and analysing how the external evaluator and the teachers evaluated and experienced the same indicator and comparing the results. Teachers from nine preschool units participated in a competence development programme (Article 2) and the differences between these types of interactions were problematised. During the development programme, the teachers videotaped their own interactions with the children. Each teacher's individual interaction pattern was discussed within the working team in relation to the above criteria of high quality in interactions and to various theories of learning. Together they reflected on it, and put their knowledge into action by trying "new" approaches when they interacted with the children. During the whole development programme, different interaction patterns were documented, problematised and analysed by various methods. At the end of the development programme, an external evaluation of quality was made, and the teachers filled in a teacher questionnaire. The analysis of the teachers' comments has shown that this approach to competence development has made them more aware of what goes on in different pedagogical processes, and the external evaluations confirm that this approach has led to an overall higher quality in the participating preschools.

The analysis also showed that the improvement in quality was marginal in preschools evaluated to be of average or just above average quality. For some reason, the development programme did not seem to have the same effect on the

quality in these preschools, and further research is needed in this area (Article 2).

The perspective of the teacher

Research on quality has shown that the most important criteria of quality in preschool are the approach and competence of the teacher (NAEYC, 1991; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Kärrby, 1992; etc.). The task of the teacher is to create opportunities for children to encounter all experiences they have the right to in preschool and school (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a, 1998b). To do this, teachers should have both theoretical knowledge and practical experience. They must have knowledge about the task and goals of preschool and be aware of what is important for a child to learn, both from the perspective of here and now and in the future. In practice, the teachers need to know how to communicate with the children and listen to what children express. The quality in preschool depends, to a large extent, on how sensitive the teachers are to the children's various expressions (Bertram, 1995). How they respond to children's acting and try to interpret and understand how children think, try to understand why they act as they do, and the meaning behind it or given to it.

The role of the teacher is to be engaged/involved and present, here and now, in the children's world. Engagement may be defined as a set of personal qualities, which describe the nature of the educative relationships between the teacher and the child. These personal qualities will affect a teacher's ability to motivate, extend, enhance and involve children in the learning process (Bertram, 1995, p. 82). The Adult Engagement Scale drawn up by Laevers (1994) focuses on three categories that reflect personal qualities of engagement, these are: 1) Sensitivity – the sensitivity of the teacher to the feelings and emotional wellbeing of the child; 2) Stimulation – the way in which the teacher intervenes in the learning process and the content of such interventions; and 3) Autonomy – the degree of freedom that the teacher gives the child to experiment, make judgements, choose activities and express ideas. To evaluate the teacher's personal qualities of engagement is extremely important. The experience children get from preschool will influence how they look upon themselves as individuals, their future academic achievements, and their approach to life-long learning (Sylva, 1994). Hundeide (draft) says that the role of the teacher is to look for the qualities, competence and skills of the child and to create a positive intersubjective space and atmosphere in which these can develop. It is a question of having a combination of awareness, knowledge, and a positive approach and to see possibilities: to redirect children's attention and point out for them all things that they are allowed to do, can do, instead of emphasising what is forbidden, to negotiate about rules and discuss the consequences of breaking them and direct children's attention towards knowledge that is valued as knowledge important to learn.

Marton (1980) states that a teacher needs to develop at least four different aspects of competence. They are: 1) A common competence, which means that the teacher has an ability to communicate with children, to be positive and generous, sensitive, makes children feel safe and affirmed, and that s/he must be willing to participate in children's life and share their world; 2) A common pedagogical competence, which means that the teacher has deep knowledge of how children learn; 3) A competence of various topics, which means that the teacher has deep knowledge of the various fields they want children to develop an understanding about; 4) A methodological competence, which means that the teacher is interested in how children conceive the content or phenomenon they are to learn about.

How preschool will be constituted for a child depends both on the professionalism of the teachers and the very conditions they have to work with. The role of the teacher is therefore crucial. Evaluated as high quality in my thesis were situations in which the teacher was engaged and extended the child's world and experiences in the direction of the overall goals, where the point of departure for learning was based on the child's previous knowledge and competencies and a search for the positive features and resources rather than the deficiencies and the deviant features of the child.

The aim in developing a model of competence development was to improve the teacher's competence and possibility of meeting the child in ways that are characteristic of high quality in interactions (Article 2). The theoretical approach underlying the model of competence development is: To develop, change and improve the quality in their own practice, the teachers must be aware of what goes on in various pedagogical processes. They must also know what they want to achieve in their work with the children, and have an idea of what changes are wanted and required. Improving quality is a complex process in which certain conditions are required. To allow these conditions to exist and develop, teachers must become aware of circumstances that influence their work and they must have knowledge of how to create a pedagogical environment that stimulates and challenges children to learn. Another underlying assumption is that teachers who are viewed as competent and met with respect will meet children in the same way. Therefore, the model of competence development focused on the strength of the teacher and was built on participation and dialogue.

From a meta-perspective, it is apparent that the focus of the development programme was the results of the evaluations of quality. During the development programme, situations were created in which the teachers could deepen their theoretical knowledge and practical experience of how children learn, develop their understanding of what knowledge is, and how knowledge is constituted. In practice, they were to reflect over their thoughts and actions, so as to become aware of their own attitudes and standpoints. Throughout the development work the process of reflection was seen as one way to problematise one's own practice. With the help of various tools, the teachers reflected both

individually and together with colleagues. This was expected to lead to experimentation with new approaches, which once again were to be reflected on in a never-ending spiral (Schön, 1983; Alexandersson, 1994; Bengtsson, 1994; Marton & Booth, 2000). The content of the development programme also focused on children's rights and needs and their interest in learning, and how these are related to the overall goals, and how various attitudes to upbringing, values and cultural specifics influence children's learning and development in preschool.

Looking back at the four perspectives of high quality in interactions (see pages 85-88), we find that Bae mainly focuses on Marton's first two teacher competencies, while Pramling's (1994) development approach includes all four of them. The content of the development programme was largely inspired by the pedagogical development approach. It meant that the teachers, during the development programme should develop an interest in how children conceive the content or phenomenon they were to learn about. They should also actively and consciously expand the children's understanding of their world. In practice, the teachers engaged themselves and encouraged the children to put what they saw, heard and felt into words, that is, to express their experience. The intention was that they should use the child's own experience in the way it was understood by the child, as a goal and as a method. The teachers should also use the variation in children's understanding as a tool to make children aware that there is a variety of ways to understand and do things, and make them reflect over it, about themselves and how they learn.

Another important aim of the development programme was to see children as competent persons with intentions, wishes, feelings and reactions. In practice, the teachers focused on what the children wanted to do, their intentions, and active initiatives to explore the surrounding world, and used that as a starting point to direct children's attention towards the overall goals. The development programme also aimed to point out that a learning situation in preschool should not be seen as a formal structural activity. Teaching should be seen as the teacher's awareness of what is important for a child to learn, and her competence in creating situations for a child to learn this in every possible way that occurs during a day, and to take advantage of natural situations as well as planned activities. To think about learning as a process of making meaning meant that the teachers should strive to create an environment in which children could constitute meaning, participate, interact and communicate with other adults and children.

Pramling Samuelsson says that creation of understanding requires creativity, and the condition for the development of children's learning in direction of the overall goals is that play, learning and creativity are seen as a whole, as a creative dimension is the core of the learning process (Pramling Samuelsson, 2000). The competence of the teacher is important to a pedagogical perspective. The question is, what do we mean by competence, and what aspects constitute

competence? The interpretation of the results of the four studies is that high pedagogical quality in preschool to a large extent depends on if a creative dimension is part of the competence of the teacher. Creativity seem to be a necessity for teachers so that they can take advantage of situations, see possibilities and use themselves and available resources in an inventive way.

The (teacher's) perspective of the child

One of the most crucial aspects of pedagogical quality is how teachers view children. The question that is related both to the evaluations of quality and to the planning of the content of the development programme is what do the teachers see when they see a child? Is it a psychological child that is predestined to learn and develop according to certain patterns and stages, or it is a child that is socially constructed, within a certain context and culture? The post-modern perspective would, for example, "decentre the child, viewing the child as existing through its relations with others and always in a particular context" (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999, p. 43). What is meant by, *to see the child* has become one of the major issues within the field of early childhood education today. The reason for this is the growing understanding that, whatever standpoint we take, we must be aware that it will determine how we approach the child.

The Swedish preschool system has become known for succeeding in creating a balance between a learning that is directed towards both "here and now" and towards the future. Children are allowed to be children at the same time as their learning is directed towards future goals, which will probably take a life time to master (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1999; Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a). Important from a perspective of pedagogical quality is that the overall goals for learning are to be integrated with the child's own learning goals, in such a way that the child is challenged, that an interest in learning is kept and enhanced within new topics (Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 1999).

A pedagogical perspective of quality has a clear direction of learning, and the child is viewed as rich, resourceful and competent. To view children as competent means to acknowledge their ability to relate to the world, to create meaning and understanding of phenomena and situations, as well as actions they are involved in. To see children as competent is to see them as social actors who constitute knowledge and culture (Sommer, 1997). Even the youngest children in preschool have their own intentions and goals for learning, they are curious about life, and have a desire to learn about the surrounding world (Lindahl, 1996).

Piaget meant that the most essential thing is, that in order for a child to understand something, he must construct it himself, he must re-invent it (Piaget, 1973). To learn is to constitute meaning, and in the process of learning the child

must be active and constitute his or her own version of what is said or experienced. According to the Swedish curriculum for preschool, the starting point for children's learning is the experience children have already gained, their interests, motivation and compulsion to acquire knowledge (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a). In the curriculum, the theoretical perspective of knowledge is broad and should be seen from the perspective that children conquer the world by learning knowledge of various kinds. Acquiring knowledge is not only seen as a cognitive process. Knowledge is embedded in various situations, in all human practice, and in the body, and it can be divided into and expressed by four different forms: facts, understanding, skills and accumulated experience or/and familiarity, even if these four forms do not cover the whole variety of forms of knowledge. They are rather to be seen as pieces of a jigsaw, which together form the knowledge, that is, the whole base from which a child acts in every situation. Nor should the four forms of knowledge be seen from a hierarchical perspective with different values. All of them presuppose and interact with each other, and they exist within all areas of knowledge. So when a child learns to walk, balance, write, read, count, etc., s/he has learnt knowledge that consists of the four forms, even if the emphasis may be greater on one than the other (Carlgren, 1994). It is also important that a child experiences mastering and coping on their own as well as with the help of others. "The feeling of self-efficacy and self-confidence does not come by itself from nowhere, it comes through the experience of mastering challenging experiences, confirmed by significant others" (Hundeide, draft, p. 13).

In my thesis, spontaneous and/or planned situations, in which the teacher recognised, guided and supported the children's efforts to learn and master various situations were evaluated as being of high quality. They were situations in which the child sought challenges, developed skills and competencies and constituted meaning and learned through variation, which means that the child saw something in a qualitatively different way than s/he did before (Marton, 1981; Pramling, 1988, 1994). Such situations were visualised throughout the development programme and discussed in relation to the overall goals, to theories of learning and to research on quality.

The perspective of society

The starting point of the development programme was to understand the meaning of the task of preschool as required by society (Article 2). To be in phase with the surrounding world the teachers need both a historical perspective and an understanding of how today's changes in society, such as new laws, attitudes, requirements, economic changes, research findings, etc. will influence their work in preschool and school.

Changes in the Swedish preschool system over the past century can be characterised as dynamic and radical. Most of the changes in the educational system have been made during a period of increasing effectiveness in combina-

tion with harsh economies in the public sector. Parallel to these new realities came the shift from government by rules to government by goals. The absence of strict guiding principles means that the teachers must continuously concretise the overall goals, discuss the meaning and values beyond them, and implement the goals in their daily work. Accordingly, a national law was enacted, requiring that all activities in preschool must be of high pedagogical quality (Socialstyrelsen, 1995:2). In August 1998 the compulsory national curriculum for children aged 1 to 5 in preschool came into effect. The dual aims of the curriculum are to promote a child's learning and development and to enhance quality throughout the education system. Since 1998, preschool has been considered the first step of the educational system under the jurisdiction of the Department of Education (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a). Other important changes are the inclusion of all six-year-old children in the compulsory school, the proposal that preschool shall be public for all four and five-year-old children, regardless of whether their parents are working or not, a new maximum fee system, and alterations to the education for teachers in school as well as preschool (SOU, 1999:63).

All these changes will influence what goes on in preschool in one way or another. These changes were problematised from various perspectives throughout the development programme.

The quality of the outcome

The quality of the result is the expected outcome, that is, what children have learned and constituted knowledge about in relation to the overall goals. The level of quality depends on how well the overall goals are achieved (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a, 1998b). The only way to assess this is to carry out an evaluation of quality based both on the child's own goals and on the goals of society.

Today the framework of learning is the curriculum for preschool and school and its underlying theoretical approach. The Swedish preschool has traditionally rested on a psychological developmental perspective, in which the level of a child's biological and psychological development sets the limits of what is possible for a child to learn. In time, this perspective has been integrated with other theoretical perspectives of learning. In the daily activities in preschool, all of them have been woven together, focusing on quality in different ways and influencing how quality is valued in preschool. The Swedish national curriculum for preschool that took effect in 1998 is a combination of theoretical perspectives in which the socio-cultural one predominates (Alvestad & Pramling Samuelsson, 1999). This means that experience has an important role in a child's learning, and that experiences from a child's social and cultural world must be considered in the pedagogical work of preschool.

The development of each individual is important, but children must not only develop to become strong individuals. They must also learn from each other, play, share experiences and want to co-operate with one another. This is important for the continued existence of society (Williams, Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). High quality is associated with peer play (Whitebook, et. al., 1990), and characteristic of the Nordic preschool tradition is that the individual and the collective both have been in the focus of interest for pedagogical activities. The balance between the individual and the group in the Swedish preschools was highly valued by the OECD group in 1999 (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1999). They declared that Sweden was one of the few countries that had succeeded in implementing the societal values in the pedagogical practice, by letting the fundamental values permeate the daily activities.

The nature of the goals in the Swedish curriculum is to be described as qualitative, which means that the focus of a child's learning is on a change of understanding. In preschool children must be able to constitute and give meaning to all kinds of phenomena and activities that occur in their daily life. They must develop an understanding of, and embrace the fundamental values of society, develop their identity, self-autonomy and confidence, their ability to listen, narrate, reflect and express their own views, understand rights and obligations, as well as taking responsibility for common rules, developing their motor skills, being able to differentiate shades of meaning in concepts, seeing interconnections and discovering new ways of understanding the surrounding world. The curriculum also emphasises that children should develop a rich and varied spoken language, an ability to communicate, an interest in the written language, an understanding of symbols and an ability to discover and use mathematics in meaningful contexts and situations. Further, they should develop their creative abilities and an understanding of their own involvement in the processes of nature and in simple scientific phenomena (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a).

However, participation in preschool or school is no guarantee that understanding has occurred. The only way to see if and how children have constituted knowledge about something is to observe and talk to them, to make them express themselves, both verbally and in action. It is not until we have seen in what way and how a child has understood a specific content and/or phenomenon that we can be sure that we are heading towards the goals that have been set up for the preschool (Pramling, 1994). To study competence is to observe what children normally do and are involved in during everyday activities, to relate this to theories and to express those activities and actions in the form of concepts. Children's interactions with all human actors should also be explored, and the competence of the child should be valued according to its social and cultural functionality (Sommer, 1997, p. 35).

In my study, children's outcomes were not explored. The focus of my thesis was on how children themselves express and experience their opportunities to participate and exercise influence in preschool (Article 3). Their expressions were related to the preschool unit's externally evaluated quality. The external evaluations of quality gave one perspective of children's participation, the interviews with the children another. The results of my thesis show that the interviewed children experience that they can decide over their own play, their own activities, their own things, and over themselves in preschool. However, the children experience that the teacher decides everything else, which is contrary to the intentions of both the UN Convention and the Swedish curriculum for preschool. Those documents stipulate that the child has the right to exercise influence in a far wider area than these five-year-old children experienced in preschool. The results clearly show that an evaluation of pedagogical quality in preschool must include the voices of children, otherwise an essential part of how children experience quality within various preschool settings, as well as an overall understanding of pedagogical quality, will be lost.

To summarise, pedagogical quality is a conglomerate of variables that affect a child's learning in various ways. It is to be found in the interaction between the teacher and the child and between the children, as well as in the pedagogical awareness of the teacher, that is, meeting each child's wishes and interests, supporting, stimulating and challenging their learning. Further, it is to be found in the contact with the parents, in the content and in the overall goals of preschool.

Preschool must be seen as an integrated whole, in which the social and cultural values and goals of society permeate the practical work. Pedagogical quality has a clear direction of learning and, as it takes shape and manifests itself in various pedagogical processes, it can be visualised and evaluated. When pedagogical quality is evaluated it must be related to the overall goals and how these goals are achieved in relation to the child's own learning goals, wish to develop skills and abilities and desire to develop strategies to master situations s/he will experience during life.

The results of my thesis show that the level of pedagogical quality depends on to what degree the teachers use their competence to create a pedagogical environment in which children have opportunities to learn and develop, and how they use their own competence and all available resources in this process. For a high pedagogical quality, a creative dimension of teacher competence is necessary. The results show that any improvement in pedagogical quality must be directed towards the teachers' desire to continue to learn and change, to adapt their work to new theories of teaching and enhance their knowledge according to modern research and advancement in society. Important results are that the external evaluator, the teachers and the children value the same characteristics as important to the quality, even if they experience and evaluate situations in which those characteristics occur in different ways. For example, valued high from all

perspectives was the frequency, content and quality of interactions, communication, participation and possibility of exercising influence. Other aspects vary with the perspectives and with what is considered more, or less, important to the quality, for example, space and material resources in themselves.

To understand the complexity of pedagogical quality, the relation and interaction between various indicators of quality and how these are viewed and experienced from different perspectives, must be studied at a theoretical level. The level of quality depends on how human and material resources are both used and experienced, the quality of the content, how processes are conducted, the attitude, the view of children, the knowledge and task of preschool, the influence of social and cultural values as well as ongoing changes in and requirements of society, the awareness and competence of the teacher, etc. All these aspects are concretised and manifested in pedagogical processes that occur during a day in preschool. The quality of *structural aspects* is what can be seen and used as a tool for learning in a creative sense. The quality of *the attitude* sets the mental framework of what is possible for a child to learn. The quality of *the process* reflects how the learning proceeds and in what direction, and the quality of *the outcome* shows what the child has learned.

Section three

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The quality of the pedagogical environment in preschool has an unquestionable influence on children's wellbeing and their possibilities for learning and developing (Schweinhart, Barnes & Weikart, 1993; Sylva & Wiltshire, 1993; Sylva, 1994; etc.). Research on how quality is constituted and manifested in preschool is therefore essential. The aims of this thesis were to find out what characterised a pedagogical environment of high quality, how those characteristics could be made visible, how they were valued from different perspectives, and how that knowledge could be used to improve the quality of preschool. The present work both describes the theoretical framework of the first four studies (presented in articles 1 to 4) and, from a meta-perspective, relates the results of these, both to one another and to theories of learning, previous research on quality, and to the values and goals in the Swedish curriculum for preschool.

A pedagogical perspective of quality has its base in the objective approach to quality and infers that certain aspects of quality benefit a child's learning and development more than others do. These characteristics of quality can be defined and evaluated. At the same time, pedagogical quality is an interactive and dynamic concept, depending on knowledge and values in cultural contexts and time. Its meaning is integrated with and influenced by theories of learning, proven experience from preschool, perspectives of teachers, children, parents, etc., and should be seen in relation to the values and goals of society.

Pedagogical quality has a clear direction of learning. It is based on the principle that education consists of norms concerning what a child should have the opportunity to learn during education and its outcomes (Marton & Booth, 2000; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, manuscript). From this perspective, the level of quality depends on what the teachers do in preschool and how they use both physical resources and themselves to motivate children to learn and to challenge them to explore new areas. To understand how pedagogical quality takes shape and develops, both research and evaluation have to focus on the learning process of the child, the approach of the teacher, and how they interact with one another in relation to the overall goals.

Essential characteristics of pedagogical quality

Early childhood education in Sweden is heavily influenced by the social pedagogical tradition that places most emphasis on the care of the child and fostering on the child to become a democratic citizen (Kärrby, 2000). Seen in the light of the Swedish curriculum for preschool, this is not enough. The curriculum embraces a broad perspective of learning goals, and the level of quality depends on how well all of these goals are achieved (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a).

In this study the quality of the participating preschools was evaluated in the light of the goals and intentions of the Swedish curriculum for preschool. To achieve the highest level of quality according to ECERS requires planning, teacher scaffolding and guidance, and that the activities in preschool should be learning-orientated. Interpreted from a Swedish curriculum perspective, learning orientation includes the development of social competence, co-operation, mathematical understanding, becoming aware of and practising reading and writing as a way to communicate with others, participation in nature activities, science, technology, etc. Evaluated as high quality were also situations in which the children could develop so-called everyday-life-skills, such as being responsible, active, creative, communicative, flexible, reflective, solving problems, taking initiative, thinking critically and learning how to learn (EU, 1996).

A meta-perspective of the results showed that learning in the participating preschools mainly focused on social aspects. The core of pedagogical quality is in the interaction and what educational style teachers favour in interactive situations will be determined by a whole range of factors. They are: theoretical knowledge, previous experience and training, individual personality, their conception of childhood and learning, as well as the particular context they work within, its resources, colleagues, etc. (Siraj-Blatchford, 1999c). To change and improve the overall quality in preschool, the teachers must become aware of what they want children to learn and how they interact and communicate with them. Further, differences between the teachers' educational styles need to be visualised and problematised.

My thesis highlights four teacher educational styles or approaches, in which the teachers interact with the children. Low quality in interaction was characterised by teachers who used educational styles in which rules, norms and obedience were emphasised, the authoritarian, or where there was no control at all, the *laissez faire*. In preschool units with strict control, structured teacher-directed activities occurred. They seemed to be planned from an adult perspective and focused on activities for the whole group. Throughout the day learning situations had the characteristics of narrow patterns of interaction (Bae, 1997). That means that the teacher had an unfocused attention, was emotionally remote

or distant, did not confirm the child's experiences, and only reacted to the content of what was being said and not to the way it was said. The atmosphere could also be related to the climate of "here and now" as characterised by Ekholm and Hedin (1991), that is, a climate in which the teachers emphasise rules and norms and communicate more with one another than with the children. In preschool units evaluated as having no control, planned activities seldom occurred and the initiative came mainly from the children. This can be compared to evaluations of quality in English preschools, which also showed that the learning opportunities in maths and science were limited and sometimes inadequate (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons & Siraj-Blatchford, 1999).

Most of the participating preschools were evaluated as being of average to high quality. In these preschools, the teachers approached the children applying an educational style that can be characterised as democratic. They interacted through interaction patterns identified as spacious by Bae (1997) and to some extent by Hundeide (draft). The teachers had a focused attention, made room for the child's contribution, confirmed the child's experience, responded sensitively, listened intently and let the child pursue his or her own line of reasoning. Time in those preschools was characterised by both teacher and child-initiated activities in which the children sang, created, used letters and numbers, counted, listened to stories, etc. The focus of the teacher was, however, more on the activity itself than on what was happening to the child, that is, what the child had learned and understood in relation to the activity, except when it came to the development of children's social competence. The focus of learning was mainly on the child's emotional and social development. Social learning opportunities were created, but the activities were seldom based on the child's previous knowledge and interests. For teachers to start at a point where the intention and goals of the child are considered takes knowledge of what children are interested in. This is not always the case. The results of my study show that there is a gap between the perspective of the child and the teacher. The teachers evaluated their interaction to be of high quality, but the interviews with the children showed that the children did not believe that the teachers knew what they were interested in and what they liked doing (Articles 1 and 3).

Only a few preschool units were evaluated as being of excellent quality. The teacher interacted with the children from a democratic/pedagogical development approach. The interaction was characterised by mutual recognition and by the teacher meeting each child using a reciprocal approach to find out what the child was interested in, why s/he approached friends, activities and things in the way s/he did, that is, how the world appeared from the perspective of the child. The distinguishing quality in this teacher approach is that the teachers had a very clear aim as to what they wanted the child to learn and develop an understanding about. Activities had a clear direction of learning and the teacher focused on the child's possibility of developing an understanding of

various phenomena, such as maths and science, and of developing basic skills in reading and writing as well as social competence. The variety of understanding among the children was made visible both to themselves and others, as a tool for learning (Pramling, 1994).

Interesting to note is how this teacher approach concretised the difference in quality between those preschools evaluated as being of low quality and those evaluated as of average to high quality. That is, this approach visualised the difference between just doing activities, for example, going for a walk in the forest, and doing the same activity as a means of focusing on something the children should learn and develop an understanding about. A situation in which a child learned something in the sense of seeing it in a qualitatively different way than the child did before (Marton & Booth, 2000) visualised a teacher approach that was characterised by an awareness of what s/he wanted the child to constitute an understanding of. Characteristic of an excellent quality was also that the overall learning goals were implemented in dialogues and communication with the children, and through activities based on children's interests, previous experience and knowledge.

The results of my study show that the tradition of preschool is still strong. That is, a pedagogical view that is socially deeply rooted, child-initiated activities, focus on the whole child, play and creative activities as a way to learn, and the belief that the role of the teacher is to foster children's social competence (Stukát, 1966; Dahlberg & Lenz Taguchi, 1996; Katz & McClellan, 1997; Kärrby, 2000). The conclusion is that activities in the participating preschools were seldom learning-orientated and/or guided by the teacher from a democratic/pedagogical developmental approach as described above for the evaluation of excellent quality. The results of my study imply that, if the pedagogical quality in preschool is to be improved, then the activities and content have to be more learning-orientated. That is why the role of the teacher becomes crucial.

The role of the teacher

Longitudinal studies show that a high-quality programme should provide possibilities for children to express their intentions, act on their intentions and generate experiences, reflect on their accomplishments and develop a sense of personal control/achieve control (Schweinhart, Barnes & Weikart, 1993, pp. 227-229). In Sweden preschool shall lay the foundation for democracy, and it is the teacher's responsibility that all activities in preschool should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a).

The overall experience of the interviewed children in my study is that their opportunities to participate and influence what goes on in preschool are limited,

except in their own activities and play. It is in play that children negotiate, participate on equal terms, influence, take turns, and they learn the value of reciprocity and equality. In play they also learn that taking turns is one aspect of democracy, while taking the initiative leads to power over the content/theme. Seemingly these children practiced democracy in preschool, but mainly among friends and in their own play. Even if the overall experience of participation was limited, there was a clear tendency. The children from high-quality preschool units experienced that they were able to participate and to exercise influence to a larger extent than the children from low-quality preschool units. In the latter, children more often expressed that they were not seen and listened to, and that they could hardly ever influence what went on in preschool.

The perspective of these five-year-old children showed how important it is that teachers have knowledge of how children experience different things in preschool, and that the child's experiences and interests must be confirmed and extended by the teachers. To follow the intentions of the curriculum, the teachers need to discuss more with the children and talk with them about the things they are interested in. Further, they need to tell the child explicitly for the child to know that the teacher knows. The teachers should also problematise and extend the children's experience of participation and influence achieved in play to areas outside play, areas that traditionally are planned and decided by the teacher. In this process the knowledge gained from my thesis will help the teachers to create situations of equality and participation similar to those in which the five-year-olds felt that they had made decisions together with the teacher and between friends, that is, where taking in turns, reciprocity and participation on equal terms were accepted.

The consequence of this is that activities in preschool cannot be based purely on the child's initiative. Children have to be challenged by teachers, who go beyond their previous knowledge and extend it. Taking the child's previous experience as the point of departure, the teachers have to get involved and engage the children's interest in the unknown and create situations in which the child can negotiate, co-operate, reflect and develop standpoints and critical thinking.

Competence development

In a Swedish national study, Roos (1994) found three different patterns of how the local authorities handle educational development work in preschool, that is, the rational, the enthusiastic and the anarchist pattern. None of these patterns seemed to have any significant effect on changing the work in the preschools for the better. The results of my study show that development work in preschool needs to be firmly established at all levels in a community and that collaboration between practitioners and researchers benefits the outcome. The evaluation and

development project, described in my thesis, was firmly established at all levels in the community: politicians, administrators, managers of preschools and the teachers in the field. Parents were informed but not actively involved. The research project as a whole was characterised by clear aims, planning, documentation and evaluation, and it focused both on the process and the outcome. The development work was led and evaluated by a project leader and run in collaboration with Göteborg University. The preschools participating in the development work had a common programme based on evaluations of quality, and the teachers could influence its content all the time. Each preschool developed their own area of interest and the experience was shared with the teachers from the other working teams. Progress in the development programme was continuously spread to the administration and the politicians. The competence development programme was evaluated and shown to have a clear effect on the quality in preschool (Article 2).

The quality can be evaluated at various levels: economic, political and philosophical, as well as at the process. From a pedagogical perspective, these levels cannot be separated in practice because the economy sets the structural frames and constitutes the reality for teachers' everyday working life and affects children directly. A curriculum is both political and philosophical and, if implemented as intended, it has implicit and explicit effects on children's daily experiences. In practice, these levels are integrated in the pedagogical environment of preschool and influence the pedagogical processes in various ways. A focus on the process is indirectly an evaluation of these levels as a whole. The pedagogical environment in preschool can therefore be seen as a constitution of several dimensions of quality. To achieve an improvement in quality, these dimensions must be visualised, reflected on and problematised simultaneously.

To improve the quality of preschool, the teachers need to be aware of the present level of quality, and they must know what they want to achieve in their work with the children and have an idea of what changes are required. To gain this knowledge, the teachers have to become aware of circumstances that influence their work by reflecting on aims and means, the outcomes as well as the organisational structure (Schön, 1983). As the results of my thesis show, such conditions are unlikely to exist and develop unless at least four perspectives are considered during research on quality, and in the development work. These perspectives are: the quality of interactions, the perspective of the teacher, the perspective of the child, and the perspective of society.

Teachers who work in a preschool on an everyday basis are often bound by its culture, codes, routines and habits (Blixt, et. al., 1995). As they shape and reshape each other, individuals and settings achieve stable patterns of relationships and habits of interactions (Schweinhart, Barnes & Weikart, 1993, p. 225). In time, established patterns are taken for granted, which means that

people experience the world without reflecting over how they experience it (Marton, 1981; Marton & Booth, 1997; Pramling, 1988, 1994). This taken-things-for-granted attitude should be visualised, problematised and reflected on for a change to occur (Pramling, 1994).

The pedagogical task undertaken by the development work was to improve quality in compliance with the national goals, by providing opportunities for teachers to reflect over what they took for granted and to increase awareness of the various ways one can look upon a situation or a phenomenon. In this process the external evaluator's perspective proved to be necessary. A unique feature of my study is the way in which both external and self-evaluations of quality were used to plan the content of the development programme and to direct competence enhancement towards the teacher's own expressed needs and interests in relation to theories of learning and the overall goals of society. During a period of one month the teachers observed, reflected and evaluated their own practice. The analysis of the teacher's self-evaluations showed that the teachers from high-quality preschool units had a higher agreement within the working team on self-evaluations compared to teachers from low-quality preschools. Further, the analysis showed that the teachers in high-quality preschool units evaluated their own interaction lower than the external evaluator, while it was the other way around for teachers in low-quality preschool units. Differences in evaluations between the teachers from high and low-quality preschool units are interpreted as differences in how children are viewed (Article 1).

The differences between evaluations and perspectives were clearly delineated in the development programme. If these differences are not visualised, it will affect the outcome of the development programme in a negative way. For example, the external evaluator evaluated the quality low on interactions in preschools evaluated as being of low and average quality. The development work was therefore directed towards this area. The teachers in these preschools valued their interaction with the children as high quality and commented that it was the lack of structural aspects that hindered them from doing "a good job." If these differences are not problematised the teachers will feel that the competence development programme is being directed towards areas that they are already competent in, and they will not be open for improvements and changes in their own approach and working methods. At the same time, they will not get what they say they need: better resources, both material and personnel. One conclusion is, that for a change to occur, the teachers need to become aware of their own way of thinking in relation to others. Further, the differences in the values and the things given priority among the teachers, and between them and the external evaluator, have to be visualised during development work. Experiences from the development programme showed that it was in the meeting of those different perspectives that a process of reflection started, and what was

taken for granted could be problematised and by time changed in most of the participating preschools.

Another underlying assumption was that teachers, who are viewed as competent and met with respect, will meet children in the same way. Therefore, the model of competence development focused on the strength of the teacher, and was built on participation and dialogue (Article 2). During the development programme, situations were created in which the teachers could deepen their theoretical knowledge and practical experience of how children learn, an understanding of what knowledge is, and how knowledge is constituted. They were also meant to become aware of their own attitudes and standpoints. To do this, the development programme utilised a number of analytical tools, including video recording and various types of documentation, which promoted both individual and collegial reflection (Article 2). Throughout the development work the teachers reflected over their thoughts and actions with the help of the various tools provided by the development programme. New approaches were practised and tried out in action, and once again analysed and reflected upon. Confrey (1995, p. 195) says that to know something is to act on it, and that knowledge consists of actions and reflection on those actions. In a spiral process, the teachers reflected, tried new approaches in action, reflected on them and gradually started to see things in a qualitatively different way than they did before. Parallel to reflections on their own understanding, actions and learning process, the teachers were confronted with diversity and variation. During the development programme, they had to face the variation in how their colleagues thought and valued their common work in the pedagogical practice. At the end of the development work, the quality was evaluated higher in those preschools in which the teachers had participated in the development programme. The improvements for most of the teachers within the working teams could be characterised by growth and a heightened awareness, rather than a radical change. The results show that, for the teachers to reflect and work together towards shared goals, the whole working team needed to participate in the development programme. The importance of collegial reflection is also discussed by Andersson (1995, 1999), Lidholt (1999), Mara (1999), and Rönnerman (2000).

The content and form of the model of competence development were not fixed. They evolved and took shape through interaction with the teachers throughout the development work. The strength of this model is that the form and the content shape and reshape one another, and that its different parts continuously coincides. The model of competence development is therefore more than the sum of its parts. It is the combination of different parts, how those parts occur in parallel and interact with one another that lead to development. The success of the development programme can be explained by the massive and directed development input, which continuously changed and evolved

throughout the development work thanks to the influence of the teachers themselves.

A different approach to the use of ECERS

To gain additional information from the different perspectives, a qualitative approach was adopted when evaluating quality with ECERS. In addition to the numerical ratings of ECERS, both the external evaluator and the teachers gave the rationales for scoring and described them in an informal way. Analysis of this documentation made it possible to reconstruct the perceptual process underlying the evaluation of quality with ECERS (Pedhazur & Pedhazur Schmelkin, 1991) and to describe and visualise observed pedagogical processes. The definition of the concept perceptions was extended to include the observers' thoughts, beliefs, values, experiences and feelings.

To improve the quality in preschool various pedagogical processes must become visible, in order to be reflected upon and critically analysed. Documentation of the rationale for scoring made it possible to visualise pedagogical processes within each preschool unit from various perspectives. An analysis and reconstruction of that documentation created opportunities to deepen the understanding of what went on in the preschool, and in dialogues the teachers could discuss and reflect on it together. The external evaluator contributed an outside perspective to this process. This approach means that evaluations were used as an inquiry *with* rather than *on* the teachers who were involved in the evaluation of their own practice (see also Moss, Dahlberg & Pence, 2000). Through the reconstruction of the perceptual process underlying the ratings of quality with ECERS, an overall picture of each preschool unit's profile and level of quality appeared, as did differentiating characteristics of quality in a national as well as a cross-national perspective.

The results showed that this approach made the evaluations formative, that is, they had an effect on learning and teaching and could provide guidelines for the teachers to change their own practice. In research, an analysis of the documentation and a reconstruction of pedagogical processes can lead to a greater understanding of what constitutes quality in preschool and how quality is concretised in various pedagogical processes – an understanding that is necessary if we want to discuss, compare and learn about quality issues from each other.

Implications for research and quality improvement

Pedagogical quality is to be seen as a conglomerate of aspects and processes, which takes shape and develops in the meeting between the teacher and the child

and among the children in a preschool. Several dimensions and aspects of quality constitute the concept, and it cannot be studied or evaluated in a simplistic way. In this thesis, the complexity of the concept of pedagogical quality could only be grasped by adopting several research approaches, and examining it from diverse perspectives.

One of the main results is the operational definition of the concept of pedagogical quality, which can be seen as one step in the development of a theory of pedagogical quality. However, at this stage the definition is only preliminary and needs to be developed further. In the first phase of the process of definition, the concept was deconstructed by analysing and describing what characteristics and values formed the basis of quality evaluation. In the second phase, it was reconstructed from a meta-perspective of the results and analysis of the first four studies. By exploring how various aspects of quality were experienced, expressed and valued from different perspectives, in relation to previous definitions and theories of quality, it was possible to develop new theories and methods. These can be used to enhance the quality in preschool and be made available to researchers, administrators and teachers. The different approach to quality evaluation with ECERS, that is, a documentation of the rationale for scoring, contributed to the definition of pedagogical quality. It visualised the pedagogical processes underlying the evaluation of quality and deepened the understanding of what goes on in preschool.

The results of this thesis confirm that high quality in preschool is related to the competence of the teacher (NAEYC, 1991; Kärrby, 1992; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons & Siraj-Blatchford, 1999; etc.). The level of pedagogical quality depends on both the teacher's awareness of what children should learn in preschool and how they approach the child. From a meta-perspective, it seems that teacher competence needs a creative dimension to make teachers take advantage of different situations. Further, a meta-perspective of the results shows that the content and the activities in the participating preschools are rarely learning-orientated and/or guided by teachers with a democratic/pedagogical developmental approach.

My thesis confirms that structural aspects are no guarantee for high quality. The results show that an overall high level of quality was maintained in several of the participating preschools despite lack of space and material resources (Article 4), and that the pedagogical quality was enhanced even when cutbacks were made and a lower staff-child ratio had to be accepted (Article 2).

Nevertheless, development work does not necessarily lead to higher quality in itself. High quality in interactions requires certain conditions such as being able to sit down and eat in smaller groups, to divide the children into subgroups, to encourage dialogues, etc. When these conditions exist, it takes pedagogical knowledge, awareness and creativity on the part of the teacher to take advantage of them and to use them as situations for learning. That is exactly what the

development programme tried to achieve: a greater awareness, a change of attitude and/or approach, to view children as competent, knowledge of what characterises high quality in the interaction with the children, etc. If a change and learning has occurred that makes the teachers interact, communicate and meet the children as rich and competent persons, an improvement in quality can occur despite the need to economise, but only to a certain extent.

The serious aspect is that we do not know where to draw the line. Today we know the value of high quality in preschool, but we do not know how financial cutbacks affect the quality. In these circumstances, it is easy for policy makers to exceed the limits, as research findings have failed to define the limits of programme variation in which societal goals can be realised (Schweinhart, Barnes & Weikart, 1993). Lidholt (1999) questioned whether the gap is too wide between the intentions of laws and regulations and the real possibilities of realising these intentions. She found that in times of budget cuts and subsequent reduced financial resources, the teachers develop strategies of resistance or fighting and different kinds of escape strategies, but most of all they develop various adjustment strategies. A common adjustment strategy is to “lower one’s pedagogical level of ambition” and give preference to meeting basic needs and achieving socio-political goals. The predominance of adjustment strategies can either result in a higher degree of awareness and professionalism, or, in the long run, in the staff becoming burnt out and/or all work being undermined (Lidholt, 1999, pp. 142-143).

The results of this study show that the external evaluator, the teachers from high and low-quality preschools, and the children attach different priorities and values to certain aspects of quality, as evaluated with ECERS, and to the overall goals. It is interesting to note that there is hardly any discrepancy about characteristics of value, but that these characteristics are given different value depending on the various perspectives above. For example, the external and self-evaluations of quality differ as well as the self-evaluations between teachers from high and low-quality preschools. Interesting is in what way they differ on indicators of quality, such as interaction and material resources. Physical resources had a much higher value to teachers in low quality preschools than to teachers in preschools with high quality and to the external evaluator. Seen in relation to the economising that has taken place within the public sector in Sweden, the consequence of this result is that low-quality preschool units are more vulnerable to cutbacks and declining resources. The reason for this is that these teachers rely more on material resources to uphold the quality than teachers in high-quality preschools. The conclusion is that lack of material resources and a low staff-child ratio can cause severe damage to preschool units whose quality has already been evaluated as low.

Compared to the external evaluator, the teachers evaluated their own interaction, approach towards the children, and their work to be of high quality

(Article 1). In situations where the teachers described difficulty in interacting and communicating with the children, the analysis of teacher comments brought out an interesting difference between teachers from low and high-quality preschools. The former focused on limitations in structural aspects, while the latter held themselves responsible for missing opportunities for a positive interaction with the children.

The pedagogical implication is that these different perspectives have to be visualised, reflected on and problematised, in development work, both by the teachers and the external evaluator (Article 2). Otherwise a development programme that focuses on changes in attitudes, teacher approaches and how children are viewed can be experienced as “something that has nothing to do with me” by teachers who believe that it is circumstances out of their control that hinder them from approaching children in a positive way.

The study describes how children experience their possibilities for participating and exercising influence in relation to the preschool’s evaluated quality. Children in preschools evaluated as being of high quality, tend to participate more than children in the other preschools. The children’s own statements about the characteristics of situations in which they express that they can participate on equal terms, and the meaning they give to the concept decide, will help teachers to create such situations in future.

The results of my study have deepened the understanding of the concept of pedagogical quality and highlighted how certain aspects of quality are interpreted and valued from different perspectives. This type of comparison of different perspectives on the same kind of aspects and issues related to high and low quality has, to my knowledge, not been made before. The study has also revealed characteristics that are critical for the pedagogical quality and visualised how these characteristics are manifested in various pedagogical processes. The results confirm that it is in the meeting between visualised differences in perspectives that development occurs. Further, they highlight how these differences in priority and values can form the content of a development programme. The model of competence development was constructed on the basis of this knowledge and evolved continuously in interaction with the teachers. The directed development programme resulted in higher quality, which benefited both the teacher and the child. The children were given a better opportunity to learn, to participate and influence what goes on in preschool.

This study was designed to evaluate changes in teacher approaches and interactions, and not just improvements in quality based on modifications concerning space and physical resources. The research approach adopted here can therefore be used for longitudinal studies and in the development of a theory of pedagogical quality.

The future

In my thesis evaluations of quality have been used for research, to visualise various pedagogical processes in practice, and as content in development work. I have shown that these evaluations are of mutual benefit even if there are differences in aims and procedure, depending on the way they are used.

Among NAEYC's (1991) listed criteria of indicators affecting the level of quality in preschool, evaluations came last. The level of quality in preschool is visualised through evaluation, and evaluations can be used at the same time to improve the quality. However, the relation between evaluation and development work is complex, and can be categorised as: evaluation *of* development work, evaluation *for* development work, and evaluation *as* development work (Skolverket, 1999). Research shows that the first two kinds of evaluation are less used in communities, and should be supported and strengthened (Skolverket, 1999). This study embraces both kinds, even if the emphasis is on the second. If external evaluations are made in a preschool or a school without feedback to the teachers, the results will have no direct effect on the level of quality. In the long run, effects might occur, as our shared knowledge of what constitutes quality will grow. The results of my study show that to affect the quality in a specific practice the teachers must be involved in and/or have access to the results of the external evaluations.

The role of self-evaluation must also be problematised. Self-evaluations of quality can have the greatest impact on the level of quality, provided that they make teachers reflect on their own practice in a critical way (Franke Wikberg, 1992; Holmlund & Rönnerman, 1990, 1995). The impression from this study is that the teachers experience that the decision to use both self-evaluations and documentation often comes from a top-down perspective. It is required of them as a way to visualise the quality to parents, administrators and politicians. As a consequence, both self-evaluations and various kinds of documentation mainly turn out to be a description of what the teachers and the children have done in preschool over the past year. Self-evaluations are seldom done on the initiative of the teacher and used as a basis for reflecting on and improving their practice. In short, they are done to be read by others, and not to be used as a tool for improving their own work or for understanding how children experience different situations and phenomena.

A pedagogical implication of this is that teachers should be able to use self-evaluation and documentation during development work, so that they can experience them as important tools to be used for various purposes in their daily work. One conclusion from my study is that external and self-evaluations of quality ought to be used simultaneously. The reason for this is that the meeting between external and self-evaluations of quality functioned as a catalyst for critical reflection and deepened the discussions about what goes on in practice,

and what improvements should lead to. Another is that evaluating tools of high quality need to be developed. Methods for both external and self-evaluations have to be easy and meaningful for teachers and external evaluators to use. At the same time, these methods have to grasp the complexity of a pedagogical practice. When established criteria are used, they must be constructed in such ways that various degrees of sensitivity in complex situations are valued. It is also important to lay an ideological screen on methods of evaluation, by describing on what epistemological and ontological assumptions they are based and the implications of that (Granström & Lander, 1997). To be avoided are methods that are simplified, instrumental, and focus on a traditional psychological developmental perspective and tests of children's outcomes without taking into account context or cultural aspects (Sommer, 1997).

The task of the teacher is to create opportunities for children to encounter all the experiences they have the right to do in preschool (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a). To see how children have understood a specific content and/or phenomenon we have to talk to children and listen to what they express, both verbally and in action. Throughout preschool age children's awareness of their own learning develops and changes (Pramling, 1983), and it is in communication and interaction with others that children develop an understanding about themselves and the surrounding world (Säljö, 2000). At an early age children become aware of their own ability in relation to others. Research has shown that by 4 or 5 years of age children have internalised an investment, "either in the evaluation of their achievement products or in the process of learning" (Smiley & Dweck, 1994, p. 1471, cited in Carr, 1999, p. 11).

Today documentation is considered to be an important method of evaluating both the learning process of the child and the progress of preschool (Dahlberg & Lenz Taguchi, 1996; Lenz Taguchi, 1997; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999). Documentation of various kinds has been used in my study, both as a base for evaluation, as a tool for reflection and to visualise ongoing pedagogical processes (Article 1 – 4). The next step is to direct the focus of research on the role of the child and the teacher in documentation. Future research and evaluations on quality should focus more on what is documented and why, how it is documented and used, who decides what is to be selected for documentation, etc. Research has shown that children's learning outcomes will differ if parents and teachers think that intelligence is a potential that can be influenced by hard work, or not (Sylva, 1994, p. 151). If so, the first aim of documentation must be to visualise the learning process of children in such a way that it strengthens their self-esteem and motivates them to take an active part in their own learning. The second aim is to make the teachers aware that effort is more important for achievement than an inborn ability, and that the children's learning can be influenced by the teacher's approach, support, guidance and challenges.

If used in such a way, the role of documentation becomes crucial. It will highlight what is valued as learning from different perspectives and the importance of including the children in documentation and in self-assessment (Carr, 1999, p. 11). Documentation will also help to visualise different pedagogical processes, products and the learning process of both the teacher and the child. Documentation is therefore to be seen as one important source for external and self-evaluations of quality.

If we want preschool to become more learning-orientated in the direction of the overall goals, and at the same time avoid falling in to the trap of formal and teacher-directed activities, new approaches to research and evaluations are needed. Alternative ways have to be found to capture and describe children's development as a basis for future evaluations in preschool. The next step in research, evaluation and documentation is then to ask the children (and the teachers) what children (and teachers) themselves value in their own work and in others. The knowledge of what is highly valued, and how the world looks from the perspective of the child is crucial for teachers when they create conditions for the children to learn and develop. Knowledge of what is experienced, as knowledge valuable to learn, is equally important in research and for teachers who work with their own working methods and/or to direct competence development.

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