

Play and learning in early childhood education in Sweden

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Learning through play is a common phrase in early childhood education worldwide. Play is often put forward as the overarching principle for working with young children (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005). However, if we go beyond the rhetorical level and explore how “learning through play” and a “play-based curriculum” are understood and transformed into practice, we may find differences both within and between countries (Karlsson Lohmander & Pramling Samuelsson, 2014a, 2014b; Pramling Samuelsson & Fler, 2009).

In this article we discuss the relationship between the concepts of play and learning and describe how they are enacted in everyday practice in early childhood education in Sweden. Starting with a brief presentation of the development of early childhood education, we then reflect on the challenges preschool teachers may encounter when trying to implement a new learning-oriented curriculum (National Agency for Education, 2011) and still trying to keep play as a central dimension in children’s everyday life in preschool.

Keywords: early childhood education, Sweden, preschool, play, learning

Introduction

In Sweden, early childhood education dates back to the late 1800s / early 1900s. In a context of urbanisation and industrialisation changing life situations for many families brought with them the need for some kind of childcare. In the beginning a parallel system for the care and education of the youngest children was developed. Children aged 5 to 7 years from better-off families were offered educational activities structured by the teacher in part-time preschools/kindergartens (also called play schools). For children from poor families and from single-parent families, full-time provision focusing on care was offered. This parallel system remained until the end of the 1960s, when women in large numbers entered the labor market and the demand for nonparental childcare rapidly grew (Karlsson Lohmander, 2002).

In 1968, the government appointed the national Commission on Child Care (Barnstugeutredningen), which was assigned to propose goals and guidelines for

the future direction of the childcare system in Sweden. In 1972, the Commission published a report (SOU, 1972: 26–27) proposing that the existing parallel system of care for poor children and education for better-off children be replaced with a new childcare system in which social, educational, and care needs would be integrated. The major part of this system would be day-care centers for children from 1 to 7 years (Karlsson Lohmander, 2002). While maintaining a clear educational focus, childcare, together with parental-leave insurance and child benefits, has been a cornerstone in the developing Swedish welfare policy since the beginning of the 1970s. This is explicitly expressed in the overall aims:

- ... to make it possible to combine parenthood with employment or studies
- ... to support and encourage children and help them grow under conditions that are conducive to their well-being (Skolverket, 2000, p. 3)

With reference to Freire (1970/1972), a “new” emancipatory teaching method of negotiation and dialogue (*dialogpedagogik*) (SOU, 1972:26–27; Strömberg-Lind & Schyl-Bjurman, 1976) was introduced: communication (teacher-child and child-child) was to be at the forefront. This method was soon criticized (Callewaert & Kallós, 1975). Kallós claimed that by concentrating on methods and social skills rather than on specific domains of knowledge, this teaching style became oppressive rather than emancipatory and could be disadvantageous to many children (Kallós, 1978). Grounded in the theories of Jean Piaget and Erik Homburger Erikson, child care had as overriding goals concept formation, communication with others, and development of the self (Schyl-Bjurman, 1976).

In the years that followed, the social pedagogy tradition, emphasizing the child’s social development and well-being, remained strong. Grounded in a democratic tradition (Johansson, 2011), it focused on children’s participation and active involvement. Children’s “free play” constituted an extensive part of the programme and underlined the value of informal and nonformal learning (Pramling Samuelsson, 2015). There was a distinct difference between preschool and compulsory school (SOU, 1985:22) in that in preschool adult-structured formal learning activities were considered to be detrimental for children.

Davidsson (2002) discusses the large difference between the two settings in *Between the sofa and the teacher’s desk*. This title illustrates the problems with finding spaces for cooperation between preschool and school teachers. According to Davidsson, circle time was the only preschool activity that was found to be similar to classroom practice and was the one activity on which teachers from preschool and school could collaborate. There was however an ambition to bring the two institutions closer together to make the transition between preschool and school easier for children. Over the years how this linking should be done was debated by numerous national commissions (Karlsson Lohmander, 2002; Pramling Samuelsson & Mauritzson, 1997; SOU, 1975/76:39).

Since the beginning of the 1970s the number of children attending early childhood education programs has steadily grown; today, already at the age of 2 years, 89% of all children attend preschool. For 5-year-olds the corresponding figure is 95% (Skolverket, 2013). Preschool has indeed become an important agent in the upbringing and education of the young child.

The national curriculum for the preschool, Lpfö98

Some kind of general guidelines for early childhood education have always been in place — for example, the pedagogical program for the preschool (Socialstyrelsen, 1987:3). Even though these guidelines were not “an ordinance with binding regulations issued by the Government” (Vallberg-Roth, 2011, p. 17), in practice they functioned as a curriculum.

In 1996, the responsibility for early childhood education, now covering the ages from 1 to 6 years, was transferred from the Ministry of Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education and Research; preschool was integrated in the formal national education system and became the first step in a lifelong learning process. Concurrently, a new school form, the preschool class for 6-year-olds, was introduced. Following this transfer, in 1998 the first national curriculum for preschool was issued (Skolverket, 1998). Unlike the previous guidelines, it is based on a government decree and is therefore mandatory. The whole Swedish education system has since been covered by three linking curricula with a shared view on knowledge formation, development, and learning. The theoretical point of departure for the preschool curriculum is a sociocultural (e.g., Vygotskian) and experience-based approach (SOU, 1997:157); children are seen as active participants in their own development and learning. With democracy as the founding value, the curriculum specifies overriding goals and tasks but not the means to reach these goals. Decisions about working methods are left to the teachers, who are expected to have the professional knowledge and skills necessary for choosing these methods. Furthermore, the goals are for teachers to strive for, not for individual children to achieve. Each team of teachers has to make sure that the activities in the preschool are structured and organized to support children’s overall learning and development.

In 2010 the curriculum was revised (National Agency for Education, 2011). New goals were introduced, and the learning dimension was strengthened. Compared with the 1998 version a stronger focus was put on early mathematics, emergent literacy, science, and technology. However, these domains of knowledge were not to be taught as traditional formal school subjects; rather, they were to be structured as theme work to allow children to actively participate in a meaning-making process.

As mentioned, play has been and remains an important dimension of preschool pedagogy. Even if learning is highlighted, the revised curriculum (National Agency for Education, 2011) still gives prominence to play: “The preschool should strive to ensure that each child develop their curiosity and enjoyment, as well as their ability to play and learn” (p. 9). Play is often linked to and perceived as a prerequisite for learning: “Conscious use of play to promote development and learning of each individual should always be present in preschool activities” (p. 3). This link between play and learning is grounded in research that shows how play can be a central part of a learning-oriented approach (e.g., Pramling & Pramling Samuelsson, 2011; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008). However, despite the grounding in research, focusing on play to promote learning in a conscious way is still not the case in all preschools in Sweden (Sheridan, Pramling Samuelsson, & Johansson, 2009; Skolinspektionen, 2013).

Structural and organizational factors affecting the implementation of the new learning-oriented curriculum

A number of factors affect how well preschool teachers work toward implementing a play-based, learning-oriented curriculum, among them group organization, group size, and child/staff ratio. In the 1970s a system of mixed-age groups for children aged 1 to 5 years, so-called sibling groups, was introduced. The main reason for this was financial (group size increased), although the official reason was pedagogical. Common practice until then was to place children in age-specific groups. A survey showed that the youngest children in preschool had fewer pedagogical activities than the older children, and this discrepancy was thought to be a consequence of the fact that at that time mainly nursery nurses worked with the youngest age group, not educated preschool teachers. It was hoped that the age-integrated groups would help change this situation and promote peer learning and toddlers' learning from older children (Familjestödsutredningen, 1979). Today the organization of the groups varies across the country. Of all preschool groups 35% are so-called toddler groups (1–3 years). The mean number of children in the groups (autumn 2013) is approximately 5.3 children per teacher, with a mean of 16.8 children per group. However, the variation of group size across the country is large; it ranges from under 15 children to over 26 children in one group (Skolverket, 2013, Table 4a).

The notion of group size in preschool has been extensively debated in Sweden. Parents and staff express worries about security when there are too many children in the groups. Furthermore, preschool teachers claim that with large groups it is difficult to work toward reaching the goals of the curriculum (Pramling Samuelsson, Sheridan, Williams, & Nasiopoulou, 2014).

Because dialogue and communication are at the forefront of teachers' work, albeit understood in a different way than in the dialogue pedagogy that was introduced in 1972, large preschool groups create problems for preschool teachers. In a study of group size in preschool (Williams, Sheridan, & Pramling Samuelsson, in press), the findings show that preschool teachers have different ways of facing and overcoming the challenge of having groups that are too large. For some teachers having many children in a group does not seem to be a problem; they work in line with the curriculum anyhow. Other teachers find it difficult and avoid certain activities, such as excursions outside the preschool or painting. All teachers claim that the discussions and dialogues with children become more shallow and that they feel they cannot challenge children as they would like to (Pramling Samuelsson, Williams, & Sheridan, 2015). The challenges experienced by the teachers are all related to teacher-structured learning-oriented activities. The teachers seldom, if ever, relate group size to children's play. When asked about good working conditions, they describe an ideal situation in which they can communicate with, challenge, and support each child to take part in a shared meaning-making process (Pramling Samuelsson, Williams, Sheridan, & Hellman, 2015). It seems as though preschool pedagogy is becoming individualised and that the understanding of preschool as a collective arena for children's learning has been lost. Furthermore, that play goes on without adult intervention regardless of the number of children in a group (Pramling Samuelsson, Wallerstedt, & Pramling, 2014).

Swedish preschool in an international perspective

As mentioned, in Sweden democracy is the foundation on which early childhood education should rest. Swedish preschool is based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), and inclusion, equality, and solidarity are emphasized (Karlsson Lohmander, 2010). According to the curriculum, preschool should provide a safe, rich, and enjoyable environment for children (National Agency for Education, 2011). In international comparisons early childhood education in Sweden often receives top ranking (e.g., Lien Foundation, 2012; UNICEF, 2008), as do the other Nordic countries. In the country review for the OECD (2001) the team looking at Sweden claimed that “the curriculum clearly enunciates the vision the Swedish society not only holds for its child-serving institutions but for children themselves. ... Nothing honours Sweden more than the way it honours and respects its young” (OECD, 1999, pp. 24 and 43).

These are words to be proud of, but there are still many questions to ask. One concerns the quality aspects of education. The international comparisons are concerned mainly with how societies support children and families at a policy level. One example is the ten benchmarks for early childhood services that UNICEF proposed (2008, p. 2). Some of the suggested standards include parental-leave programs, staff-to-child ratios, and gross domestic product spent on early childhood services. In that sense early childhood education in Sweden is of high quality. But quality is also about goal fulfilment — that is, to what extent the objectives set out in the curriculum are reached and how well children are challenged and supported in their development and learning. Findings from both research and evaluations (Sheridan et al., 2009; Skolinspektionen, 2013) prove that in this respect the quality of preschool education varies across contexts. Whereas play has always been and still is at the forefront in Swedish preschools, apart from circle time, learning, understood as teacher-structured activities, has not been prominent. This emphasis on play differentiates Sweden from many other countries. A comparative study conducted in 1970 (Austin, de Vries, Thirion, & Stukát, 1975, 1976) showed, for example, that Belgium had a more learning-oriented approach with an active and distinguishable role for teachers, while in Sweden teachers were less proactive and thought that children learned best when they were allowed to organize their play by themselves without teacher intervention. It is possible that this perception still remains.

Facing pedagogical challenges in a changing society

When the new, integrated early childhood education system was introduced in the 1970s with the Ministry of Social Affairs as the supervising body, children’s socioemotional development, well-being, and development of social skills were at the forefront. These goals, together with a focus on play, often free play, formed the pedagogical task of the preschool (day care at that time). As preschool was integrated into the national education system in 1996 and the first curriculum was issued in 1998 (Skolverket, 1998), a clearer focus was placed on learning. This emphasis was even more pronounced in the revised version of 2010 (National Agency for Education, 2011). However, the pedagogical task involves taking a holistic perspective

in which “care, socialisation, and learning form a coherent whole” (p. 4). This perspective creates challenges and sometimes problems for preschool teachers. First, they have to focus on the learning dimension while still keeping care, play, and well-being as central dimensions of their work. As mentioned, traditionally, formal learning was perceived as detrimental for children and the concept of teaching in preschool has been and still is controversial (Doverborg, Pramling, & Pramling Samuelsson, 2013).

A second challenge for teachers is to understand what constitutes learning content or learning objects for children in various areas. Most preschool teachers currently working in preschools were educated before the revised curriculum was issued, and teaching special content — such as, for example, science — is new to them. Teaching content was not part of their education (Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2010).

A third challenge is to keep care and education integrated and not to separate these two aspects. In a study on how to promote peer learning in preschool, when asked about the goals for their work, participating preschool teachers all mentioned promoting democracy as a value and developing trust in children as the overarching aims (Karlsson Lohmander & Löfqvist, 2008). This does not mean that they did not support children’s learning. They did, but not always in a conscious, planned way. They did not seem to frame learning activities in a structured way so that children were aware of the knowledge they were supposed to acquire in any given situation (Doverborg et al., 2013). This ambiguity was also found in a study on constructions of play and learning that was conducted with international master’s students in Sweden. They felt that it was difficult to discern and understand what was going on in Swedish preschools. Compared with their experiences of early childhood education in their own/home countries (the students came from Asia, Europe, and South America), Swedish preschools seemed to lack structured, goal-oriented learning activities. Children seemed to be only playing all the time. In line with one of Bernstein’s (1973) concepts, the pedagogy appeared invisible to them.

Concluding remarks

The strengthened learning dimension and the increased focus on special domains of knowledge such as science and technology in the revised preschool curriculum has challenged preschool teachers to reflect on what the pedagogical task entails and how to transform the goals in the curriculum into everyday practice. What exactly is it that young children need to learn in preschool? What does play mean in the context of preschool education? What is the relation between the two?

Given that the curriculum states only the overarching goals, much is left to preschool teachers to interpret themselves. With the explicit focus on learning, some fear that there is a risk that play and children’s influence, which is also emphasized in the curriculum, will decrease in favor of teacher-structured activities. Preschool researchers as well as preschool teachers are challenged to clearly articulate what the so-called Nordic approach (Bennett, 2010) entails when it comes to learning through play. It cannot be taken for granted that children learn when they are active participants in play. The teacher’s role must go beyond just listening. Teachers have to understand what it means to direct children’s attention toward learning objects,

while concurrently taking children's perspectives into consideration in interaction and communication (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Pramling & Pramling Samuelsson, 2011). This requirement includes an understanding of the importance of care and its relation to children's play and learning.

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