Swedish preschool children show interest and are involved in the future of the world
Children’s voices must influence education for sustainable development (ESD)

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ABSTRACT

The Swedish preschools, full day offers for children aged 1-6 years, have a long tradition of outdoor education and a curriculum that specifies goals concerning the environment, the nature and democratic values. The National Curriculum especially stresses the importance of children’s influence in the daily activities and the task to promote gender equity for girls and boys and for the teachers.

In this paper we will first tell about the specific task for Swedish pre-schools as it is stated in the national curriculum. Then we will describe a theme based project about life, hens and eggs from Långvik’s pre-school outside Stockholm, Sweden, and a research project with a gender perspective on out-door education from Mälardalen University. Finally, we point out the very important role teachers’ play and thus suggest reformed Teacher Education Programmes incorporating questions linked to education for sustainable development and to the importance of children’s influence and participation.

Previous work in Sweden

After one decade of ecological education and policy making, inspired by the Agenda 21 Rio-resolution, a committee was appointed in 2001 to summarize the process (Government Communication 2001/02:172). In 2004 the Swedish parliament formed a policy for global and sustainable development, a policy to steer all aspects and parts of the society (SOU 2004:104). All parts of the educational system, from preschool to university, have a specific responsibility to educate for sustainable development (ESD). ESD is described as having three components - ecological, social and economic – which are intertwined. The education also has to be performed in a democratic way, ensuring participation and influence for all learners. ESD for small children has a dual task, both to lay the foundations for a democratic approach and to establish a genuine interest for nature, for the environment and for natural science (Pramling Samuelsson, 2005).

The Swedish preschools, full day offers for children aged 1-6 years, have a long tradition of outdoor education. Learning and playing in natural outdoor environments are daily activities and the curriculum specifies goals concerning the environment, the nature and democratic values. With a holistic approach Swedish preschool education consider play, care, nurturing and learning as a coherent whole. The Early Childhood Education (ECE) task emanates from fundamental democratic values including striving for sustainable development.

In Sweden, the right of public access makes it possible for everyone to enjoy the countryside. Although it is not a law, it may rather be regarded as an opportunity. But it is an opportunity that requires responsibility, consideration and good judgement. The right of public access can be concisely expressed in the phrase, "Do not disturb - do not destroy". The origins of the right of public access can be traced back to laws and customs of the Middle Ages. For example, anyone travelling through a forest was entitled to gather a hatful of nuts for nourishment along the way. Such customs survived through the centuries, and have influenced today's right of public access - a cultural heritage worth preserving for the future.
Following this tradition, Swedish preschools consider questions linked to the nature and to the environment to be fundamental for the daily activities.

**National Curriculum**

The first Swedish National Curriculum for the Pre-school was passed in 1998. It is a decentralised curriculum well aligned with the curricula for the compulsory schools. In the first chapter the task and the fundamental values are stated and in the second chapter about 20 overall goals to strive for within the preschool education are specified. How to fulfil the task and goals is to be locally decided by teachers, head teachers in collaboration with the children and their parents. Some smaller additions have been made and the Swedish national curriculum is translated into English (Ministry of Education and Science, 2006). Some examples of fundamental values and goals to strive towards:

- Each and everyone working in the pre-school should promote respect for the intrinsic value of each person as well as respect for our shared environment. (a.a. p.3)

- The pre-school should put great emphasis on issues concerning the environment and nature conservation. An ecological approach and a positive belief should typify the pre-schools’ activities. The pre-school should contribute to ensuring children acquire a caring attitude to nature and the environment, and understand that they are a part of nature’s recycling process. (a.a. p.7)

**Goals to strive towards**

The pre-school should strive to ensure that each child develops

- their ability to discover, reflect on and work out their position on different ethical dilemmas and fundamental questions of life in daily reality (a.a. p.8)…

- respect for all forms of life as well as care for the surrounding environment (a.a. p.8)…

- develop an understanding of their own involvement in the process of nature and in simple scientific phenomena, such as knowledge of plants and animal (a.a. p.10)

Preschool teachers have a responsibility to develop conditions in the pre-school so children are involved and participating. Through an approach where the variety of voices from the children are listened to, and where their interests are taken into account, the pedagogues can arrange for and support learning processes which deepens the knowledge and at the same time stimulates the lust for further learning.

- A sense of exploration, curiosity and desire to learn should form the foundation for pedagogical activities. These should be based on the child’s experience, interests, needs and views. The flow of the child’s thoughts and ideas should be used to create variety in learning. (a.a. p. 9)

**Theme based projects cover all aspects of ESD in a Swedish pre-school**

In Långvik’s preschool outside of Stockholm 22 children aged 5-6 years have been working for five months with a theme that covers all aspects of ESD. The starting out point, after working with Dinosaurs for three months, was the simple and fundamental question about life: “What is alive, what carries life and what is not alive?” followed up by the question Is there life within an egg?
The teachers interviewed the children who came up with a great variety of thoughts. The children’s answers pushed the project along and they used many different kinds of languages to learn more about eggs, hens and life. The illustrations, drawings and texts, to the questions *How come some eggs carry chickens and some don’t?* and *Which animals are born from eggs?* Were exposed in the preschool and thus involved all children, all teachers and staff and all the families. As in all important research new questions came up continuously which gave inspiration to a (video-taped) study visit to a nearby farm.

When the children made their own hens in natural size with paper the project really caught every child’s interest. They identified themselves with the hens, and they were really upset when they built cages and houses for their hens, and found out how small they really were. With the help of applied mathematics they copied the “real” conditions for hens, free going or in cages, with or without ecological certification. They discussed existential and ethical aspects of being a hen and our shared responsibility as humans for nature.

Finally they asked the preschool’s cook what eggs she used and were appalled by the answer – eggs from hens in cages. They started a political process involving the municipal office, the directors of education and finance and the local egg producers. And they were successful – the rules were changed, preschools in this municipality were allowed to buy eggs from ecologically certified farms. All teachers, the children’s families and relatives also switched to eggs from hens with the nicest living conditions!

The theme really covered the three ESD components - ecological, social and economic – and it was run by the children, thus performed in a democratic and empowering way, ensuring participation and influence for all learners, which is also a fundamental aspect of ESD.

The conscious attitude of the teachers during the project was very crucial. The teachers’ roles can best be described as interested co-learners and all the pedagogical documentations that was made and used during the project were really helpful during the play and learning processes.

**Gender issues found in preschool children’s learning and playing outdoors**

In the Swedish preschool curriculum fundamental values as gender equality also play an important part and this issue must be included in all parts of the preschool programme (Ministry of Education and Science, 2006; Educational Act, 1985).

Thoughts about the nature as an environment and a pedagogical content and practise have not been discussed and problemized to a larger extent, in scientific research and especially not from gender, play and learning perspectives. This study is a part of a research project with focus on fundamental values at Mälardalen University, the Teacher Education Programme. The aim of the study is to investigate natural outdoor environment (forest play) connected to girls’ and boys’ learning and playing with a gender perspective. Generally the Swedish preschool children and teachers are going outside in natural environments once or twice in week. During the spring 2006, 86 Swedish preschool children (46 girls and 40 boys) aged 3-6 years were interviewed to investigate if there were any qualitatively different understandings of outdoor learning and play from a gender perspective. The research questions were broad spectra of questions about natural outdoor playing and learning. An interesting question is whether girls and boys describe their learning in the forest in different terms.
This article will focus on the children’s concepts, interpretation and answers about what they learn in the forest. The result can be understood with the help of three different categories; Norms, Physical and practical knowledge and Natural science. The girls are represented in all categories but the boys are only represented in the categories Norms and Physical and practical knowledge. Both girls and boys refer to norms, the boys more often, and this category was the largest.

Norms mentioned were divided into a) Norms about spatial behaviour (to be close to the teachers and not to run away), b) Norms about how to behave towards each other and c) Norms about the attitude to nature and the environment (not to break or destroy). In the category Physical and practical knowledge both girls and boys describe physical learning as motor play, running, climbing and jumping with stones and trees. Practical knowledge is e.g. building huts and snow chairs and to make up a fire. In the category Natural science there are only girls that refer to learning, e.g. about insects in the grass and bird nests. The result indicates that girls’ and boys’ learning seem to be based on different constructions of gender in outdoor natural environments. There seems to be a hidden curriculum of an admonishing practice focusing on norms, learning a lot about what NOT to do in the nature.

The complexity in analysing and understanding children’s learning can be understood in the light of hidden cultural, social and historical structures of femininity and masculinity. The children’s actions and relationships are important aspects of children’s understanding of the world in a complex holistic sense. Children learn, develop and understand their own gender identities in relation to others as playmates, teachers and parents but also as parts of the community (Browne, 2004; Johnson, Christie & Wardle, 2005; MacNaughton, 2006; Nordberg, 2005; Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2006).

Sustainable development and gender equity are important tasks in the Swedish preschool creating a need for basic research in Educational Science. The pedagogical practice as it appears in the preschools’ everyday life has to be problemized and theorized. Further research about the teachers’ concepts, teaching styles and organization of the pedagogical practice, but also about the interactions between pedagogues and children and between children in outdoor learning and play is essential. Learning studies (Marton, 2005) and pedagogical documentation are challenging methods to reveal hidden curricula and agendas, making them visible for reflection, promoting knowledge and improving the pedagogical everyday practice.

**Discussion**

The Swedish policy on sustainable development and the task specified in the national curriculum are written texts directing early childhood education by pointing out goals to strive towards for reaching high quality in all preschools. However, our paper indicates that the texts do not give sufficient guidance. Early childhood education has a pedagogical tradition well aligned with ESD. But there is a need for a conscious choice, made by teachers, directing the pedagogical activities towards overall goals aligned with ESD.

A team of teachers working with ESD need to build their pedagogy based on the children’s ideas, interests and thoughts, and it is also crucial that the teachers themselves have a curious and humble approach to their own work, what actions and what to offer in the everyday life in the preschools. ESD in Swedish preschools could be interpreted as
Ecological sustainable development – means being in the nature to develop a feeling for nature and focusing on nature and the environment as objects for learning, problemized and challenged in play and learning and with a gender perspective.

Social sustainable development – means to get to know each other and the different conditions for children in Sweden and around the world and to challenge traditional gender roles and gender patterns in the preschools. Here children’s influence and participation are essential and based on equal rights, possibilities and obligations.

Economic sustainable development – ensuring that each child’s learning and development is actively supported and challenged, and girls’ and boys’ full potential can be met through broad and wide options, which will enable the children to take full responsibility as citizens and to make the most appropriate decisions, now and in the future.

In order to reach these ambitions we need well educated teachers, prepared to make conscious decisions about the preschool programmes. Our results indicate a need for reforms within Teacher Education Programmes incorporating questions linked to education for sustainable development and to the importance of children’s influence and participation.

Teachers should promote a curriculum for Early Childhood Education (ECE) based on holistic and interdisciplinary project based learning, where question based methods make children active participators. ECE must be contextual; there is no universal model although the United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) serves as a good common foundation. ECE can tell about the world and help children to know about each other’s conditions, which is a good basis for feeling, caring and empathic empowerment. ECE shall recognise gender issues and the rights for girls and boys to equal possibilities and responsibilities, and teach the basic life skills.

Teachers play a decisive role for children’s learning about sustainable development and to help them find the most appropriate solutions. But the children represent the future and it is our obligation to empower them for the challenged future of Earth.

References


Abbreviations used:
ECE – Early Childhood Education
ESD – Education for Sustainable Development
SOU – Statens offentliga utredningar [Swedish national report]