

Child care and pre-schools in Sweden: an overview of practice, tendencies and research

Mara Westling Allodi

Stockholm Institute of Education

Mara.Allodi@lhs.se

Abstract

L'articolo descrive il sistema dei servizi educativi per la prima infanzia in Svezia, le sue strutture e i suoi obiettivi nel contesto della società svedese, in relazione al sistema di *welfare*. Vengono evidenziate alcune tendenze problematiche e difficoltà emergenti, messe in rilievo dalle valutazioni nazionali e dalla ricerca: l'incremento nella variazione della qualità, la più ampia frequenza, la mancanza di insegnanti qualificati, l'interpretazione limitata dei programmi, l'aumento del numero dei bambini identificati come aventi bisogno di sostegno. Vengono anche suggerite alcune interpretazioni che permettono di comprendere le relazioni tra questi fattori.

Parole chiave: servizi educativi per la prima infanzia; formazione degli insegnanti; sistema educativo svedese

1. The Swedish child care system

Since 1996 the Swedish system for early childhood education and care has been the province of the Swedish Ministry of Education and Science. The Ministry is responsible for central policy, goals, guidelines and financial frameworks for early childhood education and care (ECEC). Before 1996 the responsibility lay under the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. ECEC then developed as part of family welfare policy with clear connections to labour-market policy. The National Agency for Education has now taken over the task of supervision, while the 290 municipalities shall provide pre-school activities for the children of their residents. Public child care on a large scale in this form developed successively after 1975. The municipalities receive state grants for their general expenditure (including

schools and pre-schools), but they also finance their services through direct local income tax.

Female (and male) labour force participation rates are high in Sweden (76.6% in 2004) and day-care centres for young children are seen as a necessity and an important part of a family welfare policy that encourages women to work outside the family, but also to raise a family and bring up children. Another part of the family welfare policy is the paid *parental leave* period of 480 days enabling one of the parents at a time to stay at home with the child. These supporting circumstances seem to be contributing to the still relatively high fertility rate (1.71 in 2004, compared to 2.1 in 1990-92).

Most pre-school provision is offered directly by municipalities in *day-care centres* (daghem, now labelled *pre-school*, förskola). Another public form is *family day care* (familjedaghem) attended by 12% of children, where the provider offers day care to a small group of children in her own home. There are also *private day-care centres*, run by parental and staff cooperatives, churches, and other bodies (13% of children). These private provisions are also funded by the municipality, have to meet the same standard as the public services and to follow the same curriculum. There are also *open pre-schools* (öppna förskolor, drop-in centres) where parents and children together meet other children and parents, under the supervision of a pre-school teacher. Open pre-schools are also attended by children in family day care.

Working or studying parents can have their children at the pre-school for 40 hours a week or more, if they need. They pay a fee of not more than 1-3% of their income. The fee varies, often depending on the amount of time the child spends at pre-school. The fees and rules can also vary between municipalities. A reform introduced in 2002 also enables the children (from age 3 or 4) of unemployed parents or those on parental leave to attend pre-school free, up to three hours a day or 15 hours a week.

Each pre-school has a director, pre-school teachers (with a university-level training of 3-4 years) and child minders (trained assistants with a three-year secondary programme in children care). The pre-school teachers represent about 50% of the staff. Special educators and supervisors can also be available, serving several pre-schools. The staff work schedule is 40 hours a week. There is no statutory requirement for a minimum level of staff development per year, but the need for in-service training seems often recognised.

In 2005, 378 954 children aged 1-5 (77%) attended a public or private *pre-school*. The child/staff ratio was 5:2. The percentage of children attending *family day care* was 6% , with the same child/staff ratio. There is no national regulation of this ratio, nor any recommended maximum group size. Average maximum group size is 17 (14.6 in the age group 1-3, and 19.7 in the age group 3-5).

Given the regulation on parental leave and on the right to pre-school access, the rates of provision vary for children at different ages. Few children under 12

months are in ECEC, their parents having the combined paid parental leave. Forty-five percent of 1-to-2-year-olds, and 86% percent of 2-to-3-year-olds are in ECEC. This rises to 91% for 3-to-4-year-olds and to 96% for 5-to-6-year-olds. At age 6, 91 percent of children attend pre-school and 7% are already in school. Children with disabilities have a right to educational services and are integrated in the ECEC services. Children from low-income families also attend ECEC to a greater extent after the "15-hours-a-week" reform, which entitled children with unemployed parents to free ECEC attendance. The poverty rate is low in Sweden (4.2%) but has risen by 50% in the past five years. Children with a different mother tongue than Swedish represent 14% of the group attending ECEC.

2. Reforms, changes and tendencies

Quality variation. An actual issue emerging in recent national evaluations is a *lack of equivalence* between municipalities, and even within the same municipality, in the quality of the services offered to children (NAE, 2004). The economic downturn of the 1990s and the increasing enrolment rates resulted in larger group sizes in some municipalities. This seems in some cases to have affected negatively the quality of the services and staff working conditions. The national evaluation noted *increased variation in the quality* of the services offered. Quality often seems lower in low-income catchments areas, where large groups also have an immigrant background.

The increasing variation in costs, resources and quality *between* municipalities is noted even in the case of the primary and secondary educational system, which has been decentralised since 1992. Here, these differences can be regarded as a threat to the principle of equity in education and against children's right equal education independently of where they live (Gustafsson, 2006).

Quality variation within the same municipality is also a concern: it seems that children in disadvantaged environments risk getting lower-quality care than other groups do. These differences also relate to the relative *deregulation* of child care, e.g. concerning the child: staff ratio or the distribution of other resources and costs.

Lack of qualified teachers. In 2002 a new teacher education programme for pre-school teachers, leisure educators and school teachers was introduced. With the new programme, fewer candidates are now selecting the pre-school option, and this is a cause for concern for employers (the municipalities) worried about the recruitment of trained staff in the future.

Before the reform, students were enrolled in specific teacher education programmes that had a maximum number of places available. The number was determined by the expected future needs for teachers. Nowadays, students are no longer enrolled in particular programmes chosen at the beginning of their studies (pre-school, compulsory school, different subjects, leisure educator). They can

choose freely from a range of courses that can be combined to a general teaching diploma, with different orientations. Students intending to work in secondary schools, primary schools or pre-schools can thus share the same courses.

This new programme structure and the miscellaneous grouping may have influenced more students to prefer a career in school to one in pre-school. The new organisation may possibly have weakened the development of a specific pre-school professional identity, for instance if the contents of the shared courses are general and supposed to be relevant for a large range of ages.

National evaluation of the new teacher programmes has shown up several problematic issues, and it is probable that the organisation will be changed again in the near future. Even some teacher's unions have criticised this system, asserting that it allows students too many course combinations and makes it difficult to match the newly-qualified teachers' competence with available posts. A result of this is that teachers are sometimes assigned to a subject they have not studied at all.

One goal of the most recent reform was in fact to create more flexibility in the teaching profession; thus for instance, in a life perspective a pre-school teacher could also be qualified to work in school after a supplementary course. This flexibility was meant to help solve the recurring recruitment or surplus problems at different levels of the system, which depended basically on changes in the birth rate. But the extreme flexibility of the system cannot apparently guarantee that the necessary numbers of pre-school teachers are examined each year.

Apart from the influence of the new teacher training, work conditions (timetable, weekly and annual hours, environment, salary) of staff working in pre-school have presumably become less attractive than those of teachers working in school.

Obviously, a lack of qualified teachers with post-secondary education in pre-school can negatively affect the quality of the services offered in pre-school. The latest available account of staff and resources reports data from 2005 (NAE, 2006b), are showing a moderate increase in the proportion of pre-school staff with no training in child care (5% 2005, only 1.9% in 1998). The future need for pre-school teachers with post-secondary education was also related to the expected rise in the birth rate (NAE, 2006c).

Short-sighted interpretations of the curriculum. With the introduction of the national curriculum for pre-schools in 1998, the pre-schools were incorporated into a *goal- and result-steered education system*. Under the new curriculum, the practice of assessing goal attainment and evaluating the results can be problematic for pre-schools, according to the results of the national evaluation (NAE, 2004). The practice of evaluating individual performance in relation to specific goals to be attained at a certain age conflicts with the intentions of the curriculum and the reform, yet these undesirable interpretations have occurred – in contrast with the previously more holistic educational traditions of day-care centres.

Greater individualisation, for example through individual plans for each child, was in fact an intention of the new curriculum and may have good effects if used to adapt activities to children's interests and needs. But the national evaluation pinpoints the risk that the individual plans may instead lead to an increased *focus on the child's shortcomings*. If teachers stress attainment of curriculum goals as a necessity for each child, variations in development among children can become problematic and undesirable, and children who fail to respond to curriculum expectations may risk being seen as problematic or in need of support.

The NAE national evaluation reports that child's learning has been given greater importance since the pre-school reform. This is in line with its intentions. But the NAE considers that "excessive emphasis placed on formal learning at an early stage can have negative consequences and be in conflict with the overall goals of the curriculum" (2004, p. 40).

The new curriculum was intended to enhance the quality of the pre-school and to raise its educational ambitions and importance. It is a matter for concern if a zealous interpretation and a near-sighted application of the letter of the curriculum lead to an over-identification of children's shortcomings and problems. This also contrasts with the overall goals of the curriculum.

Children with special needs. The number of children considered in *need of special support* has increased, according to the national evaluation. This increase is related by the investigators to the models developed by the municipalities for the allocation of resources: more resources should be distributed where the needs are greater, and this is not always the case. In a decentralised organisation there is a risk that pre-schools facing more difficult situations do not receive sufficient support to carry out their task. The NAE report concludes that better resource allocation models have to be developed by the municipalities in this regard, (NAE, 2004).

The aspects and changes discussed above can be interrelated in several ways. Zealous interpretation of the curriculum in the direction of fault-finding described above may be directly related to the increased identification of children with special needs. More focus on the curriculum standard may imply less understanding of children's unique experience and needs. This increased focus can also be related to the variations in quality and the lack of resources in certain areas. We can suppose that, where the pre-schools do not get enough resources to carry out their activities, quality sinks and the number of children identified as having special needs may rise: if the educational environment is poor, those children that are uncomfortable and unhappy are more likely to show behaviour problems. Problems inherent in a poor environment become in this way problems and needs inherent in the child. In the same way, a good educational environment can prevent special educational needs from arising. The low-quality pre-schools probably risk also having more problems in recruiting qualified teachers, who can choose to work in

a pre-school with a more attractive work situation. The lack of qualified teachers may be a factor in a negative spiral leading to further deterioration (see fig. 1 for a hypothetical model of the relationship between these aspects).

The occurrence of negative or positive spirals among these factors can explain how quality differences even within the same municipality may increase over time. Several factors seems to contribute and be related to the noted increase in the numbers of children considered to have special needs in pre-school: the narrow interpretation of the curriculum goals, the lack of qualified teachers, the deterioration in educational environments in low-income areas can all contribute to this over-identification of special needs in children. The risk of such negative spirals seems higher in the low-income area, and this should cause concern.

Even broader attendance. The Swedish pre-school system was already accessible to a very large proportion of the child population. With the recent reforms (see government bill 1999/2000:129) access to pre-school was defined as a right even for groups not previously considered in need of this. It is now more clearly stated that pre-school attendance must meet not only the needs of parents for care of their children while they are working, but also the needs of all children for education and stimulation, interaction and communication with other children and adults outside the family.

How the municipalities have adapted to these new regulations was evaluated by the NAE in 2006. The number and the proportion of children in pre-schools have increased since 2002 when the reform was introduced, while the fee differences between municipalities decreased dramatically after the maxtaxa reform, which imposed a ceiling on the fee payable.

3. Research

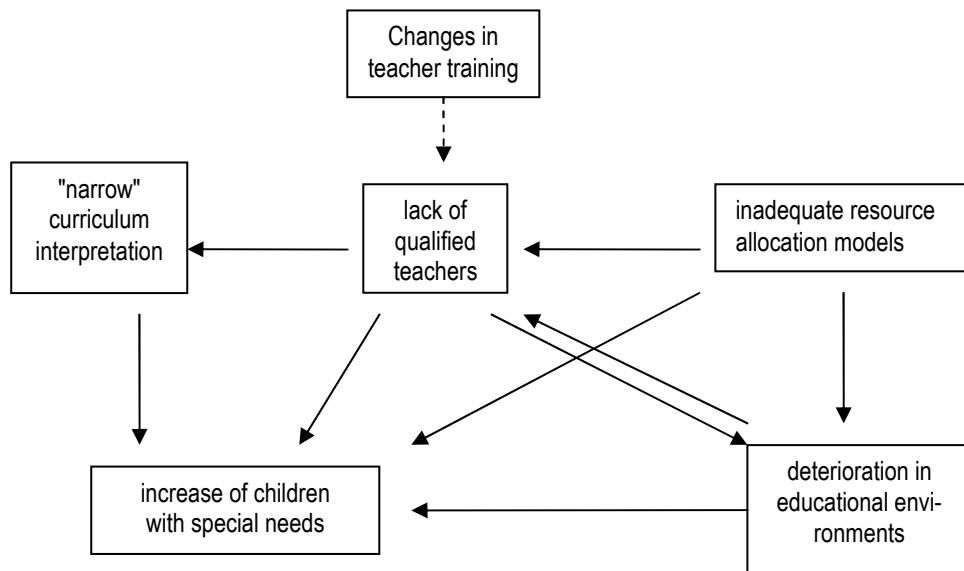
A survey of recent research in this field shows ongoing themes. The studies performed follow a variety of methods: observation, focus groups, retrospective, population, longitudinal, case, intervention studies, etc. Here follow examples from Swedish research.

One emerging theme relates to *policy analysis, organisation and administration* of ECEC at national and local levels, including analysis of the changes in pre-school activities after the most recent reforms (e.g. Samuelsson Pramling & Sheridan, 2004, Hiilamo, 2004, Qvarsell, 2005, Perez Prieto et al. 2003, Guldbrandsson & Bremberg, 2005).

Several studies look more in detail at *activities in pre-school* and focus on educational environments and practice (e.g. Andersson, 1999, Williams, 2001, Johansson & Pramling Samuelsson, 2006), on interaction among children and between children and teachers (Nordhagen et al., 2005, Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006, Thornberg, 2006) and also on special-educational interventions in pre-school aimed to increase integration and participation (Wetso, 2006).

A large field of study examines the situation of *specific groups of children* (e.g. children at risk, refugees, children with disabilities, bilingual children) and the interaction of individual experience with the educational milieu (e.g. Larsson et al. 2004, Horowitz et al., Granlund & Björck-Åkesson, 1996, Håkansson et al., 2003). Besides the research reported in peer-reviewed scientific journals, there is much experience of teaching-theory and professional development in many municipalities and pre-schools. Some of has been published in book or report form. Particularly topical is the work on *pedagogical documentation*, (Dahlberg et al. 1999, Lenz Taguchi, 2000) inspired also by experience of pre-schools in Reggio-Emilia, Italy, and on *gender equality* among pre-school children (SOU 2006:75).

Fig.1. Relationships between some problematic factors described by the national evaluation of Swedish pre-school that can contribute to a negative quality spiral.



4. Changes and reflections

The Swedish model of child care and education can be considered outstanding: it is in principle available to all children if their parents apply, irrespective of parents' income and occupation. The government and the municipalities have endeavoured to make this service available to all who need it – even if some families sometimes

have to wait more than the stipulated time before their place is available and cannot always choose the pre-school they most desire. Many forms of service are in fact available that can most often match families' needs and preferences. The ambition is and has been to offer a service of high quality to all who need it, to combine quantity and quality.

The quality of the services is monitored and controlled by the municipalities themselves and by the National Agency of Education. The latter publishes each year several reports that make it possible to follow and evaluate developments in the whole country and in each municipality.

Several experiments in professional and educational development are going on in this area as well as research by scholars in e.g. science of education, child psychology, child psychiatry, linguistics, social policy, and special education.

Some causes of concern have emerged in the past few years: the national evaluation has shown that the latest reforms have in some way challenged the system. Sometimes it seems difficult to maintain the desired high quality in all settings, in view of the increasing difficulties in recruiting qualified staff. The variation in quality and the increase in the number of children with special needs are particularly problematic issues that deserve more investment in research and intervention.

A characteristic of the Swedish welfare system is its capacity to introduce powerful reforms: some reforms now in the pipeline may contribute to further changes in the conditions for child care and education. One change announced is an overview of the regulations and financial assistance to parents. If parents received – as suggested by some parties – more economic support when they are at home with their child for the first three years, more parents would presumably prefer to stay at home and pre-school attendance for the younger children would decrease. Some changes or even new, more radical, reforms are also expected in the organisation of pre-school teacher training, in order to ensure the availability of qualified staff in pre-school in the future.

This overview suggests a picture of the Swedish system of child care and education as one of constant change as a result of diverse needs, new regulations and objective conditions. The future will tell how this system will develop and answer to current challenges emerging from evaluation and research. The presence of a comprehensive external evaluation system and of both broad and specific research can be considered extremely positive, since they can support and give direction to further development of services. However, one condition is that a strong connection is maintained between evaluation and research on the one hand and organisation and practice on the other. This connection is not obvious in a system that, itself very decentralised and flexible, is subjected to political standpoints affecting policies, personal values and preferences.

References

- Andersson, M. (1999). *The early childhood environment rating scale (ECERS) as a tool in evaluating and improving quality in preschools*. Stockholm : Stockholm Institute of Education Press (HLS).
- Daud, A. Skoglund, E., Rydelius, P-A.(2005). Children in Families of Torture Victims: Transgenerational Transmission of Parents' Traumatic Experiences to Their Children. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 14, 1, 23-32.
- G. Dahlberg, P. Moss and A. R. Pence, (1999). *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care : postmodern perspectives*. London: Falmer.
- Granlund, M. & Björck Åkesson, (1996). In service training of pre-school consultants in family-oriented intervention-training process and outcome. *British Journal of Developmental Disabilities*. Vol 42, 82, pp. 1-23.
- Guldbrandsson, K., Bremberg, S. (2005). Municipal Intentions to Promote Pre-school Children's Capabilities and Health: A Descriptive Study of 25 Swedish Municipalities. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. Vol 33, 1, 31-38.
- Gunnarsson, L. Martin Korpi, B. Nordenstam, U. (1999). *Early childhood education and care policy in Sweden*. Ministry of Education and Science.
- Hiilamo, H. (2004). Changing family policy in Sweden and Finland during the 1990s. *Social policy and administration*, 38, 1, 21-40.
- Horovitz, L. Jansson, L., Ljungberg, T., Hedenbro, T. (2006). Interaction before conflict and conflict resolution in pre-school boys with language impairment. *International Journal of Language & communication Disorders*, 41, 4, 441-466.
- Håkansson, G., Salameh, E.-K., Nattelbladt, U. (2003). Measuring language development in bilingual children: Swedish-Arabic children with and without language impairments. *Linguistics*, 41, 2, 2003, 255-288.
- Johansson, E., Samuelsson Pramling, I. (2006). Play and learning-Inseparable dimensions in preschool practice. *Early Child Development and Care*. 176, 3-4, 441
- Larsson, J-O., Bergman, L., Earls, F., Rydelius, P-A. (2004). Behavioral Profiles in 4-5 year-old Children: Normal and Pathological Variants. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*. Vol 35, 2, 143-162.
- Lenz Taguchi, H.(2000). *Emancipation och motstånd: dokumentation och kooperativa läroprocesser i förskolan*. Stockholm, HLS förlag.
- Löfdahl, A., Hägglund, S. (2006). Power and participation: Social representations among children in pre-school. *Social Psychology of Education*. Vol 9, 2, 179-194.
- National Agency of Education. (2004). *Pre-school in transition. A national evaluation of the Swedish pre-school*. Stockholm: Skolverket.

- National Agency of Education (2006a). Uppföljning av maxtaxa, allmän förskola. Stockholm : Skolverket, report 278.
- National Agency of Education (2006b). Barn, elever, personal- Riksnivå. Stockholm : Skolverket, report 277.
- National Agency of Education (2006c). Lärare inom förskola, skola och vuxenutbildning. Stockholm: Skolverket, Regeringsuppdrag, Dnr 2006:1865.
- Nordhagen, R. et al. (2005). Parental reported bullying among Nordic children: A population-based study. *Child: Care, Health and Development*. 31, 6, 693-701.
- OECD (2006). *Starting strong II: Early childhood education and care*. Annex E, Sweden.
- Perez Prieto, H., Sahlstrom, F. Calander, F., Karlsson, M., Heikkila, M. (2003). Together? On Childcare as a Meeting Place in a Swedish City. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 47 1 43-62.
- Qvarsell, B. (2005). Early childhood culture and education for children rights. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 37, 3, 99-108.
- Samuelsson Pramling, I., Sheridan, S. (2004). Recent issues in the Swedish preschool. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 6, 1, 7-22.
- SOU 2006:75. Jämställdhet i förskolan: om betydelsen av jämställdhet och genus i förskolans pedagogiska arbete: slutbetänkande av Delegationen för jämställdhet i förskolan. Stockholm: Fritzes.
- Thornberg, R. (2006). The situated nature of preschool children's conflict strategies. *Educational Psychology*. Vol 26, 1, 109-126.
- Wetso, G-M. (2006). *Lekprocessen – Specialpedagogiskt intervention i förskola*. Stockholm: HLS förlag.
- Williams, P. (2001). Pre-school routines, peer learning and participation. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*. Vol 45, 4, 317-339.