What May Characterise Teaching in Preschool? The Written Descriptions of Swedish Preschool Teachers and Managers in 2016

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ABSTRACT
This paper addresses national concern about teaching in preschool, building on the challenges, opportunities, and requirements facing today’s preschools due to the higher expected level of preschool assignments. The aim is to build knowledge of how preschool teachers and managers from 10 Swedish municipalities characterise preschool teaching. The material was generated in a 2016 survey completed by 243 respondents (91% response rate). A didactics-oriented textual analysis referred to Kansanen’s (1993). An outline for a model of teachers’ pedagogical thinking. In P. Kansanen (Ed.), Discussions on some educational issues IV. Research report 121. Helsinki, Finland: University of Helsinki) three-level schema comprising the action, theoretical, and meta-theoretical levels and the results identify 8 distinctive traces ranging from the rejection to the recognition of preschool teaching. Recognition traces emphasise wide-ranging, diffuse, and child-centred teaching. The results indicate that traces of the action level are more prominent and “multivocal” than are traces of the theoretical and meta-theoretical levels. Overall, the combined analytical results support the concept of diffuse multivocal teaching.

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There is a great need to clarify how teaching is carried out in preschools, as significant differences have appeared in how Swedish preschools handle their educational mandate (Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2016a, 2016b). Earlier research into Swedish preschools has concentrated more on learning than on teaching (Vallberg Roth, 2017b).

This paper addresses national concerns about teaching in preschool, building on the challenges, opportunities, and requirements facing today’s preschools due to the higher expected level of preschool assignments. Preschool has become a school form that also requires teaching (Swedish Education Act, SFS, 2010:800). Teaching in preschool may refer to goal-oriented acts that, led by preschool teachers, direct children’s attention in order to stimulate “development and learning through the acquisition and development of knowledge and values” (SFS, 2010:800, Ch 1 s 3). Education and teaching must be based on both science and proven experience (RFR10, 2012/2013). Moreover, preschools must be equal in quality and offer all children high-quality preschool activities (SFS, 2010:800). This paper on teaching in Swedish preschools can be seen as part of this context.
The Identified Problem

Teachers and managers in Swedish preschools seem to struggle with the concept of “teaching” in their daily practice. This problem is also the basis of a three-year research and development project on teaching in preschool\(^1\), of which the study described here is part. As the concept of “teaching” has been stressed in recent national preschool policies and in daily practice in preschool, it is important to explore how it is used and understood by preschool teachers and managers responsible for preschool assignments.

Survey of the Field and the Identified Research gap

Swedish preschools fit into a Nordic tradition based on welfare-state ambitions that are highly ranked in international comparisons (OECD, 2006, 2012, 2017). Nordic preschools have similar systems of management by objectives, so it is more relevant to refer to, translate, and employ results from Nordic than non-Nordic research when examining Swedish preschools. However, research into teaching in preschool contexts in other countries can add important perspectives (see examples of references below). One example of this is a review of research into development, learning, play, and care considered as elements, in particular, of preschool as an educational programme and, to a lesser extent, of the preschool teaching in various countries (Tallberg Broman, 2015).

A Norwegian study found that the Norwegian day-care curriculum (\textit{rammeplanen}) does not use the concept of teaching and that the day-care teachers interviewed seemed to repudiate the concept (Hammer, 2012). Hammer wondered whether dominant discourses concerning child-centred practice have undermined preschool teachers’ significance as active agents in relation to children’s learning. The downplaying of teaching in preschool is a theme that recurs in Swedish studies (e.g., Doverborg, Pramling, & Pramling Samuelsson, 2013; Rosenqvist, 2000), and “many are disinclined to use the term teaching” (Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2016a, p. 6). In research into subject-based didactics (Tallberg Broman, 2015), Swedish/Nordic studies place more emphasis on the “learning side” than on the “teaching side” of didactics (Vallberg Roth, 2016, 2017b), although there are also examples of studies that focus on teaching in preschool (e.g., Areljung, 2017; Björklund & Ahlskog-Björkman, 2017; Botó, Lantz-Andersson, & Wallerstedt, 2017; Dalgren, 2017; Doverborg et al., 2013; Engdahl, 2010; Fleer, Gomes, & March, 2014; Harju-Luukkainen & Kullti, 2017; Hedefalk, 2014; Jonsson, Williams, & Pramling Samuelsson, 2017; Rosenqvist, 2000). The implications of teaching in preschool can shift, depending on the theoretical perspectives and approaches used in the studies. The (meta)theoretical approaches applied in the studies, such as sociocultural perspectives, variation theory, pragmatic perspectives, and post-constructionism, however, emphasise learning more than teaching (Vallberg Roth, 2017a, 2017b). We have, for example, sociocultural perspectives focusing on “situated learning,” variation theory with a connection to the “learning study,” and intentional learning; we also have pragmatic perspectives referring to “reflective learning” and post-constructionism with a connection to “rhizomatic learning” (Vallberg Roth, 2017a, 2017b). All of this evokes something of a “learnification of didactics” (cf. Biesta, 2017).

From an international perspective, research indicates the significance of preschool teachers to the quality of activities and thus to children’s learning and development (e.g., Chambers, Cheung, & Slavin, 2016; Guo, Wang, Hall, Breit-Smith, & Busch, 2016; Sullivan & Bers, 2016; Sylvan, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2010; Wang, Firmender, Power, & Byrne, 2016; Wyatt & Chapman-De-Sousa, 2017). In a literature review including

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\(^1\)The paper is based on a three-year research project, 2016–2018 (Vallberg Roth, Holmberg, Löf, Palla, Stensson, & Tallberg Broman, \textit{forthcoming}). The project specifically aims to test the concept of \textit{multivocal didactic modelling} and is being carried out in partnership between Ifous (Swedish acronym for ‘innovation, research, and development in schools and preschools’) and Malmö University.
international studies, Persson (2015) emphasised that “earlier research has presented results which indicate that quality in preschool education is a combination of responsive care and high-quality teaching; the latter is designated instructional quality in the international research literature” (p. 123). The examples of non-Nordic studies of teaching in preschool focus primarily on the teaching of academically oriented content and on learning outcomes; however, some also focus on child-initiated activities involving little direct teaching and on teaching in different group sizes. Critical didactics and didactic levels (Kansanen, 1993) are not prominent in the non-Nordic studies (see also the section entitled “Theoretical premises, main concepts, and analysis” [below]). Moreover, these non-Nordic studies do not include both managers and teachers (cf. Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017).

In earlier research into teaching in preschool concentrating on the Nordic and Swedish contexts, commonly used methods include interviews, video documentation, and qualitative data analysis in a relatively small number of case studies focusing on preschool teachers and/or student preschool teachers (Vallberg Roth, 2015, 2017b). In the present paper, preschool teachers and managers document their thoughts about teaching and generate data regarding a relatively large number of preschools from 10 Swedish municipalities, without the direct presence of researchers observing the preschool practice (see Footnote 1). The range of preschool teachers and managers included from these 10 municipalities provides data that sheds light on what may characterise teaching in preschools on a significantly wider scale than has been usual in earlier studies of teaching in preschool that have analysed qualitative data.

The identified research gap especially concerns teaching in the Swedish preschool as a school form. There is a need for research into preschool teaching in which the scientific foundation is not reduced to an emphasis on learning theory. This does not mean that learning-theory-based research into teaching is irrelevant, but rather that it can be expanded to incorporate other possible theoretical approaches.

In 2000, Rosenqvist studied student preschool teachers’ views of the concept of teaching in preschool in light of Kansanen’s (1993) three levels of didactic thinking (see the section entitled “Method and theoretical premises” [below]). The results indicated that student preschool teachers had not developed their thinking about teaching on a theoretical and meta-theoretical level. The question is how preschool teachers and managers express what may characterise teaching in preschool in 2016 and what levels of didactic thinking can be discerned in this.

**Aim and Research Questions**

The aim is to develop our understanding of what preschool teachers and managers from 10 municipalities in Sweden have expressed in writing about what may characterise preschool teaching in 2016. The research is guided by the following questions:

- What may characterise teaching in preschool according to preschool teachers’ and managers’ written descriptions?
- What levels of didactic thinking about preschool teaching can be discerned in the preschool teachers’ and managers’ written descriptions?

**Method and Theoretical Premises**

The method consists of a survey with relatively open-ended questions. The data analysis consists of textual analysis with an expanded approach (see Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008; Åsberg, 2000/2001; Silverman, 2011). Textual analysis and the specific approach applied here are further described in the section “Analysis in relation to ontological, epistemological, methodological, and data-related dimensions” (below). First, a few words about the material and sample are warranted.
**Material and Sample**

The material consists of written answers to the first of five relatively open-ended questions included in a reflective questionnaire administered to preschool teachers and managers, as follows:

*The reflective questionnaire*

1. What may characterise teaching in preschool?
2. What may characterise preschool teaching in
   a. music
   b. mathematics
   c. language/communication/multilingualism?
3. What may characterise an instructive preschool teacher?
4. What may characterise an organisation and leadership that promotes teaching in preschool?
5. What might characterise assessment and co-assessment in preschools?

This paper is limited to analysing the first question. The answers to Question 1 were probably affected by the focus of the other questions, such that the answers ended up being more general than the answers to the questions focusing on specific content areas or on management and organisation.

**Sample, response frequency, and non-response**

The sample comprises 243 respondents representing their municipalities in a three-year research project (see Footnote 1). Of these 243, 178 are preschool teachers and 65 are managers, of whom 55 are preschool managers at the preschool level and 10 are administrative managers at the municipal level. It is not apparent from their responses whether all respondents were trained preschool teachers; however, all participants were part of the ongoing project (see Footnote 1), for which the principals required that the participants be preschool teachers.

As no significant differences were evident between the responses of the preschool managers and administrative managers (at the municipal level) to Question 1 about what may characterise teaching in preschool, in this paper I have combined preschool managers and administrative managers, calling them simply “managers”. The analysis is further limited to considering preschool teachers and managers as groups, with no comparison made between municipalities. In the confines of this paper, interpreting and differentiating between each municipality’s preschool teachers and managers would entail far too extensive, and unwieldy, an analysis. I also label the groups preschool teachers (T) or managers (M) in the word frequency analysis in Table 2 and when identifying the distinctive traces emerging in the responses of only either preschool teachers or managers in Tables 3 and 4. I note that the number of participating preschool teachers ranged between 3 and 42 and the number of managers between 3 and 12 in the various municipalities.

The reflective questionnaire described above was distributed by email to all 243 respondents from the 10 municipalities. This study reports part of a larger ongoing project (see Footnote 1) that complies with the Swedish Research Council’s (2017) principles of research ethics. The material was generated in connection with the beginning of the project in 2016. The instructions to the project participants were simply to answer the questions and then return the completed questionnaire by email. After four reminders, there was a total of 21 non-responders. The researchers had hoped to obtain a 100% response rate, and the four reminders probably influenced the number of responses. Overall, the response rate was 91%. The response and non-response rates are shown in Table 1, distributed by municipality and preschool teachers (T) and managers (M) (Table 1).

**Theoretical Premises, Main Concepts, and Analysis**

“Teaching” is the main concept addressed here, while “didactics” can be seen as the overall knowledge base for teaching and learning. Didactics focuses on the teacher-child-content relationship – in
other words, a theory of teaching (e.g., Bengtsson, 1997; Comenius, 1632/1989; Uljens, 1997). “The word ‘didactics’ may be explained as ‘the art of pointing out something to someone’” (Doverborg et al., 2013, p. 7).

The analysis in this paper is guided by critical didactics. Didactics, interpreted as stressing reflection in educational processes that involve preparing individuals for an open and unforeseen future, therefore by definition refers to critical didactics (cf. Biesta, 2011; Brante, 2016; Broström, 2012). In concrete terms, this means that in the research question I have replaced “should” with “may.” In didactic questions, “should” pertains more to traditional normative didactics (Uljens, 1997), whereas “may” is associated with critical didactics. “May” ensures that there might be alternatives to the choices made and that we make no claims to having definitively established “what should be taught” or “what characterises …,” but that we instead emphasise “what may characterise ….” Critical didactics endeavours to support critical reflection through the use of alternative tools, the point being to set the stage for something alternative. In this paper, I open the door to “multivocal teaching” in which teaching is multivocal on the action, theoretical, and meta-theoretical levels (see Kansanen, 1993; Vallberg Roth, 2015, 2017a, 2017b). Multivocal refers to multiple voices in many parts, which can be translated into multiple perspectives and a variety of approaches (Vallberg Roth, 2015, 2017a). The Norwegian linguist Dysthe (1993) launched the concept of “the multivocal classroom,” clearly inspired by the work of Russian philosopher and literary theorist Bakhtin and his colleagues. Sociolinguistic and sociocultural premises are prominent in their work. The multivocality could then be interpreted as focusing more on the action level than on the (meta)theoretical level, which instead emphasised sociocultural perspectives in a more univocal manner. In the present study, the term “multivocal teaching” is inspired by Dysthe, even as a more expansive approach can be tested that is intended to encompass several action-based, theoretical, and meta-theoretical premises (Vallberg Roth, 2015, 2017a, 2017b).

**Table 1. Response frequency and non-response.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Response T/M</th>
<th>Non-response T/M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>14/6</td>
<td>5/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>11/4</td>
<td>3/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>12/4</td>
<td>2/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>12/3</td>
<td>1/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>8/3</td>
<td>0/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>16/4</td>
<td>1/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>22/12</td>
<td>1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>8/4</td>
<td>0/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>17/7</td>
<td>1/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>12/12</td>
<td>1/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total 10</td>
<td>163/59 = 222</td>
<td>15/6 = 21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: T = preschool teachers, M = managers.

**Analysis in relation to ontological, epistemological, methodological, and data-related dimensions**

Didactically oriented analysis may operate through shifting theoretical approaches and scientific foundations – that is, didactics as a multidisciplinary field of knowledge (Ingerman & Wickman, 2015). Teaching may therefore be studied based on varied theoretical premises, such as variation theory, sociocultural and pragmatic perspectives, and post-constructionist premises, and, depending on the particular approach and premises, the meaning of teaching seems to vary (Vallberg Roth, 2015, 2017a, 2017b).

Traces of scientific grounds that emerge from the written material are discussed here. The aforementioned theoretical premises are explicitly mentioned in the written material, but there are examples of other theoretical premises that may be associated with the traces in the material. I use the term “trace” in the analysis rather than “category,” for example, because
“trace” can be analytically compatible with different premises and perspectives that shift between qualitative and post-qualitative approaches and ways of relating to and processing data. Traces can be both explicit and implicit. Explicit traces are delimited with relatively sharp and closed outlines, for example: “We do not use the term ‘teaching’ in preschool.” Implicit traces have more diffuse, fuzzy, and open outlines, such as the diffuse traces of scientific grounds in terms of “learning objectives” that can be connected to both variation theory and developmental pedagogy. Although both explicit and implicit traces appear in the material, the analysis emphasises explicit traces.

The present analysis applies Kansanen’s (1993) three levels – that is, the “action level,” “thinking level I” (object theories), and “thinking level II” (meta-theory). The action level refers to descriptions of teaching acts, such as planning, co-action, and assessment in practice, in connection with educational aims and goals in the curriculum. Thinking level I, including object theories, refers to how preschool teachers and managers base their teaching practices on science and relate them to theoretical premises such as variation theory and pragmatic and sociocultural perspectives. Thinking level II, the meta-theoretical level, refers to traces of preschool teachers’ and managers’ orienting themselves in and connecting themselves to the meta-theoretical level, as in post-constructionism. It is appropriate here to emphasise that I do not regard thought as separated and isolated from action, but as intertwined in all three levels. To meet the need for tools that can expand teachers’ professional scope for action and support critical reflection and science-based action, studies are required that clarify how teaching can have both theoretical and meta-theoretical bases (Vallberg Roth, 2017a). In other words, this can be expressed as an orientation that includes how teaching is based on ontological and epistemological grounds. A broader approach can discern practice-related, theoretical, and meta-theoretical traces in the material and the analysis can be expanded and transposed between different identified grounds.

In the methodological dimension, the analysis refers to abduction. An abductive analysis iterates between empirically loaded theory and theoretically loaded empiricism, with each being successively reinterpreted in light of the other (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008; Peirce, 1903/1990). The results of the abductive analysis, presented in the “Results” section (below) contain elements of both theory and empiricism. Abduction can point to the creative aspect of the analysis. Abductive moments in the analysis may include suddenly seeing an alternative – that is, discovering a previously unrevealed “being-possible” (Peirce, 1903/1990). The abductive analysis moves to and fro between empiricism, open reading, and theory-based tracing.

In the data-related dimension, the data comprise “word data.” The quotations presented here were selected for their clear exemplification of the traces in the material. More concretely, the analysis involves identifying traces in the material in relation to the research aim and question. The analysis can then be described in terms of the following interpretive paths (see, e.g., Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008; Fejes & Thornberg, 2009; Rapley, 2011):

**Empirically based analytical path**

- Close reading – I read the material and highlight prominent words.
- Word frequency analysis – The frequency of prominent words was counted using the “Find” function in Word to enable quantitative processing of word data (see Table 2 and Figure 1). This process identified words that, upon repeated revision of the material, appeared the most frequently, as indicated in Table 2. The word-frequency analysis can be seen as a quantitative element of the qualitative processing of word data. The point of including quantitative elements in the qualitative processing is to stabilise the analysis and hopefully reduce error sources, such as confirmation bias.
- Distinctive traces were identified – How words interact with and reinforce each other in their contexts was analysed. The analysis built on both high- and low-frequency traces in the second and qualitatively oriented interpretive path (see “Distinctive traces” in Table 3 and responses in
Table 4. The word-frequency analysis can be viewed as offering stabilising support in the analysis of the distinctive traces. One example is high-frequency words such as “children,” “interest,” “play,” “we/together” (i.e., educators + children), and “co-explore” (see Table 2). In the analysis of how the words interact with and reinforce each other in their contexts, the high-frequency words in this case led to a distinctive trace of “child-centred teaching.” According to one interpretation of the material, the teaching therefore proceeds from children’s interests and play with accompanying, responsive, and co-explorative educators (see “Trace 3” in Table 3 and examples of responses in Table 4).
Distinctive traces in the third interpretive path were problematised in relation to earlier research and concepts (see the section “Problematisation of the distinctive traces” [below]). The high-frequency, empirically based traces were paid somewhat greater attention than were the low-frequency traces when reporting the problematising step of the analysis.

Cohesive analysis was performed in light of Kansanen’s (1993) three levels, resulting in a conceptualising focus (see the section “Concluding discussion related to the action, theoretical, and meta-theoretical levels” [below]).

In practice, the empirically based and theory-based interpretive paths are more intertwined than the above bullet list would indicate.

Situated Generalisation

As regards generalisation, there is an argument for the logic of situated generalisation, according to which the results provide alternative perspectives and concepts rather than a single truth (Larsson, 2009). This approach is discursive, exploratory, and sensitive and one in which the reader interprets the extent to which the results can provide guidance in similar cases, situations, and contexts outside the study. The generalisation is situated in the sense that it cannot be predicted and instead occurs through recognition, that is, when the reader can recognise identified teaching traces described in the paper and can use the results and concepts as tools in practice (see Larsson, 2009).

Results

The results are presented first in the form of an empirically-based word frequency analysis, followed by the presentation and problematisation of distinctive traces. This leads to a cohesive theory-based
Word Frequency Analysis

Altogether, the material comprises about 10,000 words. Each response ranged from 3 to 288 words, with responses of 11–40 words being the most common. The word counts of the responses of preschool teachers and managers are presented in Figure 1.

The word frequency analysis identified several words that topped the list of 125 high-frequency words, as shown in Table 2. For reasons of space, only the most frequently used words with total hits of more than 30 are included in the Table.

References to Table 2 are integrated in the section “Problematisation of the distinctive traces” (below).
**Distinctive Traces of What May Characterise Teaching in Preschool**

Eight distinctive traces emerged in the analysis of what may characterise teaching in preschool. These traces build on both the high- and low-frequency traces in the preceding interpretive path and are compiled in Table 3. The eight distinctive traces range from the rejection to the recognition of preschool teaching. Recognition and high-frequency traces emphasise wide-ranging, diffuse, and child-centred teaching (Traces 2–3). The results indicate that traces of the action level are more prominent and "multivocal" (Traces 1–7) than are traces of the theoretical and meta-theoretical levels (Trace 8).

Examples of responses illustrating the distinguishing traces in Table 3 are presented in Table 4. The example responses in Table 4 are expanded on and contextualised in the following section.

**Problematisation of the Distinctive Traces**

The various traces are problematised in this section in relation to earlier research; here I examine the question of what may characterise teaching in preschool from various perspectives.

**Repudiation of teaching in preschool**

The trace “repudiation of teaching” identified in the analysis can be illustrated by the quotation “We do not use the term ‘teaching’ in preschool” (Trace 1 in Table 3). This trace in the preschool teachers’ responses is consistent with the Swedish Schools Inspectorate’s 2016 reports on preschool outcomes, in which many respondents resist using the word “teaching” (Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2016a, 2016b).

In line with the traces identified here, the earlier cited Norwegian study (Hammer, 2012) found that the repudiation of teaching as a concept emerged in interviews with preschool teachers. The authors considered whether the dominant discourses on child-centred activities undermined the significance of preschool teachers as active agents in relation to children’s learning. However, other traces also emerged in presenting the analysis of the material.

**Wide-ranging and diffuse teaching**

The trace “wide-ranging and diffuse teaching” is apparent in the material, for example, when teaching is described in terms of “everything that happens in a day at preschool,” “EVERYTHING you do with the children at preschool!” and “Teaching starts when the preschool opens at 6:15 in the morning and ends when the preschool closes at 6:15 in the evening” (Trace 2a in Table 3). It can be difficult to regard “everything” that happens in the preschool as teaching. For example, it is difficult to see children’s already learned and mastered acts as teaching; this might involve children doing what they have already learned and mastered, such as riding a bicycle. Moreover, there may be acts that are difficult to regard as teaching acts, even though preschool teachers are present, such as when preschool teachers clean tables and storage areas when children are not present. As to the link to teaching as a goal-oriented, intentional, and didactic relationship, Engdahl (2010) presented didactic examples from one outing with two preschool teachers who offered different opinions. According to the author, Preschool Teacher A provided a pleasant outing, while Preschool Teacher B taught “about the preschool’s local community and documented follow-on learning processes, in which the children were given the opportunity to exert considerable influence” (Engdahl, 2010, p. 27). The example of Preschool Teacher A did not, according to Engdahl, equal the teaching status and quality of the example of Preschool Teacher B.

“Learning” is another high-frequency word (see Table 2) and, in this wide-ranging and diffuse trace, teaching and learning can appear to be identical phenomena that do not require preschool teachers:

- Learning in general.
- All learning can be characterised as teaching.
- The children see and learn from each other.

(Trace 2b in Table 3)
Learning and teaching can be said to be strongly linked, because teaching is intended to facilitate learning. However, learning can be interpreted as possible without teaching and outside of teaching situations (see Illeris, 2015): There “is no automatic connection between teaching and learning” (p. 16). When the word “learning” is used as synonymous with teaching, no difference emerges between what the teacher teaches and what the child actually learns. In this context, traces illustrated by statements that seem to equate teaching with learning can be interpreted as problematic. Teaching can also happen without learning. For example, preschool teachers may teach about something that some children in the group have already learned, that the children are not interested in, or that is too difficult, so that the children do not learn it. Also, children may perceive and learn something other than what the preschool teacher intended to teach (see, e.g., Rosenqvist, 2000; Sandberg, 2012). A post-structural approach would be an alternative way to get closer to teaching in this context, in which teaching can be interpreted as opening a pathway for non-predetermined potential. The main point may then be that teaching can facilitate children’s creative, knowledge-generative processes, giving rise to the unpredicted in the moment. Examples of this are when children start thinking and talking about “mould music” (Elfström, 2013) or “talking strings” between worms that let them message each other, warn each other about danger, or ask for help when they get ill (Dahlberg & Elfström, 2014, p. 283).

Furthermore, teaching in the form of a trace that involves both spontaneous everyday situations and planned activities (see “Activity” in Table 2 and Trace 2c in Table 3) can be interpreted as consistent with a broad interpretation of teaching:

- Teaching in preschool is evident throughout the day, not only in “assemblies” but in brief moments all day long when there is an educator present.
- Everyday situations … . Scheduled activities, assemblies, physical activity periods, etcetera.
- Teaching is ongoing in the preschool when the educators are aware of what they are meant to do. In routine situations such as mealtimes, visits to the toilet, dressing and undressing, time outdoors. (Trace 2c in Table 3)

**Child-centred and socio–emotionally oriented teaching: care according to a broad interpretation of teaching**

“Care, development, and learning form a whole in preschool teaching” (Swedish Government Bill, 2009/10:165, p. 217). In this context, the trace “teaching as a socio–emotional relationship” with children (Trace 3b in Table 3) can be interpreted as closely linked to care. Security, care, and togetherness in routines and social interaction come to the foreground here, as in the following example:

- Secure children can assimilate teaching; they need to be thoroughly accustomed to the preschool’s basic activities, i.e., routines and social interaction.
- For learning to occur, the children must feel secure and this happens through present and co-exploring educators who create a secure and tranquil climate.

(Trace 3b in Table 3)

Teaching in preschool must relate to children’s needs for care, security, and safety (Swedish Government Bill, 2009/10:165; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2017). This may involve, for example, children’s right to a safe environment, enacted by preventing accidents and avoiding high-risk situations. Further examples may involve meeting children’s needs for attachment, comfort, and wellbeing, or caring acts to ensure that children are not harassed, excluded, or treated unfairly. Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson (2001) argued that care and learning cannot be differentiated. Care in the institutional setting may refer to a relationship between the caregiver and the care recipient (Davies, 1996; Noddings, 1984, 2012). The concept may represent an ethical relationship that refers to the notion that if someone needs us, we should not turn away from that person. Care involves a reciprocal relationship and process that encompass both the person who gives care and the recipient’s response to that care. The basis of care may then be that we see and recognise ourselves in the other, that we see, recognise, and reflect the needs of others in relation to the setting and context.
According to Davies (1996), multiplicity is emphasised in care work that includes both physical and emotional work in the form of caring about and caring for. Davies stresses her focus on “caring” rather than “care.” While “care” is something static and something that is, “caring” can incorporate more ongoing processes and capture active agents and relationships between continuity and change. This may then involve relationships that are created, recreated, preserved, and changed over time. In this context, we can relate to the concept of “EduCare,” a blend of education and care. In relation to teaching in preschool, we might perhaps express ourselves in terms of “EduCaring” rather than “EduCare.” In this context, the didactic relationship is challenged and expanded and also includes dimensions of care (Vallberg Roth, 2017b).

**Child-centred teaching**

“Child-centred teaching” (or “child-led teaching”), in which teachers follow the children’s interests and play, is another prominent trace in the material (Trace 3a in Table 3). High-frequency words such as “children,” “interest,” “play,” “we/together,” and “co-explore” can be included here (see Table 2). Child-centred teaching proceeds from children’s interests and play, facilitated by accompanying educators:

We proceed from the children’s interests and play.
I consider preschool educators helpers rather than teachers.
Today, much of our work involves exploring, in cooperation with the children, whatever they have shown interest in.
(Trace 3a in Table 3)

In this context, traces of child-centred teaching can also be interpreted as consistent with the governing documents and the broad interpretation of teaching, when certified preschool teachers and other qualified staff are in charge. Children’s needs, interests, and participation are emphasised in the preschool curriculum (e.g., Lpfö 98, 2016). In the research (e.g., Persson, 2015), relationships between teachers and children are also presented as fundamental to the quality of activities in preschool.

The child-centred trace can also be problematised in relation to equivalency goals. Elfström (2013) formulated a dilemma when she asked herself “whether the interests and experiences of all [my emphasis] children are sought and allowed to influence the direction of planning and initiating aspects of the work” (p. 232). Elm Fristorp (2012) argued that it is only a few children, those who can express themselves verbally, whose interests are noticed, while the others’ voices are unheard. This also begs the question of whether preschool teachers’ interpretations of children’s interests may be linked to their own interests, knowledge, and capacity (see Mårdsjö Olsson & Tullgren, 2013). Other possible questions are whether teaching that systematically follows children’s interests and questions may lead to “cementing” or going beyond children’s knowledge and the existing order in practice and society. In this context, Osberg and Biesta (2010) have emphasised the dilemma of a child-centred approach. They problematised this approach, which is oriented towards following children and allowing them to learn what they want to learn and are interested in, arguing that it is another way to maintain and perpetuate the existing order. The authors also noted that child-centred teaching provides no way of dismissing or modifying knowledge that is wrong. Earlier studies have cited the example of preschool teachers who reply to children’s questions with a counter question: What do you think? (Thulin, 2011). Child-centred teaching can be problematic and it can be difficult to consistently “follow the children” when the teacher needs to introduce something with which the children are completely unfamiliar. When preschool teachers need to facilitate learning encounters involving learning and sense-making about something previously unknown to the children, it becomes difficult to “follow the children” as they can hardly ask for something about which they know nothing.
Learning environment and learning tools as support for teaching in the foreground

Tangible traces are also linked to the view of the learning environment and learning tools/materials as providing support for teaching. This can also be formulated in terms of “the third educator”:

The environment is also highly significant to teaching in the preschool. If the environment is inviting, it can stimulate learning and development and support teaching in the preschool.

A high-quality, challenging learning environment.

The environment is an important aspect of teaching because it is used as a learning environment, as the “third educator.”
(Trace 4 in Table 3)

In the material, the environment is primarily linked to “learning,” “educator,” and “challenge” (see Table 2). Environments for learning can be emphasised from various theoretical perspectives, such as the sociocultural perspective (e.g., Carlgren, 1999; Säljö, 2011). References to the learning environment as “the third educator” are related to the Reggio Emilia philosophy (see, e.g., Dahlberg & Elfström, 2014; Folkman, 2017).

The interest in teaching materials of various kinds is emphasised in the Swedish National Agency for Education’s support materials for pedagogical documentation (2012), resting on a post-constructionist basis. Learning is, moreover, not seen as an individual and independent activity, but rather as something linked to the environment and the material (e.g., Hultman, 2011; Lenz Taguchi, 2010/2012).

The Swedish national preschool curriculum (Lpfö 98, 2016, (pp. 4, 6, 7, 9, and 16) also emphasises the importance of the learning environment. Given the existence of preschools with staff members who do not hold degrees in preschool education (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016), it is difficult to regard the offer of a stimulating learning environment in the absence of preschool teachers who are responsible for and lead goal-directed processes as teaching in relation to the definition of teaching used in the Swedish Education Act.

Teacher-oriented teaching and leadership

In addition to the aforementioned traces, lower-frequency traces of “teacher-oriented teaching” (or “teacher-led teaching”) emerge (see “teacher,” “goal,” and “knowledge” in Table 2 and Traces 5a and 5b in Table 3), focusing on the teacher’s activities, such as planning, leading, introducing, evaluating, and documenting processes. These teacher-oriented activities may include conversations and collaborative action with parents/caregivers:

How we lead, what we say, and the paths we choose determine the type of teaching that is possible and happens at any given time. (Trace 5a in Table 3)
Teaching is systematically documented and evaluated. (Trace 5a in Table 3)
Goal-oriented processes planned by certified preschool teachers based on the Education Act and the preschool curriculum … create the conditions for children to acquire new knowledge. (Trace 5b in Table 3)
Using this as a base, the teaching staff create an activity plan in collaboration with the children and their parents. (Trace 5b in Table 3)

In this trace, teachers figure as instruction leaders in relation to goal-directed processes and an emphasis on knowledge. Teachers’ exercise of their profession, including planning, introducing, evaluating, and documenting, is in the foreground. This trace can be related to Biesta (2011, 2017), who emphasised teaching as something relational that, unlike learning, presupposes teachers, teachers’ leadership, and teachers who add something new.

Furthermore, traces of control and power relationships can be connected to statements about teacher-oriented teaching related to governing documents, systematic evaluation, and documentation (Traces 5a and 5b in Table 3). Control can also be related to the other traces, for example, “When activities are controlled by the children’s interests.” The words “power” and “norms”, however, are not explicitly expressed in the material.
Teaching with special-needs education and multilingual traces

Other low-frequency traces are teaching that includes “all children” (i.e., the special-needs education trace) and teaching incorporating elements of “several languages.” The Swedish national preschool curriculum (Lpfö 98, 2016) also emphasizes the needs of “all children” (e.g., pp. 5 and 12) and languages other than the mother tongue (e.g., pp. 7 and 10). Multilingual and special-needs education traces are also evoked by Question 2c in the reflection questionnaire, concerning “language/communication/multilingualism.” The first question in the reflection document gives rise to only a few individual traces, as follows:

Teaching proceeds from the needs and circumstances of all children. (Trace 6a in Table 3)
When the children have acquired one or more languages, we can create many opportunities for reflection during the preschool day. (Trace 6b in Table 3)

These traces can perhaps be interpreted as evidence of inclusive teaching and teaching that considers multiple languages as a resource (cf., e.g., Björk-Willén, 2006; Cekaite & Björk-Willén, 2017; Ehrlin, 2012; Harju-Luukkainen & Kultti, 2017; Kultti, 2012; Lunneblad, 2009; Martín-Bylund, 2017; Palla, 2015). A research survey addressing special education (Palla, 2015) stresses the need to develop research and competence in various areas related to teaching situations, ways of working, and children with functional variations.

Teaching connected to measurable learning

The responses of preschool managers display traces of narrower teaching oriented towards measurable learning: “Carefully considered elements that result in measurable learning” (Trace 7 in Table 3). Traces that include teaching as promoting measurable learning can be interpreted as illustrating a relatively narrow definition of teaching, with claims that can be interpreted as outside the purview of the preschool’s objectives, with interim goals for the activities to strive for without a predetermined final objective. On the general level, Andersen Østergaard, Hjort, and Skytte Kaarsberg Schmidt (2008) have discussed whether it is even possible for teachers to document learning. The authors argued that learning and learning processes are inaccessible, unobservable, and intangible, comprising, for example, ideas, smells, and tastes. In that sense, learning cannot be recorded. Measurable learning may furthermore be interpreted as influenced by measurement theory and by goal–rational (i.e., goal- and results-oriented) thinking in business and management (cf. new public management; see, e.g., Schwandt, 2012; Segerholm, 2012). Management can then be interpreted as based on competition and accountability in the case of measurable learning, in which the reporting of results and quality is connected to underlying economic interests.

Traces of scientific grounds and proven experience

Finally, a few explicit traces of scientific grounds and proven experience emerge, comprising traces of didactics, a pragmatic perspective with reference to Dewey, a sociocultural perspective, and a post-constructionist approach. Didactics, preschool didactics, and subject didactics are exemplified as follows:

Didactic attitude:

Preschool didactics are the basis for mixing with subject didactics, which we then implement together in the preschool. (Trace 8 in Table 3)

Sociocultural premises, in terms of the “zone of proximal development” and “sociocultural learning” are exemplified as follows:

Activities/doings that constitute the basis for aims and goals and influence together with the children to challenge and develop children’s learning processes, which are based on the children’s zone of proximal development.
As a teacher, I have knowledge of sociocultural learning. (Trace 8 in Table 3)

Variation theory premises can be interpreted in relation to traces of “learning objectives” as follows:
That one works with variation theory and has knowledge of the various subjects. Active educators who involve themselves in the children’s interests and are able to get them interested in various learning objectives. (Trace 8 in Table 3)

Pragmatic premises are exemplified by references to Dewey and “learning by doing”:

That I proceed from John Dewey’s ideas about the democratic classroom or that one must do in order to learn. Teaching can also occur through shared experiences and “learning by doing.” (Trace 8 in Table 3)

It can be noted here that though Dewey became famous for “learning by doing,” according to researchers (Burman, 2014), what Dewey actually brought to the fore was “learning by reflective experience.” It is from the consequences of actions that we learn: “We learn through experiences and personal activity combined with reflection: the reflective experience” (Burman, 2014, p. 37).

Traces of meta-theoretical premises also emerge from the material in terms of post-constructionism, as follows:

Preschool teaching can be characterised as something that I, as a teacher, have knowledge of … learning in a post-constructionist environment/culture that treats the children as beings. (Trace 8 in Table 3)

Finally, explicit references to science and proven experience also emerge, for example:

It is based on science or thoroughly proven experience. (Trace 8 in Table 3)

Partially implicit traces of proven experience can also be discerned in the material, in other words, traces of shared, communicated, reflected on, and documented experience. In the following section, the discussion of traces of scientific grounds and proven experience is expanded and then concluded by establishing connections to the action, theoretical, and meta-theoretical levels2,3,4.

**Concluding Discussion Related to the Action, Theoretical, and Meta-Theoretical Levels**

This section presents a cohesive theory-based discussion in relation to the aim of the study and the questions concerning what may characterise preschool teaching and the levels of didactic thinking about teaching in preschool that can be discerned in the preschool teachers’ and managers’ written descriptions.

The discussion is pursued with reference to Kansanen’s (1993) three levels – that is, the action, theoretical, and meta-theoretical levels. In this context, it should be emphasised that these levels overlap in practice and that the analytical process iterates between empirically loaded theory and theoretically loaded empiricism.

Earlier research has, for example, tested Kansanen’s levels in relation to beliefs about the teaching of student preschool teachers (Rosenqvist, 2000), finding that the students “engaged in talk only to a minor extent at the second thinking level” (p. 164), arguably indicating that “pedagogical and other theories should be repeatedly studied in the course so that they can subsequently constitute vibrant and powerful tools in the programme” (p. 164). There has also been criticism of Kansanen’s view of the action level, which seemed to recommend that teachers should literally follow the state texts. Relating to state governing documents, “not following a curriculum ‘word for word’ can actually be regarded as a prerequisite for upholding a democratic society,” Rosenqvist (2000, p. 152) claimed.

In this analysis, the levels in Kansanen’s model are not used as literally exemplary and hierarchical levels, but are instead regarded as intertwined levels to be referred to as they are useful.

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2 A post-constructionist approach is a theoretical approach and relational ontology that together become an agential realism (cf. Barad, 2012; Lenz Taguchi, 2010/2012).

3 The term ‘social construction’ (Berger & Luckman, 1966) has evolved along two main lines. One of these main lines is called constructivism or social constructivism. The other main line is called social constructionism (e.g., Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008; Åsberg, 2000/2001).

4 Proceeding from a restrained realism, Ferraris (2012/2014) argued that social objects differ from natural objects, and likewise that an internal world (inside the conceptual schemas) differs from an external world (outside the conceptual schemas).
With reference to Kansanen’s (1993) levels, I can more clearly decipher distinct, explicit, and multivocal traces of a practice-based action level than traces that can be explicitly assigned to the theoretical or meta-theoretical level. Traces 1–7 in Table 3 can be interpreted as distinguishing traces of a more practice-based action level. Trace 8 in Table 3 can be interpreted as encompassing explicit signs on the theoretical and meta-theoretical levels. It is preferably explicit expressions of theories (e.g., “variation theory”) and concepts (e.g., “zone of proximal development”) that determine whether a statement is allocated to the theoretical or action level (e.g., “All learning can be characterised as teaching”). The explicitly expressed theory-based traces in the material vary between didactics and sociocultural, pragmatic, and variation theory perspectives.

Meta-theoretically, explicitly expressed traces of post-constructionist premises also emerge. The theories that otherwise occasionally appear in Trace 8 (Table 3) can in meta-theoretical terms primarily be associated with social constructionism (see Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008). Taken as a whole, these traces can be interpreted as mainly attributable to relativist premises (i.e., social constructionist and post-constructionist premises; see Vallberg Roth, 2015, 2017a). In this context, expressions also occur in the material that can be interpreted as emphasising construction in terms of “there is no right or wrong.” However, there are also traces that can be associated with realistic premises. Traces of implicit realistic premises can be discerned in descriptions that emphasise facts, as follows:

“Facts” is a concept that is open to multiple interpretations. In this context, one interpretation might be that a fact is something that exists in a reality that can be experienced but cannot be corrected through the power of thought (Ferraris, 2012/2014). In that connection, teaching generally and as a whole can be linked to two meta-theoretical directions that move between relativist and realistic premises (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008; Ferraris, 2012/2014; Vallberg Roth, 2015, 2017a).

Limitations associated with the study

It is appropriate to emphasise that there is significant variation in the theoretical and meta-theoretical premises of this work. The paper makes no claims to offer comprehensive interpretations or exhaustive coverage of a list of theoretical and meta-theoretical directions. Rather, it should be regarded as a discussion outlining certain tendencies in teaching in preschool based on the (meta)theoretical variation discerned in the material.

Regarding the analysis, the point of including quantitative elements in the qualitative processing is to stabilise the analysis of the closely empirical, distinguishing traces in the extensive material. In other words, it is not a matter of a quantitative analysis that claims that each and every word in the material should be quantified. In Table 2, for example, it is difficult to quantitatively compare the different groups, as they include different numbers of informants. Moreover, there is a great range in the number of words per response (i.e., 3–288 words, see Figure 1), and preschool teachers and managers probably have ideas about teaching that have not been expressed in words in the material. Teachers and managers might also, for instance, be theoretically informed even though they do not explicitly refer to theories when they write about teaching. Although both explicit and implicit traces appear in the material, the analysis focuses more on explicit traces. The preschool teachers’ and the managers’ responses were of varying length, breadth, and depth, and it was considered important not to over-interpret the responses. The paper does not claim to include all possible interpretations in the wide range of traces explored. As part of the ongoing project (see Footnote 1), a follow-up and comparative analysis of teachers’ and managers’ thinking about teaching is planned for 2018, which may open the way for further interpretations of the traces.
Concluding conceptual discussion

In relation to the research aim and question, the analysis can finally be unified into a demonstrable and communicable whole through the concept of diffuse multivocal teaching. Multivocality can be discerned primarily on the practice-based action level but less clearly on the theoretical and meta-theoretical levels. Traces of relatively action-based approaches (Traces 1–7 in Table 3), based on the voices and interpretations of multiple actors, can be discerned as relatively strong in the material. In other words, diffuse multivocal teaching in preschool can, first, encompass a strong practice-based outcome, primarily oriented towards following the children in wide-ranging and diffuse teaching. The concept can also include relatively weak traces of explicit scientific grounds (Trace 8 in Table 3).

Multivocal teaching can be demonstrated to be a potential tool for critical reflection on teaching in relation to every child’s development, learning, play, and care in a preschool for all (see Vallberg Roth, 2015, 2017b). The concept can be discerned in the case of teaching in preschool, which may be multivocal with interlinkages between the action-based as well as the theoretical and meta-theoretical levels. In that way, multivocal teaching can include various interpretations of contents, forms, and educational functions, as well as various actors, such as children, preschool teachers, educators, and managers, having varying backgrounds. Multivocal refers to multiple voices in many parts, which can be translated into multiple perspectives and approaches (Vallberg Roth, 2015, 2017a). In contrast to multivocal teaching on both the action level and the theoretical and meta-theoretical levels, univocal practice in preschools could appear when a certain (meta)theory becomes dominant (e.g., Dysthe, 1993; Folkman, 2017). With reference to Kansanen’s (1993) levels, it is the explicit rather than implicit traces of multivocality in the professionals’ thinking and co-actions that are invoked here.

Future research could usefully examine multivocal teaching as a tool for critical reflection that can include the perspectives (versions) of a variety of actors, scientific grounds, and proven experiences. The concept of multivocal teaching requires further testing (see Footnote 1).

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