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Change or Paradigm Shift in the Swedish Preschool?

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Since the mid-1990s several reforms have challenged the idea of *educare*, which is often held up as the main characteristic of the Swedish preschool (OECD 2001, 2006, Moss 2006). *Educare* in the Swedish context means good-quality care and education in a balanced mix. Unlike many European countries, there is not a split in the organisation between care of children below and above the age of three (Knijn, Jönsson and Klammer 2005, Letablier and Jönsson 2005). Contemporary reforms point to increased expectations of preschool as a preparation for school. Such ideas are included in the social investment strategy which is supported on the European Union level and by international organisations such as the OECD and the World Bank. According to White (2009), the social investment strategy implies a positive relationship between early childhood development and early childhood education programmes and children's success later in life, which is related to a country's economic success.

The aim of the paper

The aim of the paper is to discuss whether or to what extent the social investment strategy has an impact on the Swedish preschool and the reform work being done at the moment. Since its establishment in the 1970s, the emphasis has been on the child's needs at the same time as it fulfils goals related to family, social, gender equality and labour market policies. Has the balance changed in favour of future-oriented goals? Is there a paradigm shift taking place in the Swedish preschool? The paper will explore whether this is the case by discussing the development of the Swedish preschool since the 1970s, proceeding from Hall's (1993) requirements of a paradigm shift; these include a simultaneous change of objectives, policy instruments and settings. During the last ten to fifteen years far-reaching reforms have been implemented, and the article will discuss whether these changes could be characterised as a paradigm shift or whether this development only refer to changes in one or two of the three areas referred to by Hall (ibid.) The focus of the paper is on the Swedish context.

To situate our questions, a section brings up the background to preschool in a new social context and its relationship to the social investment strategy. To trace changes or a paradigm shift in relation to its establishment in the 1970s, the paper will present a short overview of previous and current goal formulations (implicit and explicit) and steering modes for preschool. By using examples from two evaluation studies of the

preschool after the introduction of a national curriculum in 1998 (Skolverket 2004, 2008)¹ we will discuss what actually happens in preschool settings, i.e. how daily life in preschool is influenced by changes at other levels. To further investigate Swedish preschool settings, especially *different* settings accordingly to the findings in the national evaluations, an exploratory interview study with a focus on parents and preschool teachers was performed.^{2 3}

The Swedish preschool includes all kinds of activities (day care, family day care and open preschools) for children aged 1–5, while the focus in this paper is limited to preschool institutional settings.

Childcare and preschools in a new social context

According to the Lisbon Strategy (2001) and the Barcelona meeting (2002), childcare is clearly related to lifelong learning as a part of the strategy to keep up European economic competition in a globalised world. The strategy aims at increasing the participation rate among older workers and at increasing female labour market participation to 60 per cent by the year 2010. The prime reason behind the recommendation of the Barcelona meeting to the European member states to expand childcare was to remove obstacles to female labour market participation. The goal was to have childcare organised for at least 33 per cent of children under three and for more than 90 per cent for the age group from three to mandatory school age by the year 2010 (European Council of Ministers 2002). In 2006, only five member states (Denmark, the Flemish part of Belgium, Iceland, France and Sweden) reached the stipulated goal for the younger children, while the French region of Belgium and the Netherlands were coming close. In many member states, the coverage rate was less than ten per cent. The coverage rate for the older age group is higher, with 90 per cent or more attending childcare/preschools in ten member states (Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Iceland, Denmark, Italy, Sweden, Norway and Germany) (Population & Development Review 2006, p. 389). The Barcelona document did not, however, discuss the number of hours per day, and in many of the countries childcare is offered on a part-time basis which creates problems for working mothers of young children. It should also be noted that the demand for childcare can be met in other ways, e.g. with the help of grandparents or informal arrangements. Childcare as a social right exists only in

Finland, Denmark and Sweden. There is no straight converging trend of development among European countries, rather the opposite; higher coverage rates are found in the Netherlands and the UK, while there is more or less a standstill in Malta, Greece, Spain and Italy and a decline in former eastern European countries (ibid., p. 390).

The issue has for quite a time been on the European political agenda, e.g. through the network on reconciliation of work and family responsibilities in 1986–1996. A Recommendation from the Council of Ministers (1992) clearly aimed at improving women's access to the labour market and advocated services combining “reliable care” with “a pedagogical approach”. However, the main focus was on maternity and parental leave rights and benefits, and a minimum standard for these was established by the Second Directive from 1996, but since 2000 the focus has been on promoting childcare provisions (White 2009). Other international actors, e.g. the OECD and the World Bank, have further contributed to the fact that childcare has appeared on the political agenda in many countries. A change of policy by these organisations is noticed and a primarily neoliberal view of social welfare, advocating economic restructuring and economic cutbacks, has been abandoned in favour of a policy advocating e.g. public investments in childcare (Jensen 2006). This is a more proactive social policy which promotes the development of human capital and is directed not only to individuals who do not manage but rather aims at building up educational knowledge that enables people to manage and succeed in their working lives, i.e. to mitigate exclusion from the labour market. The OECD claimed that “increasing the provision of early childhood education programmes, especially for children of disadvantaged backgrounds, is part of a long-term strategy improving labour force skills and competencies” (OECD 1998). The idea of lifelong learning supported in the report, *Making Lifelong Learning a Reality for All* (OECD 1996), focused on early childhood education as a way to provide the foundations for lifelong learning. According to such a strategy, investments in human capital, lifelong learning and education are important to enable all grown-ups to get a job and to keep it (Jensen 2006, p. 29). To obtain a picture of the childcare situation in member states OECD performed thematic reviews in a number of countries, of which Sweden was one (OECD 2001), followed up by a study of the progress over a five-year period (OECD 2006).

Ideas about lifelong learning are developed within the framework of new social risks of the post-industrial society. Increased economic globalisation leads to a more flexible labour market. Post-industrial labour markets have led to increasing income and service differences and to the decline of well-paid, lifelong employment for males and an increasing number of short term and precarious jobs (Taylor-Gooby 2004). Ageing population, the increase of female employment and new family formations (smaller families, later marriages, increasing rates of divorces and separations etc.) have contributed to insecure incomes and to uncertainties about how to arrange the care of children and elderly. A care gap is expected to appear in most European countries.

This new policy promotes an active rather than passive social policy and the European Union employment strategy aims at getting more people – men, women and older people – into paid employment. In this context, early childhood education and care (ECEC) is expected to play an important role for the future of the child and for the society as a whole. “Early childhood education and care are often promoted as both a way to care of children while their parents – that is mothers – work, and as an investment in prevention, to reduce the chance of social failure and therefore the need for basic skills training later in life as well as the likelihood to encounters with the criminal justice system” (Jensen 2006 p. 30). However, there are voices questioning the objective of the preschool as primarily preparing children for school, and researchers claim that too school-like content and methods can actually have the opposite effect (Moss 2006, OECD 2001). Mahon (2006) detects two different voices within the OECD: one advocates the instrumental idea while the other standpoint supports less school-like pedagogies and activities.

The transfer of policies from one country to another is not a straightforward process because social policies are historically formed and social policy is not included in the mandate of the European Commission. It is a complex process, and ideas are being processed at the national as well as the local level. In this process historical, cultural and political traditions are taken into account (Ball 1994, Ozga and Jones 2006).

Goals of the Swedish preschool

In the 1950s, the conflict between the needs of the child and state’s interest in increasing labour market participation among mothers of young children was brought up by a

committee on family policy (SOU 1951:15). The conclusion was that children under three were best cared for at home by their parents while they would gain from more collective forms from three until school age. Playing and cooperation with other children were seen as preparing for adult life and would in the long run strengthen democracy. Day nurseries were regarded as damaging infants, but there were worse alternatives if the mother had to work. At the same time, the committee supported society's need for labour and women's freedom of choice to work, and suggested an expansion of child-care institutions for all preschool-age children, although the implicit idea was limited to kindergartens. In the 1960s, the interest of the child was a lower priority than the needs of economic growth and the right for women to work. The final reports (SOU 1972:26–27, SOU 1972:34) of two public investigations – the Committee on Family Policy of 1964 and the Committee of Preschools of 1968 – influenced much of the reform work during the subsequent decades. The right of women to work, not least for economic and emancipatory reasons, was supported. The dual-earner family and shared parenthood were supported by the introduction of a gender-neutral parental insurance, changes in the taxation system and expansion of public childcare. Contacts between child and parents were to build on quality time rather than on quantity time. It was important that the child became prepared for living and working in a changing society (Hammarlund 1998).

In an international context, the contemporary Swedish preschool is often held up as a good model of educare, i.e. a preschool that includes both good-quality care and education (OECD 2001, 2006, Moss 2006). Traditionally professionals have had a strong position in the Swedish preschool, and parents' roles in preschools and schools have been limited (Erikson 2004, Jönsson 1999, Tallberg-Broman 2009). Lately expectations on parents' participation and responsibilities have increased (Prop. 2008/09:1), and school-like activities are being emphasised. The preschool has become part of a life-long learning strategy, and preschool is discussed in relation to school and school success (Ds 1999:53, Prop. 2008/2009:1, SOU 2008:109).

Since the 1990s, preschool has been seen as the first stage of life-long learning, which is emphasised in the recent reforms of preschool along with the importance of inclusion of all groups of young children, including children of unemployed and of migrant background. Both groups are focused within the new social risk discourse

(Timonen 2004). The transfer of the responsibility from the Ministry of Health and Welfare to the Ministry of Education (1996) further emphasised its role in an educational context, and the curriculum of 1998 declares its relationship to school in clear terms: “In order to support the all-round development of children, the school should try to establish good working co-operation with both the pre-school and leisure-time centres in order to support the child’s all-round development and learning for the future. Co-operation should be based on the national and local goals and the guidelines applicable to the different activities” (Lpfö 98, p. 13, English version). This line was further emphasised by the government in 2008 when it asked the Swedish National Agency for Education for a revision of the 1998 curriculum with the aim of increasing the role of language and mathematical learning to prepare preschool children in a better way for school (U2008/6144/S).

Provision of childcare

The Swedish preschool is publicly financed, and until the beginning of the 1990s it was most often publicly organised. At the beginning of the 1990s private providers were allowed but preschool remained publicly funded. Private providers of preschools have recently been allowed to be profit-making, and private providers (private companies, organisations, groups of staff, etc.) have been allowed to buy public preschools from the municipalities. Since 2009 a voucher system has been operating, which means that providers, whether public or private, are paid a specific sum of money for each child provided that the preschool submits to the goals stated in the national curriculum and as long as quality and safety are guaranteed in accordance with municipal requirements. Additionally, a private preschool must be open to all children and the fees charged by the parents must be kept within a reasonable limit.

Governance and organisation

The municipality has always had the main responsibility for the preschool (and still has), while decisions about expansion and funding are taken by the government. The costs for preschools are shared by the state and the municipality, while parents’ fees constitute a smaller part. Preschool activities were centrally regulated in detail (staff ratio, localities etc.), but in 1991 the responsibility for the preschool as well as for

schools, social welfare etc. was transferred to the municipalities with the aim of increasing economic efficiency and democracy. The local level is expected to know more about how to meet local needs. The revision of the Local Government Act (1991) allowed the municipalities to organise their decision-making boards in a freer way. The change was accompanied by a change of the state grant system: from earmarked activities to a block grant for all “soft” activities which it is up to the municipalities to distribute between different sectors of social welfare. Decentralisation meant increased freedom for the municipalities to decide how to organise preschools provided that they fulfilled the goals laid down in the national curriculum. Some responsibilities can be further transferred to the individual preschool by the municipality.

Decentralisation was accompanied by a new mode of steering; detailed laws and regulations were replaced by frame-laws and goals. This resulted in large variation between municipalities due to local freedom and professional responsibilities but also due to different conditions for municipalities to carry out their tasks and to adapt preschool to the different needs and preconditions of children (Skolverket 2004, Neuman 2009). The report further stated that variations in the quality were related to community resources and the social background of the parents.

Reports on the development of social welfare during the economic recession in the 1990s identify four vulnerable groups: young people, immigrants, lone parents and large families with children (SOU 2001:79). In the 1990s, there was an increase of parents’ fees, and to mitigate non-attendance among parents with less economic means, the government decided to offer a special state grant to municipalities provided that they kept the fees under a specific level. The introduction of the *maximum fee* in 2002 was accompanied by opening up access to preschool on a part-time basis as a right for the four- and five-year-old children of non-working parents. One reason was to enable unemployed parents to participate in various forms of education to improve and update their qualifications (*Kunskapslyftet*⁴). As work-incentives increased among low-income families, dependency on welfare was expected to decrease (Sweden’s action plan for employment 2002).

Who attends preschool?

Today most children from the age of two attend preschool in Sweden, and the relatively low participation rate below the age of one is explained by the long parental leave insurance.⁵

Table 1. The rate of children aged 1–5 attending preschool in 2009.

Age	1	2	3	4	5
(%)	50	91	95	98	98

Source: Skolverket 2009.

In the 1970s only children of employed parents had the right to a place in preschool but since 2002, children of unemployed parents and of studying parent have been eligible to attend preschool from the age of four on a part-time basis. A maximum fee for daycare was introduced for reasons to do with education, family economy and labour market. First it aimed at mitigating the split-up of attendance and thus decreasing interruption of activities, secondly at improving the economic situation of families with young children and thirdly at lowering the marginal effects, which was expected to lead to increased rates of labour market participation. According to the government, the reform was a possible instrument for increasing labour market participation among parents and increasing their working hours (Prop. 1999/2000: 129). Preschool was offered free of charge from 1997/98 to all 6-year-olds and in 2003 it was extended to 4- and 5-year-olds. Since July 2010, this right has been extended to 3-year-olds.

In the 1970s, relatively large proportions of preschool children were children of single mothers and children with special needs. Working-class parents were more hesitant than middle-class parents about sending their children to preschools, and the care of working-class children was more often organised in informal ways, while shift-working parents often managed by themselves. Today, no social differences of significance are found in attendance (Skolverket 2007).

The resistance to the expansion of the Swedish preschool in the 1970s consisted mostly of arguments that the responsibility for care and education of young children is not, and should not, be a public responsibility. The view of the child changed, from only

being a family child to become everybody's child in the sense that all citizens in society have responsibility for children. The political decision about the expansion of the preschool was a consensual decision. The number of places was successively expanded, but as the figures in table 2 show, only 40 percent of 1–5-year-olds actually attended the public preschool at the beginning of the 1990s. It was not until the beginning of the twenty-first century that the demand was more or less satisfied. In 2010, almost nine out of ten children below the age of six attend preschool.

Table 2. Rate of children aged 1–6 attending preschool in 1975–2008 (from the year 2000, 1–5 years)

Year	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2006	2008
(%)	10	21	32	40	49	66	77	79	86

Source: Skolverket 2004, 2005, 2007, 2009.

The main arguments for the expansion of preschool were related to the labour market and gender equality. The industrial boom in the 1960s demanded more labour, and the agreement between the state, employers and labour unions to encourage women with young children to join the workforce changed gender relations in society. The explicit gender equality policy addressed both males and females, and social policy measures were implemented in a gender-neutral way. Unlike many European countries, parental leave insurance was introduced instead of measures directed especially to mothers and families. The expansion of the public sector implied a transition to a social service state, which meant a defamilialisation of the care of children as well as of elderly persons (Anttonen 1990, Lister 1990).

As pointed out in the opening paragraph, recent social change is influenced by globalisation and a changing labour market, as well as by increasing migration. The latter, according to the Green Paper (CEC 2008), constitutes a challenge to the educational systems and to social cohesion. Recent Swedish documents related to preschool also address the inclusion of immigrant children and their parents (Regeringen 2008).

Changes in preschool settings

Evaluation studies performed five (Skolverket 2004) and ten years (Skolverket 2008) after the introduction of the national curriculum in the preschool in 1998 point to similar and emphasised trends over the years. The cornerstone of the Swedish preschool is to offer children pedagogical activities which include a holistic view of care, socialisation and learning. The 1998 curriculum builds on a model of *educare*, which means a combination of care and education, and a comprehension of children's development where social, emotional, and cognitive aspects presuppose and strengthen each other (ibid.). In daily life, a combination of care and pedagogy is taking place (reported by the staff being interviewed). However, at the same time there is a clear tendency towards the use of more school-like activities in preschools, and the staff understand the preschool as the first stage of lifelong learning (ibid.). They also teach the children to prepare them for school but are at the same time anxious that the preschool should not become too similar to the regular school. As the preschool is a voluntary school form it differs from the regular school in a crucial way. Its goals are less specific than those of the regular school, but it often happens that the goals of the latter spill over to the preschool, and school-like measurements are often used in the preschool. Here it is not permitted to award grades, but written statements in the form of individual development plans (IUP) are used in a similar way. This trend was found in the first evaluation and appears even more strongly in the second and in research from the field (Vallberg-Roth and Månsson 2006; Vallberg-Roth 2010). More than half of all municipalities and two thirds in urban areas were using IUPs in 2008 compared to ten per cent in 2002, although there is no formal requirement to establish such plans. Another increase is taking place in the use of diagnostic tests of children's language skills, and these are also used in a way close to regular assessments. The second evaluation also found that children's language development is increasingly in focus and has become an area prioritised by the staff, and improving children's language development is seen as a preparation for school. The final report asks whether such a high priority is given at the expense of other areas, i.e. whether a "narrowing [of] the curriculum" is taking place (Skolverket 2008, p. 103). A similar trend has been reported in the UK and France, but it is still not clear to what extent this is taking place in Sweden. The second evaluation

concludes that preparation for school has become emphasised, which is contradictory to the intentions of the reform. Additionally, it finds that children's development and learning have become increasingly individualised.

The explorative study of two preschools situated in two different socio-economic areas in a city in southern Sweden shows that school-like activities preparing for school are strongly supported by the interviewed parents in the preschool recruiting children from immigrant and low socio-economic families, while the middle-class parents in the other area are more ambivalent. They underline the importance of the children remaining children and being able to play, while simultaneously being anxious that their children should participate in organised activities. Parents in both areas define learning in a traditional way, i.e. what is taught in schools and taught in organised forms, and that differs from the preschool teachers' ideas of learning. The preschool teachers also emphasise that other values than school preparation are important. Both groups of parents use the preschool to enable them to work or to study. They also trusted that planned activities are supplementing "baby-sitting" or care of their children. The parents support the idea of the *educare* model.

Cooperation between preschool and parents is still to some extent based on the old idea that the family as not a good enough socialisation environment (Donzelot 1980, Gleichman 2004). The preschool teachers state in the interviews that parents do not have the patience, they do not manage to resist their children, they do not have the time etc. and that they need the support from the preschool. In the interviews, parents also indicate that they do not have the time to prepare their children for school. Today parents are expected to be involved in preschool according to the curriculum and local steering documents. Parental involvement is organised in different ways at the two preschools; the preschool functions as a social meeting point in the area with many immigrants and the parents are notified that they *must* attend meetings, while parents in the middle-class preschool have organised themselves in a parents' organisation and cooperate with the preschool teachers through this organisation. The preschool teachers in the former preschool arrange parents' education and include parents in the fostering of children to become "good" (Swedish) citizens. It has resulted in less social isolation among immigrant parents, and the preschool helps to create social cohesion in addition to fulfilling the goals of an educational and welfare institution.

Conclusion

The official picture of the Swedish preschool is characterised by respect for the child, the belief that childhood has a value in itself and that it should not be viewed only as a preparation for adult life; it has a good coverage rate, stable public financing, well-trained staff, a high rate of staffing and small groups of children (Skolverket 2008). To judge by the current reform work, it still needs to be improved, and currently a new curriculum is being implemented, preschool teacher's education is being reorganised⁶ and a new School Act will be implemented in 2011. In 2009, the government decided to offer in-service training for all groups of staff working in preschools (*Förskolelyftet*). The aim of the programme was to support preschool teachers pedagogically and implicitly to stimulate children's language development and mathematical learning. These two areas are also given an emphasised position in the new curriculum and in the new preschool teacher education. The role of the media is important for understanding the focus on school readiness as a result of their interest in the development of Swedish pupils' school results as measured by the OECD's international assessments (PISA). The interest is almost exclusively limited to the Swedish school children's ranking order in an international context, when a drop on the scale creates much debate about the deteriorating standard of the educational system. As Hall (1993) elegantly puts it: "The press both is a mirror of public opinion and a magnifying glass for the issues that it takes up" (p. 288).

An analysis of what is happening in the Swedish preschool should not only limit itself to the national policy context but also take into consideration how ideas formulated in international organisations, think tanks, epistemic communities etc. are transferred, received and applied in a national context. The idea of the need for a well-educated population should be understood in relation to globalisation, the replacement of an industrial society by a knowledge society, changing labour markets, increased migration etc. which support the idea of lifelong learning. Already in the mid-1990s the preschool was discussed as the first step in lifelong learning. The transfer of the responsibility from the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare to the Ministry of Education (1996) as well as the introduction of a national curriculum (1998) are steps in the same direction. But the overarching goal for the preschool is still largely unchanged.

Its goal is still related to social, family, gender and labour market policies in addition to educational objectives, although the latter have been emphasised over time. This is also noticeable in the institutional settings according to the two evaluations referred to above (Skolverket 2004, 2008), which find that school-like activities are frequent and assessments or assessment-like judgements of preschool children are made in opposition to what is stated in regulations. The evaluation reports as well as our own explorative study show that the staff are warning about too great a focus on school readiness; everyday activities have not totally changed and preschool teachers insist on and support other values important for children's social, emotional and cognitive development. Goals are formulated to increasingly highlight traditional ways of learning at the same time as they underline children's other needs and other goals that a good quality preschool fulfils. This could be considered as an expression of an understanding of the child as *being* instead of *becoming* (Corsaro 2005, Dahlberg, Moss and Pence 1999, 2002, Halldén 2007).

The question we asked was whether a paradigm shift has taken place or whether, following Hall (*ibid.*), the changes we have brought up might rather be described as changes of first and second order. Interpreting contemporary history is problematic as changes are taking place at the very moment we consider them, and some of the changes have not even been implemented fully yet. So, to answer our question, we would claim that it might be a little too early to talk about a paradigm shift, and we would prefer to say that crucial changes are taking place at the moment. Further research is needed, not least about what actually is happening in the local context. Policy and practices seldom totally overlap.

Notes

¹ The two national evaluation studies (Skolverket 2004, 2008) performed five and ten years after the introduction of the national curriculum included *goals* formulated by laws and curriculum; *conditions* such as resources and the composition of the group of children; *processes* such as how and with what tools the everyday activities are managed and planned; and *results* expressed as goal fulfillment. They have also focused on equivalence in the preschools between and within municipalities by using both qualitative and quantitative techniques such as surveys and case studies.

² The explorative study was situated in large city in southern Sweden. The study included two preschools and was chosen to represent different kinds of groups of children and to reflect the segregation prevailing in the city. One of them is situated in an area with a high ratio of people with migration background, living in rented flats in confined quarters, and a high ratio of unemployed workers. The other is situated in

a middle-class area with a predominant population of Swedish background and living in villas or detached houses. In total seven parents and seven preschool teachers were interviewed individually.

³ The explorative study was performed as part of a small-scale project, "Ett välfärdspolitiskt uppdrag i förändring: En studie av svensk förskola i ett jämförande internationellt perspektiv", financed by the Swedish Research Council, Division for Educational Sciences in 2007.

⁴ *Kunskapslyftet* was an educational programme offered in 1997–2002 to unemployed persons without upper secondary education. It involved in total 110,000 places.

⁵ In 1974, a work-related parental insurance was introduced and the length of leave and payment has increased over time. In 2010, the parental insurance enables parents to stay at home with their children for 13 months with work-related payment and another 2 months on a flat-rate benefit. Parents without labour market relations are paid on a flat-rate basis during the same period of time. Either parent can take the leave except for two months which the other parent has to take on a *take-it-or-lose-it* basis.

⁶ Education for preschool teachers was incorporated within the general teachers' education in 2001. All students, from preschool to upper secondary teachers, studied a common programme for the first three terms followed by four terms of specialised courses. In 2010 education for preschool teachers is to become a separate department at colleges of education.

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