



Stockholm Institute of Education

Department of Human Development, Learning and Special Education

Ingrid Engdahl

+46-8-737 59 17

Infants and Toddlers in Swedish Preschools

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Presentation of the author

Ingrid Engdahl is a lecturer at the Stockholm Institute of Education. She holds degrees in Psychology and Early Childhood Education. Earlier, she worked as a preschool teacher, head teacher and project leader with a preference for infants and toddlers. She has been the president of the Swedish Association of Preschool Teachers and is now president in the local Stockholm OMEP organisation.

Please contact ingrid.engdahl@lhs.se for further information.

Abstract:

In Sweden, many parents now choose full-day preschool for their children when they start working after their period of parental leave, 41 % of the 1-year-olds and 78% of the 2-year-olds (2003). The educational programme follows the National Curriculum for the Pre-school from 1998, where tasks, goals and guidelines are jointly described for children 1-5 years old.

EDUCARE - a combination of education and caring states to pre-schools to organise a good playful environment meeting the interests and needs of the children and at the same time meeting the needs from the parents, taking good care of the children, and from the society, enabling parents to go to work.

With reference to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, you must recognise the child as a human being with her/his own rights. Children are no longer viewed as objects, to be taken care of by adults. Children are active and intentional subjects. Their construction of knowledge emanates from their own experiences. It involves the whole body and is at the same time both social and cultural. Learning is always taking place in a context, social, physical and psychological. A sense of exploration, curiosity and desire to learn should form the foundations for the educational activities. These should be based on the child's experiences, interests, needs and views. The flow of the children's thoughts and ideas should be used to create variety in learning.

Play in a curriculum directed pre-school must be related to the objects of learning and the content worked on, otherwise children might as well play at home. Just as development and learning are now seen as a joint, intertwined process, maybe early childhood education in the next decade will be built on an integration of play and learning.

Research points out, in addition to the structural framework, some important quality factors for working with infants and toddlers; how you look upon the children, how you look upon the concepts of knowledge and learning, the emotional climate and children's involvement.

Address	Visits	Telephone	Fax nr	Postgiro
Box 34 103	Rålambsv. 34b, H416	+46-8-737 59 17	+46-8-737 96 75	78 81 13-9
S-10026 Stockholm	e-mail ingrid.engdahl@lhs.se			
Sweden				

Preschools in Sweden

A short presentation¹

Preschools in Sweden offer educational group activity for enrolled children between the ages 1-5 years. In 2003 for 75% of the children attended, ranging from 40% for the 1-year olds, 78% av the 2-year olds to 89% for the 5-year olds.² As a rule, preschools are open all year and for most of the day. Families are charged not more than 3, 2 or 1% of their income for their first, second and third child respectively. The group size usually varies between 12-25 children. Overall, 50% of the staff are trained preschool teachers (university level) and 42% are nursery nurses (secondary school level). In each preschool the number of educated preschool teachers can vary between 20-100%.

Parental leave

Parents have the right by law to take parental leave from their work until the child reaches 18 months. All employers in Sweden have to pay social insurance for their employed. When you are on parental leave, or if you turn ill, you get approximately 80% of your salary (normal incomes) from this insurance. This is not paid directly by your own employer. The money is distributed by the national insurance company. In Sweden today, parents can share as many as 480 days with an insurance covering 80% of their income. Fathers have to use 60 days. These reforms are general and open for all citizens. They are parts of the Swedish Welfare System, where the Welfare reforms are directed to every one. Thus, welfare in Sweden does not mean aid to underprivileged groups.³

The origins of the Swedish preschool

Preschools in Sweden have a long history.⁴ The first preschools were started in the middle of the 19th century in Stockholm and other larger cities. Industrialisation left great numbers of children unattended while their mothers/parents worked. Philanthropists and representatives from the church started day-care institutions. The inspiration came from Robert Owen and his Scottish Infant schools, from Friedrich Fröbel and his Kindergarten and of course from Rudolf Steiner and Maria Montessori.

The different traditions formed two different types of preschools, fulltime day-care centres for children aged between three months and seven years, while their mothers worked, and part-time kindergarten for the benefit of children aged three to seven years. The day-care centres combined the task of caring and nurturing for the children with play and learning. Preschool teachers, if found, led the centres with nursery nurses, apprentices and volunteers to their help. Food was served and the daily routine included a rest/sleep after lunch. The kindergartens, also called play-schools, were usually organised in three hours sessions, sometimes for two groups/day. The programme was educational, focusing on the children's need to play.⁵

These two traditions were unified by a national committee, appointed 1968 by the government to resolve the rapidly growing demand of good day-care for the numbers of women who now had left their lives as house-wives and joined the labour market. The committee's propositions⁶ resulted in 1975 in a Preschool Act introducing the overall concept PRESCHOOL, which could exist full-time or part-time. Both forms were to follow the same task EDUCARE.

¹ National Agency for Education, (2004:a) The figures are taken from official presentations in English.

² National Agency for Education, (2004:b)

³ National Social Insurance Board, (2004).

⁴ Simmons Christensen, G. (1997).

⁵ Johansson, G. & Åstedt, I-B. (1996).

⁶ SOU, (1972).

The EDUCARE concept is a combination of education and caring stating that preschools should organise a good playful environment meeting the needs of the children and at the same time meet the needs from the parents taking good care of the children and from the society, enabling parents to go to work. Educare grew in Sweden during the 1960's and 1970's and manifests a period in Sweden when welfare systems were built and the common solutions were highly appreciated.⁷

The educationally motivated reform was followed by huge quantitative efforts to build new preschools. The percentage of children attending preschool rose from less than 25% in 1975 to 75% in 2003. During the same period the parliament has implemented a number of changes. A child allowance to all children was introduced in 1944 and has been increased over the years. Parents have the right by law to take parental leave from their work. All employers in Sweden have to pay social insurance for their employed. When you are on parental leave, or if you turn ill, you get approximately 80% of your salary (normal incomes) from this insurance. This is not paid directly by your own employer. The money is distributed by the national insurance company. In Sweden today, parents can share as many as 480 days with an insurance covering 80% of their income. Fathers have to use some of the days. These reforms are general and open for all citizens. They are parts of the Swedish Welfare System, where the Welfare reforms are directed to every one. Thus, welfare in Sweden does not mean aid to underprivileged groups.⁸

Characteristics of the Swedish preschool

I will now try to give you some characteristics of Swedish preschool education. Sweden was very active in establishing the UN Convention on the rights of the child and we try to organise pre-schools with the best interest of the children in focus.⁹

- We have a comprehensive view of the children. We talk about the whole child, referring to all aspects of the child, we plan for the whole day, matching the demands from the parents in one place all day, and we work always, in the meaning we use all possibilities for education as we consider all hours of the day to be equally important. According to this holistic approach we work with EDUCARE, with a combination of education and care.

- We recognise children to be individuals with their own rights. Children of today are active and competent and they influence their surroundings right from the start as well as being influenced by it.¹⁰

- Learning and development are processes happening any time, not just when we, the adults, have planned for them, and the learning is not always corresponding to what we had in mind. Learning and development are best promoted when children have fun and may concentrate on the things they are interested in.¹¹

- This is normally called PLAY and we believe children learn through play.¹²

- The role of a teacher is to recognise each child individually as well as in groups, their interests, wishes and needs. The teachers relate, guide, and follow the children but we also arrange the programme and the setting. We work in teams of educated teachers with joint responsibilities, and we try to keep the numbers of children in each group small.¹³

⁷ Walch, J. (1993).

⁸ National Social Insurance Board, (2004).

⁹ UN Convention. (1989).

¹⁰ Stern, Daniel N. (1991).

¹¹ Rogoff, B., Goodman Turkkanis, C. & Bartlett, L. (2001).

¹² Olofsson, B. Knutsdotter. (1996).

¹³ Johansson, G. & Åstedt, I-B. (1996).

These factors were also recognised in 1999 when Sweden was inspected by a group of international experts, appointed by the OECD. The group concluded in their report of December 1999 that Early Childhood Education and Care in Sweden is of high quality, in many areas the very best.¹⁴ One of the researchers in the OECD investigation group went so far in his conclusions that he declared in an interview:

-If I were to be a child again, I would like to be raised in Sweden!

Transition from the Social sector to Education

As shown earlier, preschool development in Sweden has been strongly linked to the construction of the general welfare society. By tradition, preschools were supervised by the National Board of Health and Welfare and locally by the authorities for Social Services. When the expansion of preschools had reached a good majority of the preschool children, the government introduced the next initiative at the national level. The whole section of preschools, family day-care and after school centres was to be moved into the field of Education. In this way, everything becoming education, the question about when to start school was neutralised.¹⁵ Compulsory school starts at the age of seven in Sweden. A committee was then given the task to consider a National curriculum also for the preschool, which in Sweden means education for children between 1 and 5 years. 6 year-olds are educated in special preschool classes, located in primary schools.

A national curriculum strengthens the Educational Task for preschools

The government acted quickly. The Education Act was changed in January 1998 to contain paragraphs about preschool, family day-care and after school activities. The very first National curriculum for the Preschool was put into force in August 1998.¹⁶ The curriculum has the legal status of ordinance with binding provisions. It is written for a decentralised school system, where the local municipalities are responsible for the education provisions.

The curriculum is very short, around 20 pages, and sets out the fundamental values as well as the goals and guidelines for the activities. The financial resources and priorities are decided in the local municipalities. The curriculum does not stipulate how these goals are to be attained. The actual education and the question of how to teach are decided at the level of individual preschools, by the teachers and head teachers in co-operation with children and parents. This has led to many fruitful discussions locally, putting educational issues in focus. Teachers have to put down their planning in local work-plans but, first they have to welcome parents and children into discussions about the programme, schedule and methods.

Preschools are considered to be the first stage in the Swedish educational system. The task is stated to be: *“The preschool should lay the foundation for lifelong learning. The preschool should be enjoyable, secure and rich in learning for all children.”*¹⁷

All children aged 1-5 years have a right to preschool education. Preschools are now first of all motivated by the children’s best interest. The parents’ need for good day-care to enable them to take up positions on the labour market is still a very important factor, but not the dominating. Preschools are an important link in the Swedish system of Education. This is shown for instance in the regulation, introduced in 2003, that children whose parents are out of work or on parental leave with a sibling nevertheless have the right to attend preschool three hours a day. The child’s need to

¹⁴ OECD. (2001).

¹⁵ Johansson, I. (2003).

¹⁶ Ministry of Education and Science. (1998:a).

¹⁷ Ministry of Education and Science. (1998:a). p. 8.

stay in preschool is recognised. A maximum fee for the preschool education has been introduced. For children aged four and five, this is a free option three hours daily.¹⁸

In preschools, the outcome of the individual child will not be formally assessed. One reason for this is that children attend preschool differently. Some start preschool when they turn 1 and spend 6-8 hours in the preschool most week-days until they turn 6. Other children just spend 1-2 years, three hours daily, in preschool. As the preschool curriculum guides the educational work for all children goals to strive towards are found to be helpful.

The concept of the child

Many discussions throughout Sweden have concentrated on a new approach to view children. A frequently quoted attachment to the school curriculum committee of 1994 describes two different dominant views of children: *Children as sprung from Nature* and *Children as Reproducers of culture and knowledge*.¹⁹

When you consider the child as sprung from nature, the content is focused on social, emotional, motor and psychological processes. You stress the daily routines in order to foster a capable group member. The underlying assumption is that children, as the nature, are mostly biologically run. They will grow and mature in their own pace, and we adults should just make sure there is lots of time for free play, preferably outside. But where lies the cognitive challenge? This tradition is often found in preschools.

If you on the other hand look upon the child as a reproducer of culture and knowledge, the content is subject oriented, focusing on the cognitive processes of the child. It is rational, as opposed to emotional, the activities are related to specific goals. The underlying assumption here is that children come empty to school and they need to be taught everything (the teachers know). Where is the challenge to become a complete human being with social skills and in contact with the emotions? This tradition is mostly found in schools.

Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi describe a third possible way to look upon the child; “*the child as a producer of culture and knowledge*”.²⁰ Here, you must recognise the child as a human being with her/his own rights. Children have the same value as adults and in many ways adults have lots to learn from children. The content will be decided by children and teachers together because you start with the children’s own thoughts and questions and you have to listen to what they try to communicate. This way to look upon children is inspired by, among others, the educational philosopher Loris Malaguzzi, one of the founders of the preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy.²¹

Teachers have to be aware of and listen to the 100 languages of children, to disregard pre-suppositions and to involve children in communication. This includes learning how to argue, negotiate and criticise. An overall goal is a collaborative creation of meaning, as opposed to passing on facts. Thus learning is considered to be a process, best reached when working in projects and with themes. This view of children in fact also gives the teachers a new role - the child and the pedagogue as constructors and co-researchers.²²

Children are no longer viewed as objects, to be taken care of by adults. Children are active and intentional subjects. Right from birth they are occupied with trying to capture and to understand the

¹⁸ Pramling Samuelsson, I. & Sheridan, S. (2004).

¹⁹ Dahlberg, G. & Lenz Taguchi, H. (1994).

²⁰ Dahlberg, G. & Lenz Taguchi, H. (1994). p.21.

²¹ Reggio Children. (2004).

²² Reggio Children. (2001).

world in an ever ongoing developmental learning process. Their construction of knowledge emanates from their own experiences. It involves the whole body and, is at the same time both social and cultural. Learning is always taking place in a context, social, physical and psychological. The result – the knowledge - can be understood as a relation between the child and her surroundings.²³

According to recent psychological studies children have a capacity to communicate and build relations to a larger number of people than was thought earlier.²⁴ Without neglecting the importance of strong relations to the parents and other family members, children now have broader possibilities. Children today take part in many different situations and social contexts. In Sweden, 40 % of the children start preschool when they turn one. Here, they meet lots of children, their parents and siblings and of course lots of teachers and they do make lots of new friends. Children are born with a competence for and an interest in being together. They have the ability to relate to others, to take other people's wishes and perspectives into account.²⁵

Early childhood education is about getting to know yourself and others, to develop a personal identity and to capture the surrounding world.²⁶ Sometimes, the individual wishes are in conflict with the common good, sometimes they go well along. These dual aspects of social life are necessary and well provided in educational settings. It seems like the many variations children meet daily are the challenging sources for exploration and an eagerness to learn.²⁷

An example of an active, competent child

Mathias, 14 months, is outdoors together with other children and with teachers. He starts crawling up a staircase leading up to a platform, attached to a suspension bridge. From the bridge he can reach another platform and finally a slide leading down into the sand again. From the very start the teacher encourages Mathias: "What a good boy!". He smiles towards her. Some children pass Mathias, almost bouncing into him. He almost stops crawling but, with the help of the encouraging teacher, he continues and finally reaches the platform, where there is a gap to the bridge. The teacher moves to the other side and says: "Come here!". Cautiously, Mathias crawls onto the bridge, the adult follows. The bridge is swinging while other children pass. Mathias stands up and balances away. The adult studies him carefully and says: "Hold on here!", showing him a rope. Slowly, Mathias manages to reach the other platform. The teacher again quickly moves to a new side to meet him. Some older children are waiting for their turn to slide down. Mathias waits, sits down, is helped by the adult to turn around and goes down the slide on his stomach. "How clever you are!" the pedagogue says once again. Mathias immediately stands up again and repeats the procedure around the climbing frame two more times, quicker and more secure for each lap. The teacher follows him the whole time, smiles, jokes and supports him. Mathias smiles too. He has conquered the Slide!²⁸

When analysing the situation, maybe you start out by thinking that the climbing frame is too large for Mathias, who is just 14 months old. Shouldn't the adult discourage him from trying such a dangerous task? Well, some adults might, but here we are in a preschool, with a preschool teacher recognising the wish, the intent and the competence of Mathias. She makes it possible for him to

²³ Johansson, E. & Pramling Samuelsson, I. (2003).

²⁴ Pramling, I. (1993).

²⁵ Sommer, D. (1997).

²⁶ Brodin, M. & Hylander, I. (1997).

²⁷ Doverborg, E. & Pramling, I. (1995).

²⁸ Pramling Samuelsson, I. & Lindahl, M. (1999).p.107. (own translation, somewhat shortened)

try out his intentions. It is also evident that the pedagogue does not separate different aspects of Mathias development; social, motor, emotional and cognitive aspects are intertwined. Learning is an interactive process leaning on communication. The conclusion tells us something important about the competent child and about the importance of a sensitive teacher:

*“Without the adults accompanying, this learning episode had not been possible and, without the child’s active involvement, the learning had never taken place.”*²⁹

Taking the perspective of the child

The concept of child perspective has been raised in relation to the UN convention on the Rights of the Child³⁰ and is also noted in the Swedish preschool curriculum. Taking the child's perspective has to do with studying children's social relationships and cultures in their own right apart from the perspective and concerns of adults. Child perspective can also be looked upon and discussed as children's accounts of their own lived life, which means taking into consideration children's accounts as well as the process of understanding children's views as part of the discussion.³¹

Yet another way to define the child's perspective takes into account the child's experiences, intentions and expressions of meaning that is *“the phenomena that might become visible for the child”*.³² It is important, especially with infants and toddlers, to take the wholeness of the physical child into account as well as the entire situation when interpreting children's actions as expressions of a child's perspective. This includes the child's experiencing and expressing of meaning. Taking the child's perspective also means establishing a close relation, something which takes time. Closeness is attained through sensitivity and respect for a child's integrity.

The concepts of Knowledge and Learning

The new Swedish curricula have broadened the concept of knowledge. One hundred years ago, knowledge was considered to be objective and permanent, something that could be passed on, learned-by-heart. A teacher could lean on her formal education, her knowledge would last all her professional life. Today, knowledge includes so much more; the amount of knowledge grows very quickly and it even becomes out-of-date. We live in a society with rich access to information and knowledge, which is not only found in schools and universities as before. New media invite us into new experiences. We travel around the world and sometimes we know more about someone in another country than about our neighbours. Children become experts in different fields and they often know more than their parents and their teachers. All in all, this development of the society calls for new definitions of knowledge and of the task for preschools and schools.

*“Knowledge is a complex concept, which can be expressed in a variety of forms – as facts, understanding, skills, familiarity and experience – all of which presupposes and interacts with each other. The starting point for the preschool is the experience children have already gained, their interests, motivation and compulsion to acquire knowledge.”*³³

Professor Pramling Samuelsson, president of the Swedish OMEP has been engaged in research within Early Childhood Education during the last 25 years, recently summarised her position in a *Developmental Pedagogical Theory*.³⁴ Teachers do no longer have the task to shape the child, to model them into some sort of ideal. In stead, they should direct their efforts towards the conditions in which learning take place and strive towards understanding. Learning is a process which grows if it is communicated, when discussed on a meta-level. Children need to talk and to reflect over their

²⁹ Pramling Samuelsson, I. & Lindahl, M. (1999). p. 112.(own translation)

³⁰ UN Convention. (1989).

³¹ Halldén, G. 2003.

³² Johansson, E. (2003).

³³ Ministry of Education and Science. (1998:a). p.10.

³⁴ Pramling Samuelsson, I. & Asplund Carlsson, M. (2003).

own thoughts and experiences. Children are unique, and this gives the teacher – and the children – a great variation of ideas and opinions in every situation. Using this multiplicity consciously, the teacher works with many different perspectives, thoughts and ideas. These perspectives can be used in natural or arranged situations where they certainly will challenge the children's thinking.

*“A sense of exploration, curiosity and desire to learn should form the foundations for pedagogical activities. These should be based on the child's experiences, interests, needs and views. The flow of the child's thoughts and ideas should be used to create variety in learning.”*³⁵

The process of formulating work-plans and methodology in accordance with the curriculum and within a changed society must continue. Teaching could be redefined from mediation – passing on certain knowledge - to something like *intentionally chosen pedagogical goal-directed acts*.³⁶

*“The teacher has a clear “teaching” role, that is, to work intentionally to develop the child's learning of values, skills and an understanding of different aspects of the world around them.”*³⁷

An important step for Swedish preschool teachers to take is to become aware of the focused content in education and also to develop the skill to communicate their intentions. In the British project, *Effective Provision in Preschool Education – EPPE* the researchers talk about “*shared sustainable thinking*”.³⁸ Shared sustainable thinking means that the child – or children – and the teacher share the same focus of attention. Communicating around this shared focus seems to enhance learning in a way similar to the sort of meta-communication Pramling Samuelsson previously has shown to be effective.³⁹

Factors that indicate high quality

Eva Johansson from Gothenburg University has recently performed a study in 10 Swedish cities covering 30 preschools with infants and toddlers. Her research shows that the way the team of teachers look upon the children, the concepts of knowledge and learning, the emotional climate and children's involvement are crucial factors. In preschools of high quality children are looked upon as competent human beings with their own rights, interacting with each other and with the teachers. An atmosphere of well-being and involvement characterises the in-door climate.⁴⁰ These factors are also well described by Ferdinand Laevers in Belgium when he writes about Experiential Education.

Challenges for the future

A tendency towards a more school oriented focus

After five years with the curriculum, the aim to strengthen the educational task for preschools seems already fulfilled.⁴¹ Learning and teaching activities are taking place. One explanation has to do with the local organisation. Preschools have become parts of the local school system. Sometimes they have the head of the local school. In the suggested process of building continuity between preschool and school, the school vocabulary and the school rules are often followed even in

³⁵ Ministry of Education and Science. (1998:a). p.12.

³⁶ SOU. (1997:b).

³⁷ Pramling Samuelsson, I. & Sheridan, S. (2004).p.16.

³⁸ Siraj Blatchford, I. et al. (2002).

³⁹ Doverborg, E. & Pramling, I. (1993).

⁴⁰ Johansson, E. (2003).

⁴¹ National Agency for Education. (2004:c)

preschools. If the preschool tradition about integrating care, nurture and learning to a coherent whole shall last, one must take the reports about “schoolifying” the Swedish preschools very seriously.

In Sweden, the leading psychological and pedagogical theories during the last thirty years stress interaction and co-operation. Still, the old psychological school of assessing individual children within certain frames and stages is very strong. If something problematic occurs, teachers still tend to pin the reasons on the children. Instead of saying for instance “*Peter has a hard time concentrating on his tasks*” teachers could ask *Why is Peter so bored in this environment? Which learning style could better reach him? What have I misunderstood? What new ways could we try?*⁴² In stead of talking about children’s lack of concentration skills and boredom, teachers could ask themselves why the environment is so meagre and poor and why the teaching is so monotonous and repetitive.

Variations in quality

In a decentralised school system, as we have in Sweden, local variation is expected and welcome. Decentralisation enables local politicians and teachers to adapt their preschools and schools to the different local and individual needs. However, the national evaluation shows that local authorities don’t always take varying conditions into account when they allocate resources. Conditions that should influence the resources are for instance the socio-economic settings, the parents’ willingness to co-operate with the preschools, the proportion of immigrants, the number of children with special needs and the level of the pedagogues’ education. The report quotes the following paragraph from the preschool curriculum:

*“Account should be taken of the varying conditions and needs of children. This means that the preschool cannot be organised in the same way everywhere, and that the resources of the preschool need not be distributed equally.”*⁴³

The report concludes that local municipalities must take this provision into account in the future and a further recommendation is to involve the preschool professionals more in the decision-making.

Redefining play and learning within preschool pedagogy

Play is one of the foundations in Early Childhood Education, children play everywhere and all the time. But play had another meaning in the context of the early Kindergartens. The perspective of *play* has changed just as *learning* and *knowledge* have been redefined. Nowadays, involvement, concentration, having fun, using all senses, starting from the child’s suggestions and being together is characteristic for both play and learning.

For children playing is a goal in itself; they play to create meaning in their lives. Teachers on the other hand tend to put up goals for the play, a different angle that shows how close play and learning have come. Play-full education is of course better than boring education! You choose to play, it is voluntary and fun, while learning during lessons in school is not always perceived that way. Yet, you learn most when you have fun. Creativity and fantasy are other characteristics for play and nowadays researchers often link creativity with learning.⁴⁴ Play in a curriculum directed preschool must be related to the objects of learning and the content worked on, otherwise children might as well play at home.⁴⁵ Just as development and learning are now seen as a joint, intertwined

⁴² Nordin-Hultman, E. (2004).

⁴³ Ministry of Education and Science. (1998:a).p.8.

⁴⁴ Pramling Samuelsson, I. & Asplund Carlsson, M. (2003).

⁴⁵ Pramling Samuelsson, I. & Sheridan, S. (2004).

process, maybe early childhood education in the next decade will be built on an integration of play and learning.

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