Preschool class: a one-way bridge to primary school

Examining preschool class teachers’ perspectives on preparatory practices for children’s transition to primary school

**Course:** Thesis Project, 15.0 credits

**PROGRAM:** EDUCARE: The Swedish preschool Model

**Author:** Filia Milopoulou

**Supervisor:** Monica Nilsson

**Examiner:** Robert Lecusay

**Semester:** Spring, 2018
Abstract

Filia Milopoulou

Preschool class: a one-way bridge to primary school
Examining preschool class teachers’ perspectives on preparatory practices for children’s transition to primary school

The preschool class was built in 1998 in an effort by the Swedish government to achieve a smooth transition for the children from preschool to compulsory school. This voluntary, one-year class was envisioned as a bridge between preschool and compulsory school, and the activities would be unlike those in preschool or school. Nevertheless, presently the role of the preschool class seems to be unclear to the preschool class teachers. This is all the more concerning given that in 2018 this class will become mandatory children. The aim of this qualitative study was to investigate how teachers understand preschool class and “preschool class pedagogy” as a distinct practice, that is “not preschool” and “not school”, and if and how in that case, mandatory attendance in preschool class will change their view. In this qualitative study, transition theories were applied to characterize teachers’ understanding of the preschool class meaning as a transition year, its preparatory role, and the teachers’ perspectives on this transition class. The sample consisted of four preschool class teachers who were either former or current preschool class teachers. The study data was based on semi-structured interviews, observations and document analysis. This study found that the preschool class teachers understand this class as a one-way bridge to primary school and emphasized the importance of the new policy of the mandatory attendance as a beneficial change for the children.

Key words: preschool class, transition theories, policy change, teachers’ perspectives, curriculum, bridge, Sweden
# Table of Contents

1. Introduction ........................................................................................................... 2

2. Background ............................................................................................................. 3
   2.1. Transitions ...................................................................................................... 3
   2.2. Transitions in Swedish Schooling ................................................................... 4
   2.3. The Policy of preschool class .......................................................................... 5
   2.4. Preparation for Primary .................................................................................. 7

3. Research Aim .......................................................................................................... 9

4. Research Questions ............................................................................................... 10

5. Methods .................................................................................................................. 10
   5.1. Theoretical Framework .................................................................................. 10
   5.2. Participants ..................................................................................................... 11
   5.3. Field sites ....................................................................................................... 12
   5.4. Documentation Methods ............................................................................... 12
   5.5. Analysis .......................................................................................................... 13
   5.6. Ethical Guidelines ......................................................................................... 13
   5.7. Validity, Reliability, Generalizability of the Data ........................................ 13

6. Findings and Discussion ....................................................................................... 14
   6.1. “Preschool class pedagogy” .......................................................................... 14
   6.2. Follow up on the children from preschool and preparation for primary ....... 18
   6.3. Mandatory Attendance .................................................................................. 24

7. Conclusion ............................................................................................................. 25
   7.1. Future Research ............................................................................................. 26
   7.2. Limitations ...................................................................................................... 26

8. Reference List ....................................................................................................... 26

9. Appendix ............................................................................................................... 29
   Appendix A. Interview guide .................................................................................. 29
1. Introduction

In an effort by the Swedish government to help children transition from preschool to primary school, the preschool class was introduced in 1998, a one-year class between preschool and primary school (Skolverket, 2011). The preschool class is a transition class that children can attend the year they turn six until the start of compulsory schooling. Swedish municipalities are required to provide all 6-year-olds with a place in preschool class. While enrollment in the class is not mandatory, more than 95% of children attended (Alatalo, Meier & Frank, 2015).

Preschool class was created to bridge the gap between preschool and primary school (Ackesjö, 2017). The original intent behind preschool class was to ease children’s transition between preschool, a voluntary activity, and compulsory primary school. Acting as this bridge, preschool class was understood as a space for integrating preschool practices into primary school (Alatalo, Meier & Frank, 2014). A main goal of preschool class was to create continuity in early education (Ackesjö & Persson, 2016). According to Alatalo and colleagues, in preschool class the teachers should provide the children with a safe transition and care, rather than to promote continuous and long-term learning outlined in the primary school curriculum (Alatalo et al., 2014).

The preschool class, as a transition year, was envisioned as being neither a school activity nor a pure preschool activity (Nilsson, 2014; Skolverket, 2004). However, a booklet about preschool class that was recently published by the Swedish Ministry of Education (Skolverket) paints a different picture. The booklet, published as a guide for teachers for how to work in preschool class, described preschool class as having become too focused on preparation for school or as too focused on preschool traditions and playful activities (Skolverket, 2014a).

Currently, a preschool class is typically staffed by either one qualified and experienced compulsory school teacher or one qualified and experienced preschool teacher. Also, a fritidspedagog1 typically participates as an assistant in the classroom. preschool class is

---

1 Fritidspedagog: pedagogue who works at the leisure center after school or helps the teacher in the classroom
located on the primary school premises, and therefore is embedded into the “school-world.” However, with both preschool and primary school teachers working with children in preschool class, the work done there has influences from both preschool and primary school “worlds” (Ackesjö, 2013). The teachers work to achieve the outcome of a smooth transition for children from preschool to the primary school.

Although the preschool class was voluntary, the Swedish government has now decided that it will be obligatory beginning in the fall of 2018 (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2017). Concretely this now means that children in Sweden must now begin compulsory school a year earlier. Contradictions in previous voluntary attendance and current mandatory attendance policy present the following dilemma: Will preschool class extend mandatory schooling by one year, or will it remain as a class “in-between” the preschool and the compulsory school cultures, where children are no longer considered preschool children, but are not yet considered school students (Garpelin, 2014)?

Given the upcoming changes and the contradictions contained in the steering documents, the aim of this research is to illustrate how teachers understand the preschool class and “preschool class pedagogy” as a distinct practice, which is not preschool and not school, and if and how in that case, the mandatory attendance in preschool class will change their view and way of working.

2. Background

The following section begins with a brief examination of the meaning of transition in educational contexts, followed by a discussion of how transitions are understood to take place for children at the age of 6-7 years old in Sweden. Next, the policy of preschool class, the curriculum of preschool class and the guidelines that teachers follow in these classes will be discussed. This section concludes with a discussion of approaches preschool class teachers adopt in order to prepare children for primary school.

2.1. Transitions

Transitions have traditionally been characterized as forms of change. These may be inner changes (new beliefs or developmental growth) or the physical changes from one place to another (Crafter & Maunder, 2012). In education, transitions are typically framed in terms of forward movement from one educational level to another, with corresponding changes to the curriculum, the school, and the teachers (O’ Kane & Hayes, 2007).
Transitions in school may also involve nervousness, anxiety, and insecurity that children confront in order to face the new social contexts and different educational practices (Ackesjö, 2013).

Moving from preschool to formal schooling has been identified internationally as a crucial step for young children to overcome. (O’ Kane & Hayes, 2007). According to the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER, 2005), the transition should be viewed “as a process rather than an event.” Furthermore, teachers have to take into consideration that the learning situation of the child changes during the transition practice (Samuelsson, 2006).

2.2. Transitions in Swedish Schooling

Previously in Sweden, there was no specific transition year from preschool to primary school. All children began compulsory school the year they turn seven. In 1998, the preschool class was born as an optional transition year, where the activities in this new class would be neither school activities nor pure preschools activities (Swedish Agency for School Improvement, 2006). Education in the preschool class should stimulate students' development and learning and prepare them for further education (Skolverket, 2011). Skolverket has put forward guidelines to aid children in the transition from preschool to primary (Skolverket, 2011).

The preschool class guidelines published by Skolverket describe the preschool class as having a specific identity that should be characterized by a combination of preschool and school methods and pedagogy. Play, care, creativity, and the child's own exploration would also have a bearing on how activities are organized in the preschool class. The guidelines emphasized that the preschool class should act as a bridge between preschool and school where the children were supposed to “follow their own rhythm” (Ackesjö, 2013, p.389). Increased educational cooperation between preschool and school should contribute to develop a holistic view of children as well as children's learning and development, which should lead to better quality in the cooperation among the preschool, preschool class and compulsory school. The intention was that a new pedagogy and a new approach could be developed (Skolverket, 2014a).

When the preschool class was introduced in 1998, one aim was to find ways for preschool pedagogy to influence the organization of activities in primary school (Nilsson,
2014). However, the integration between preschool and school was also motivated by economic reasons, (Nilsson, 2014; Persson, 2008) as the ambition was to extend elementary school by an additional year, which was seen as being cheaper than providing the children with preschool education (Nilsson, 2014). There were expectations and hopes that a new educational practice and new approach would be able to develop, in which preschool class would act differently than the preschool and the primary school (Nilsson, 2014). However, there was the risk that preschool class would be dominated by the school’s rules and pedagogy, and that the preschool class teachers would teach more like the primary teachers (Nilsson, 2014).

2.3. The Policy of preschool class

The National Curriculum of preschool class contains the values, goals, guidelines, and the purpose of this class (Skolverket, 2016b). The aim of the preschool class is to stimulate the development of each child’s learning and prepare the children for future education, as well as promote their harmonious development (Alatalo et al., 2015, p.155). Play, exploration, and creativity are important parts in children’s education, and their desire and curiosity for the activities should be taken into consideration by the teachers (Skolverket, 2014b). The curriculum of preschool class has three parts: the first part is about the school’s values and mission, the second part is about the goals and guidelines of preschool class and the third part is about the purpose and the content of preschool class (Skolverket, 2016b).

A variety of values are prioritized in preschool class in Sweden. The preschool class should be a democratic environment that respects the inviolability of human life, the freedom and integrity of the individual, the equal value of all people, gender equality and solidarity with vulnerable people (Skolverket, 2014a). The school should be open to different perceptions and encourage them to be presented. The staff should create an open and democratic environment. Finally, there should be an equivalent education for all children (Skolverket, 2014a).

The curriculum lays out a set of goals and guidelines that should be achieved during the preschool class, and the teachers must present opportunities for children to develop their socially, emotionally and cognitively (Skolverket, 2016b). In line with the Swedish preschool curriculum, activities in preschool class should be focused on goals to strive for (vs. goals to reach). The curriculum emphasizes that the school's task is to allow each individual child to find their unique character and thereby participate in community life.
by giving his/her best in a free and responsible way. However, the overall goals set the
standards and values, as well as the skills that all pupils should develop when leaving the
preschool class (Skolverket, 2016b).

In 2014 Skolverket published a supplementary booklet to provide increased knowledge
and understanding of the preschool class content. The publication of this booklet was
motivated in part by the observation that there was a general confusion among teachers
about how to work in preschool class. The booklet, thus, aims to guide the preschool
class teachers on how to work in the preschool class, and contains examples from the
experience and practice of teachers, school principals, and researchers, where they
explain how the activities in the preschool class can be pursued. It is primarily aimed at
primary school teachers and preschool teachers in preschool classes, and people who
lead and coordinate the educational work at the school unit. The material is also
addressed to school principals and those active in preschools, recreation centers,
elementary schools, special schools, joint school and primary schools, in order to
collaborate and cooperate with the preschool class. (Skolverket, 2014a).

Additionally, Skolverket published a commentary material in 2016 that was addressed to
preschool teachers, preschool class teachers, and principals. The purpose of this material
was to provide a broader and deeper understanding of the third part of the current
preschool class curriculum (the purpose and the content of preschool class). This
material also describes the differences between the third part of the curriculum, the
preschool class, and the elementary school (Skolverket, 2016a).

Finally, Skolverket has also published a revised curriculum of the primary school which
includes six pages regarding preschool class (Skolverket, 2017). This curriculum
emphasizes the method of “teaching” in the whole text, as a didactic way through which
the children will achieve the goals of preschool class. Additionally, there is a small
paragraph, out of the six pages, which refers to the free play and outdoor activities. The
teaching method is clearly emphasized in the primary curriculum, whereas in the
National curriculum of preschool class emphasizes that cognitive skills and social
development should be taught in combination.

Since 1990’s the Swedish preschool has shifted from a social development pedagogy to
an academic readiness position. The Swedish government viewed that a competitive
educational system would be achieved through the education of young children and the
investment of their preparation to compulsory school (Ackesjö & Persson, 2016).
Aspelin and Persson (2010) argued that the idea of the "knowledge-efficient school" is that the investment in education will prepare qualified students for the increasing demands of the labor market (as cited in Ackesjö & Persson, 2016, p.185).

Riksdagen, the Swedish House of Parliament, has now decided that preschool class will be mandatory for six-year-old children in Sweden beginning in the autumn of 2018 (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2017). The Swedish government has cited several reasons to justify this change. Firstly, it is argued that this move will promote the learning and development of all children, prepare children for their further education, promote a lifelong desire to learn, and it will underpin the continuing schooling process as well. According to the Swedish government, preschool class works as an introduction year to the educational activity. Secondly, for the small percentage of children that did not attend the preschool class, about 1,7 percent or approximately 2,000 children, showed challenges in their transition to primary school as they missed the preparatory work of the preschool class, which caused difficulties in their further education according to the National board of Education’s statistics (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2017). Thirdly, in comparison with the other Nordic countries where children are mandated to begin primary school at the age of six, children in Sweden begin primary school at the age of 7. Finally, Swedish government supports that the education is very important and a preschool class presupposes daily student’s attendance. In that way obligatory daily attendance in preschool class would allow for more focus on the students’ development and learning during the early years of the children. (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2017).

As attendance in preschool class becomes obligatory, it will be necessary to conduct research in order to study the practical and developmental consequences for children, teachers, and schooling conditions. Already ethnographic research is being planned to examine the consequences of mandatory attendance in preschool class (Ackesjö, 2018). This work will involve interviews, observations and document analysis in order to identify the continuity and the changes in the educational practice of preschool class (Ackesjö, 2018).

2.4. Preparation for Primary School
Preparation for school can be understood in various ways. In preschool class, instead of focusing on adaptation through behavior and emotional preparedness for school (Broström, 2012), "school preparation" is understood as a narrative learning about developing symbolic thinking and creative imagination, which are prerequisites for abstract thinking and problem solving (Nilsson, 2014). This raises the question of what is meant by "school preparation" and of preschool class as a "transition zone" (Ackesjö, 2010a, 2010b).

Bennett (2005) describes two curricular traditions in early childhood education: readiness for school and the social pedagogy tradition. The former focuses on learning, skills and instructions. There is an emphasis in pre-reading and pre-mathematics knowledge and the goals for the children are based on cognitive development. In this tradition, the teachers also follow the pre-primary approach which means that they are influenced by the primary school model. On the other hand, at the social pedagogy tradition, the children and the teachers, learn to do, to know and to act together. The programs are child-centered and the learning takes place through the relationship between the peers, through the play and through the educator who intervenes the appropriate time (Bennett, 2005).

Some educators follow different approaches in order to prepare the children in writing and reading in the first grade. These perspectives can be strategies, methods, and beliefs. Some of these points of preparation include: 1) the existence of collaboration between preschool and primary teachers, 2) the existence of teachers with skills and theoretical knowledge, 3) the teachers should give clear and direct instructions to the children regarding the alphabetic code (Sandberg, Hellblom-Thibblin & Garpelin, 2015, p. 507).

Broström (2012) argues that school readiness should involve the development of personal, social, and intellectual competences that promotes school achievement. Moreover, he argues that a system of high quality preschools, which provides rich daily activities contributes to children's learning and comprehensive development. Finally, a "child-ready school" is required, that is a school that is able to take the child's perspective, understands the child's needs, and creates an appropriate learning environment (Broström, 2012).

The greater the variety of transition practices implemented by teachers, the more the children’s skills are developed, such as academic skills (Ahtola et al., 2010). In the present study, transition practices are understood in two different ways. Firstly, transition
practices can be seen in terms of co-operation between preschool and primary school and what kind of activities do the preschool class teachers organize in order to familiarize the children with the compulsory school environment. The other transition practice can be understood in terms of which curricula the educators use in the preschool class, that of the preschool class or that of the primary school, and the resulting kinds of activities that are implemented according to the curriculum that is followed. Multiple researchers (Broström, 2017) have shown that in order for children to be prepared for primary school they need free play and playful learning, which will be guided kindly from the teachers. Preparatory practices for the primary school have also proven to improve children’s confidence at school entry (Laverick & Jalongo, 2011).

3. Research Aim

Although Skolverket has published a curriculum, an additional booklet, and a revised curriculum in the primary school’s section, there is a lack of understanding and sharing of information and experiences concerning what kind of activities and directions exist in preschool class, among preschool class teachers and primary teachers alike (Ackesjö & Persson, 2016). There is no consensus, for example, on approaches for preschool class teachers’ to take regarding preparing students to learn to read and write, as teachers use a variety of strategies and approaches in order to promote learning and development related to reading and writing (Sandberg et al., 2015). Moreover, Skolverket has not published a revised curriculum or other steering documents to correspond with the change in mandatory attendance, documents that one would expect would be needed in order to provide guidance to preschool class teachers under these new circumstances. As the preschool class becomes obligatory this year, there is a lack of national research regarding this change. The proposed research aims to develop knowledge on how teachers understand the preschool class and “preschool class pedagogy” as a distinct practice, which is not preschool and not school, and if and how in that case, the mandatory attendance in preschool class will change their view.
4. Research Questions

The research presented herein was guided by the following research questions:

- What do teachers think are the particular features of the preschool class practice/pedagogy?
- How do preschool class teachers follow up what children have done in preschool and how do they prepare them for primary?
- How will the obligatory attendance to preschool class affect the planning of activities that teachers organize for children?

5. Methods

The present qualitative study was conducted using was conducted using a combination of semi-structured interviews, observations and document analysis in order to characterize the practices of a small sample of education practitioners (Mukherji & Albon, 2015). Specifically, these methods were used to examine the work of preschool class teachers, investigating “preschool class pedagogy” as a distinct practice, and determining if and how the mandatory attendance in preschool class may or may not change these teachers perspectives and practices. Theories of educational transitions were used as an analytic framework to interpret the data.

5.1. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on socio-cultural perspectives on transitions. From these perspectives, it is important to identify the different definitions of transition theories, which will be incorporated in this research on the teacher’s perspectives regarding the preschool class pedagogy and the mandatory attendance in a transition framework.

Transitions are understood as ways that persons move from one place to another, focusing on how cultural beliefs and tools are received and negotiated by the individual in a meaningful way (Crafter & Maunder, 2012). Teachers should understand the children’s culture in order to achieve for them an effective transition and learning relationship (Podmore, Sauvao, & Mapa, 2003). According to Ackesjö, transitions can be
understood as the movement from one step to another, from preschool to preschool class, and from preschool class to primary. A theorist, Van Gennep (Ackesjö, 2013), emphasized that transitions have different phases and can involve various trajectories. Transition could be understood either as the passage of separation (from preschool or home) or as the passage of inclusion (in the school).

Bridges (2004) supported that the children own their own cultural perspective, but during the transition they become part of a new culture, to the culture of preschool class in this case (Ackesjö, 2013). According to Rogoff (1996), transitions involve a change in the individual’s experiences and expectations for learning and social participation. According to Golan (1981), transition is a period of motion and movement, from a state of safety and security to another state of safety and security (Ackesjö, 2013). Whereas, according to Beach (2007), transition involves conscious reflection, maybe it is a period of struggle and experiences (Ackesjö, 2013). Fabian (2007) writes that the transition means cultural change, where the children learn new rules and routines and adapt to them during the transition (Fabian, 2007).

5.2. Participants

The participants were one former (Catherine) and three current (Sara, Isabel and Anna) preschool class teachers who work(ed) in preschool class, in schools in southern Sweden. Catherine, Sara and Anna have studied preschool education and Isabel has studied primary education. Catherine previously worked in preschool class for 5 years, and now works as a preschool teacher, and part-time in a medium-sized university in southern Sweden. Sara and Isabel have each worked in preschool class for over 10 years. Anna has been working in preschool class since 1998 and will retire this fall. The participants were recruited by word of mouth through personal connections with colleagues from a medium sized university in southern Sweden. The relatively low number of participants was due in part to the limited number of personal connections that the author had with relevant stakeholders due to her status as an international student who had been residing in Sweden for five months at the time of recruitment. Furthermore, the fact that the interviews had to be conducted in English limited the pool of possible participants to those who were comfortable conducting the interview in what was likely to be their second language. Pseudonyms were used for the names of the participants.
5.3. Field sites

For the purposes of triangulation, informal participatory observations were conducted of daily activities in the teachers’ preschool classes. Observations were guided by the overall research aim (Mukherji & Albon, 2015). Observations took place in three different preschool classes. All of the preschools where public, two of them urban and one rural. In the classes there was only one preschool or primary teacher, and the number of the children varied: In the rural school there were 7 children, whereas in the urban schools there were 15 and 22 per teacher.

5.4. Documentation Methods

Individual, semi-structured interviews (Mukherji & Albon, 2015) of teachers were conducted in order to collect information about how teachers understand the preschool class and “preschool class pedagogy” as a distinct practice, and if and how in that case, the mandatory attendance in preschool class may or may lead to changes in their approach to working in preschool class. This type of interview gives the participants the possibility to talk extensively about their concerns regarding the questions asked (Altrichter, Feldman, Posch & Somekh, 2007).

Each teacher was interviewed once and the interview lasting an average of 70 minutes. During the interview, teachers were asked to describe examples of their activities and their immediate comments of the future change. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. An interview guide (see Appendix A) was constructed with questions containing a general framework for the interview, but the researcher had the freedom either to pose the questions in a different order or to spend more time on a topic, depending on each individual participant (Morgan & Guevara, 2012).

The interview with the former teacher took place at a medium sized university. In three of the interviews the teachers gave the researcher a tour of their preschool class, explaining the materials that are used, the environment, the organization of the class (chairs, tables, circle time), and showing some documentation files, such as handwriting papers and drawings done by the children.
Observations were conducted in three preschool classes. Field notes were used to document these observations.

5.5. Analysis

Interview transcripts and observation field notes were analyzed using thematic analyses. Through the theories of transitions, and commonalities, differences, and contradictions of the teachers’ perspectives regarding the research aim were discussed. Teacher’s narratives were analyzed in relation to the Swedish policy and current teacher’s perspectives, and patterns were identified concerning the ways that preschool class teachers talk and think about preschool class and “preschool class pedagogy” as a distinct practice, and how they understand the upcoming change of mandatory attendance to preschool class.

5.6. Ethical Guidelines

Prior to the interviews, the participants were fully informed about the upcoming research, the aim, and their expected role through participation. The participants were informed that this research will be anonymous and that they have the right to withdraw their consent to participate in the study at any time, for whatever reason, without any consequences. Participants consented verbally and in writing to participate voluntarily. Participants were provided with copies of their informed consent forms.

5.7. Validity, Reliability, Generalizability of the Data

The overall aim of this research was to collect valid and reliable data, which will allow the researcher to proceed to appropriate conclusions (Mukherji & Albon, 2015). The generalizability of this research is low, as the number of the interviewed teachers was only four. However, three of the participants had a preschool background and one a background in primary school. This provided the opportunity for the researcher to have a view from both “worlds” of those who teach in preschool class. The results provide insight into how teachers understand the preschool class and “preschool class pedagogy” as a distinct practice and their immediate comments regarding the upcoming mandatory change.
The language of the researcher and the participants has been taken into consideration. The interviews were conducted in English, the second language for all of the participants. The interviewer and the participants tried to do their best in order to clarify any misunderstandings or miscommunication when it was evident.

6. Findings and Discussion

Analysis of the data revealed a variety of perspectives on how teachers understand the preschool class and “preschool class pedagogy” as a distinct practice and if and how the shift to mandatory attendance in preschool class will have an impact on the teachers practices and perspectives. The teachers expressed different perspectives regarding what constitutes a preschool class pedagogy, the “right” way a teacher should prepare the children for primary school, what official guidelines they follow, what the children need, what the children are curious about, how the teachers construct the activities and the class, and what the role of preschool class is, with respect to a safe transition between preschool, preschool class and compulsory school. These differences are investigating the reasons which will be analyzed below. Moreover, the upcoming change of the obligatory attendance is a fact that is going to affect the role of preschool class in the near future and it is discussed below.

6.1. “Preschool class pedagogy”

The purpose of the preschool class remains unclear to the preschool class teachers. Research shows that the preschool class teachers have difficulty defining their role in preschool class and figuring out their mission in relation to preschool and compulsory school (Ackesjö & Persson, 2016). The preschool class teachers still do not know if the preschool class should be like preschool or like school. There are classes in which the teachers work through the schooling tradition, like they are used to working in primary, and there are classes where the teachers work as in preschool. The different teachers’ educational positions affect the quality of the activity in preschool class at a national level (Ackesjö & Persson, 2016). Hence, it is also evident from the interviews that the preschool class teachers do not have a common way of working, and it depends on their background, philosophies, and perspectives which educational path they will follow. In line with these research findings, one of the informants expresses this lack of clarity this
way: “the teachers from preschool class we weren’t so safe, we don’t feel comfortable because we don’t know which leg I would stand on preschool or school? What I am supposed to do,” (Catherine, 2018-04-03).

The transition issue is discussed in both national and international level (Ackesjö, 2016). One of the interviewed teachers described preschool class as a bridge between preschool and primary. The metaphor of the bridge, is defined as a meeting place, or a transition zone, within and between the preschool and school cultures (Ackesjö, 2010c). Building bridges between preschool, preschool class and primary school will simplify the transition movement of the children as it will create a connection between the other grades and the transition will be handled carefully (Ecclestone, 2009). Although preschool class was built as a bridge, its role is not evident.

The preschool class as an island or oasis was one metaphor that emerged from the interviews with the teachers. This metaphor was mentioned by three teachers to convey their feeling of isolation from the other two school forms as there is no cooperation and communication between them. What does an island mean? According to Ackesjö, it means a school form without any goals and guidelines, without any cooperation with the other grades, working independently, preparing the children through different ways (Ackesjö, 2010c). Sara, one of the interviewed teachers explains the metaphor this way: “the school minister thinks it is ok for now I think and they don’t want to be school at 6 years old, they call it a bridge from preschool to school. But sometimes it has been an island from preschool to primary and no bridges,” (Sara, 2018-04-06).

The School Inspectorate argues that the bridge is supposed to offer the children play and learning from the two worlds, and these features will lead them to continued learning in compulsory school (Skolinspektionen, 2015). The role of a bridge between preschool class and primary is to promote connections between them, and between the familiar and unfamiliar. The transition programs should be the bridging activities that will narrow the gap between the preschool class and the primary (Huser, Dockett & Perry, 2016). Taking into consideration the transition theory of the movement from one step to another, the bridge would simplify the passage of incorporation in the school to the children, in which they will move from preschool class smoothly.
It is still a mystery if the preschool class has the role of the bridge between preschool and school, as the four teachers mentioned. The teachers also complained that they feel isolated from the other school forms, as the teachers explained that there was no cooperation between them and there is not an equal relationship between preschool class teachers and primary teachers. According to the interviews, primary teachers assume that their role is more important than the preschool class teachers and there is no cooperation between them. Primary teachers should feel equal and respect the role of the preschool class teachers, as they have to pick up the children from that age and create a continuity to their education.

Discussions about which guidelines the teachers use in preschool class took place and their answers raised additional questions, as there was no consensus approach to how to use the steering documents to organize activities in preschool class. It was noted that all of the teachers follow the curriculum for compulsory school, which refers to grades one to three (first till third class of primary). Some teachers combine the primary school curriculum with the curriculum of preschool class. Some teachers felt using the primary school curriculum instead of the curriculum of the preschool class, gave the teachers insight into the development the children need to achieve in primary school. Using this curriculum, the teachers reasoned, would help the children more quickly become prepared for school. The teachers argued that the primary school curriculum gave them a set of goals that would help them build the foundation for the children’s education. There is a contradiction between this revised curriculum of preschool class and the National Curriculum of primary school, according to which criteria, preschool class teachers should use the compulsory’s school curriculum or if they should use it additionally with the preschool class curriculum. One teacher says:

We have to use it {the curriculum of primary school} because we must know what the children should learn until they are 9 years old. Because we have points 9 years old, 12 years old, what they should fix by that time. That’s why we need a curriculum even in preschool class to see what they have must learned until 9 years old. So, if we see some children have difficulties we must work harder with them so they can reach the goals of 9 or 12 years old children. So, we have to prepare them from the beginning (Sara, 2018-04-06).
This is a clear indication that the teacher sees herself working in a readiness for school tradition. Despite the fact that Skolverket has provided the teachers with a curriculum, a booklet, and additional commentary material with specific goals and guidelines, they prefer to work with the primary’s curriculum. Another teacher explained that although they have their own curriculum to follow, she mostly uses the curriculum for primary school. She believes that is the best one to follow when planning activities for the children, explaining that she has to be mindful of the whole curriculum in the educational practice in preschool class. The curriculum for the primary school is designed in manner that more oriented toward formal schooling, as it provides explicit instructions about how teaching should be performed. In contrast, the curriculum of the preschool class is based more on the social development of the children and does not emphasize formal instruction.

Only the teacher who had many years of prior experience as a preschool teacher advocated use of the revised curriculum of preschool class. When this curriculum was published, she saw it as more in line with the preschool curriculum since from her perspective she saw that there were no specific goals or guidelines that the teachers and children have to achieve. As she describes it, she was already working in this manner which placed an emphasis on listening to the children. There is also an element of feeling validated, or legitimized, since the “official” documents, and the “official” way to be a preschool class teacher, came around to this teacher’s current teaching practice:

Before 2016 we taught in preschool class we used the läroplan {curriculum} for primary and we should pick up things that we can use in preschool class and it can be very different in what teachers will read this. But now there is a central content and this is just for preschool class but this came in 2016, so before that it didn’t exist and teachers didn’t have anything to guide them. In preschool class the difference is that they don’t have goals to achieve. (…) And I in my way to teach felt even more secure in my way to work when I saw this because I have done it all way long but I can put my finger here now. I liked when it came and lifted preschool class in front of the other teacher (Catherine, 2018-04-03).

Discussions took place regarding which pedagogical philosophy the preschool class teachers follow in their educational practice. Two of the four teachers answered that they do not follow any particular philosophy. The other two declared that they follow
Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) explaining it as an approach that positions teachers as responsible for understand the cultural tools (language in particular) that mediate the child’s relationship with their social and material environment in order to be able to achieve a productive learning connection between the child and the teacher (Podmore et al., 2003). From this perspective, children’s learning is understood as emerging through the child’s social interaction with others, particularly interactions in which more expert others scaffold the child to accomplish activities that subsequently they will be able to accomplish without assistance (i.e. the “zone of proximal development”). At the same time, children collaborate with one another, which supports their individual learning and knowledge through an active co-construction learning. As Sara expressed below, the preschool class teachers consider socio-cultural theory as they try to achieve an effective cooperation between the children and to improve the individual children’s knowledge and skills:

> We used to use a lot of Vygotsky in Sweden because we talk about approximately development [sic. – the zone of proximal development], so that is much social cultural. We work a lot, if you don’t know what to do “ask a friend” or when a child work with the other, one maybe is not so strong so the stronger can help each other. So that is a lot of Vygotsky. Sometimes we have to use it that way because there are many children more development and can help each other and that will lift both of them (Sara, 2018-04-06).

The socio-cultural perspectives are becoming important during the transition to school, as the children need to grasp the cultural context of their previous and current experiences, during the movement from one step to another, and their individual improvement. (Podmore et al., 2003).

### 6.2. Follow up on the children from preschool and preparation for primary

The teachers try to include the children in this preparation class, as according to the transition theories, the transition could be taken into account as the passage of acculturation in the school. However, how this incorporation takes place raises questions, as it is focused on schooling rules and values, which the children have to adapt them during the transition (Fabian, 2007).
The teachers have different perspectives and expectations regarding school readiness. Their expectations have a profound impact on their teaching practices (Ackesjö, 2010c). It was evident that the teachers focused on the academic expectations imposed on the children, the view that children should develop the capacity to meet school requirements (Lin, Lawrence & Gorrell, 2003). These requirements are for example: the capacity to count to 20, learn the alphabet, be able to hold the book the right way, find the right page in the book and to build on these skills. One teacher explains:

Swedish, some mathematics, I think it is important, to have a base where everybody can go up to. And mostly all of the children can count to 10 or 20. When they start preschool class they do some tests to check what they can do about for example to mathematics. And then we can see on what we have to work with that child for example. If they don’t know to count to 20 we have to train them because it is important to be in the same level if it is possible. (...)
And to know how to open a book, how to use a book. Now you have to look at page 10, numbers, yes good! Play with that, prepare (Sara, 2018-04-06).

Aiming for these goals supports the view that there has to be a common standard, suggesting that there is a baseline that once acquired or appropriated, will allow a child to progress within each given discipline. Also, this baseline is useful for the teacher as a means of assessing if and how the child is progressing. This example illustrates the ways in which adults focus on some of the more technical features of school learning (e.g. knowing how “use” a book - how to hold it what page to open it to – and how to count).

So, this educational process is focused on school preparation, where the children face new experiences and try to incorporate them in the transition process.

Furthermore, the teachers highlighted the important role that social expectations - how the children are expected to behave in the school – play in how they think about “preparing” the children (Lin et al., 2003). For example, some teachers argued that teaching the children seemingly mundane things like how to sit still and be alert were also key to helping the children both know the rules of their new environment and be prepared to take in those rules. This focus on rules highlights the fact that it is the children who are expected to adjust to the school – to its laws and guidelines – but the school does not adjust to the children needs. Instead of the school adjusting to the children, the Swedish government created more expectations about how the children had
to adjust for school by increasing demands about learning dimension and the academic subjects (Broström, 2017).

Anna described how she experiences and understands the increased schoolification in the preschool class: “to learn how the school is going, you must sit down and work, you must do the best, you have to work with this, you must do it all, to learn to sit down and calm (Anna, 2018-03-28).”

The teachers also argued that children should learn social skills, to be independent, confident in themselves, to present their own thoughts, to speak, to ask questions, carry their own bags, and to take responsibilities. All of the examples above illustrate new experiences needed for the children to take part in a safe and secure framework. To move from a safe and secure environment to another safe and secure environment is a part of the transition process, where the teachers should create it for the children, as Catherine, one of the teachers, explains:

Because in preschool class we prepare for the children. I will that children should be confident in themselves. Believe in themselves I want every child to go to school that they do as they are and I also want them to feel that you can learn in a lot of ways and I would like to them to find them kind of learning and be safe of that. When you leave preschool and go to preschool class it is a big step. You don’t have so many adults around you, you have more self-confident

There is a contradiction between this argument and teaching the children to sit still and be calm. The teacher seems to think it is important to support the children to feel confident in themselves. Confidence generally refers to feeling like you are capable of doing something, which connects to the teacher’s claims about the importance of the children feeling independent. However, it is not clear from the teacher if the capability refers to building social or cognitive skills, to focus on social development, or on academic improvement. Different kinds of independence are being implied here, for example counting to 20, carrying your own bag, sitting still enough, for long enough, and to be able to listen.

In addition to discussing what the children needed to learn as part of the transition process, the teachers also discussed their ideas about how to support this learning, that is, they discussed their teaching methods. Three of the teachers noted the importance of
teaching Swedish to children to help the children to be prepared and succeed in primary school. For example, the teachers had the children engage in handwriting exercises and the children have to practice on their own, for example, on how to write the letters or how to recognize and circle the right letters on the right picture. The teachers focus on learning and skills, which are parts of the school readiness approach (Bennett, 2005) and their pedagogic practice is influenced by the compulsory school. The activities are mainly directed and managed by the teachers. The teachers also use the “Bornholmsmodellen” to teach Swedish language. This model/method is part of the bottom-up approach (Quain, 2018) to teaching language where they begin with things such as phonological awareness, the identification of rhymes, the first phoneme in words, and the synthesis of phoneme to words, which are the building blocks of the language.

In addition to teaching Swedish, there has been a more concerted turn toward teaching mathematics in preschool class. For example, Isabel noted that in the last “10 years it has been more and more common to teach Swedish and mathematics. So, you can say that the preschool class has been more and more near the school than before. It is very clear the structure,” (Isabel, 2018-04-11). Structured activities concerning mathematics, such as teaching to count to 10 or 20, exist in preschool class.

Related to the focus on Swedish and Math, is that teachers in preschool class are also focusing more on individual work with the children, as it is in the primary, than in a collective approach, as it is in the preschool. It seems to be closer to the schooling way, than keeping a balance between the two worlds. Also, as Bennett examines, a growing focus on the individual learning of the language, the emphasis in literacy and pre-mathematics knowledge is a feature of school readiness (Bennett, 2005).

However, there were practices in preschool class where the teachers tried to combine “teaching” of Swedish or mathematics in a playful form. Developing the children’s curiosity and their willingness to explore the learning can become meaningful through play (Skolinspektionen, 2015). On a trip to the forest, the children brought small pieces of paper, they wrote Swedish letters on the paper and attached them to trees. Then the children ran and caught as many of these letters as they tried to make words with these letters. The children also tried to find small things in the forest that start with different letters in the alphabet. As opposed to language, the teachers felt mathematics is universal, you can see it everywhere; for example: the food, and objects in the outside world in different shapes and sizes. The teachers encouraged the children to become familiar with
mathematics and recognize it through playful activities such as board games and other playing and constructive materials such as Legos.

Each teacher works differently. The teachers argue that work differences depend on the number of the children, the number of the immigrants’ children and the teachers’ pedagogical philosophy. The three of them focus more on the individual learning of the child, where the transition is based on the individual learning and experiences. However, achieving a smooth transition does not necessarily happen through the individual focus. A project method, as one of the interviews teachers used to work, where the preschool teacher and the children work together during preschool, provides many opportunities for a child to participate and get involved in the educational process, which will not be neither as it happens in preschool nor as in compulsory school. This approach also happens in preschool regularly, and the teacher worked with it in order to create a bridge between preschool and preschool class for the children.

According to previous research, some preschool class teachers do not focus on reading and writing practices as, they argue, that they assume play and social development of the children are the most important features to work with in preschool class (Ackesjö & Persson, 2016). Only one interviewed teacher in the present study used to work based on a project method, including all the themes such as Swedish, mathematics, arts, music etc. Working on a project through a holistic view, she combined the interest and the involvement of the children, such as their learning in a joyful and creative way. As she has a preschool background, it was easier for her to work through a project, in the way they are also used to working in preschool. Furthermore, the revised curriculum of preschool class in 2016 reported that the children in preschool class did not have to achieve specific goals, similar to the orientation seen in the preschool curriculum (Ackesjö, 2010a). In that way, the preschool teacher felt more secure to continue working as she used to. However, the teachers from primary did not accept this way of teaching preparation, as they assumed that the children will not be ready and will not have good results in primary. Catherine, a former preschool teacher did not agree: “we worked very much in project and so much in Swedish, maths, because we had a background in project and we were safe to work like that, and in this project, you got maths, Swedish, everything in a joyful way to learn for the children. And in that school, I worked we tried this for a several years (Catherine, 2018-04-03).”
The material and environment of the preschool classes were almost the same between the three schools. The class was divided into two “parts.” One half of the class was like it is in preschool, with the short tables and chairs, where the children can sit, draw, paint and they have plenty of materials and toys to use daily. These kinds of materials where, for example, board-games or other construction toys. There were also many markers and artistic materials to use. The other half of the class was with shared big tables, where the children had to sit and stay calm when they were working with either the Swedish language or mathematics or other similar activities, based on the school’s tradition. Generally, the environment of the preschool classes looked creative, as the children could employ many ways of expression, but at the same time it was reminiscent of a class of the compulsory school, with tables that the children shared.

In 2016, the revised curriculum of preschool class required preschool class teachers, preschool teachers and primary teachers should exchange knowledge and experience as well as information on the content of education in order to support the children’s development and learning in a long-term perspective. Additionally, they should attempt to build a progression and continuity in children’s learning and development. All the above-mentioned teachers should take advantage of opportunities for continuous cooperation between them (Skolverket, 2016b). However, as it seems from the interviews, the preschool class teachers do not work with the teachers from the other grades, so they do not create strong contacts, neither with the preschool teachers nor with the primary teachers. This happens because the primary teachers do not give the appropriate attention to the preschool class teachers and build on what the children already know and have worked with before. Also, preschool class teachers describe that they do not have enough time to meet and work with them, as they only visit the school one or two times per year. Catherine, one of the interviewees talks about this: “Unfortunately, the teachers the most of them just picked them up {the children} and start over, as they always do (Catherine, 2018-04-03).”

In contrast, the preschool class teachers work with the primary school curriculum, which they believe is the most important. The cooperation with preschool is limited, there is no collaboration and creative communication between these grades. As follows, the preschool class teachers do not have the opportunity to follow up with the children, and to have continuity in their learning. They just pick them up from the preschool and work with them in a different framework, so the preschool class does not work as a bridge
between the two grades but as a one-way bridge directed to primary school. The one-way bridge metaphor, is not only realized as the lack of collaboration between the preschool but also as the teachers do not work with the tools from the preschool which would be beneficial to include in the preschool class, and by this way to create a safe transition and environment for the children.

6.3. Mandatory Attendance

The new requirement for mandatory attendance is a change that the teachers saw as consequential to their pedagogical practice. Three out of the four preschool class teachers agree with the new policy, arguing that this change will improve their life, as they will have more time for planning, evaluation and assessment, and more cooperation with the teachers. Now, they feel that they will be more equal with the primary teachers. In other words, the teachers seem to think it will be good for the teachers. However, they did not discuss the change from the perspective of the children and possible consequences and how it will affect the children’s life and learning in general.

They supported the idea that now that all children will go to the school every day. They saw this as helpful to the children, especially immigrant children, as it had the potential of helping the children learn the Swedish language and mathematics. Also, according to the teachers, as the children will have a daily attendance, they will become familiar with the rules of the primary school, the environment (as it is on the school premises), and the children in preschool class will also have the opportunity to interact more with older children during outside breaks. One of the teachers says:

> I think it is very good, I agree, I think it is good because now we can say that we want the children to be school every day because we have problems with some children staying home and be free for 1-day week or something and that is not good for them, they need to be here every day especially if you are not good in Swedish. There has been a discussion of a lot of years to be obligatory the preschool class (Sara, 2018-04-06).

Catherine, the only one who did not agree with this change, argued that preschool class will transform into one more year of school. The activities will be constructed as in primary school and the role of the “bridge” will not exist anymore: “I don’t like that for children in 6 years old, I think it is too early (Catherine, 2018-04-03).”
Transition is the movement from a safe place to another one. However, until now this transition place was the preschool class, where the children were supposed to pass smoothly to the primary school. With the new mandatory attendance, this change may be too abrupt for the children.

7. Conclusion

This qualitative study aimed to develop knowledge on how teachers understand the preschool class and “preschool class pedagogy” as a distinct practice, which is not preschool and not school, and if and how in that case, the mandatory attendance in preschool class will change their view. From the perspective of transition theories, it would seem that these theories could support preschool class teachers to actively use children’s current cultures, emotions, values, skills and knowledge in planning activities that would both produce and reproduce cultural understandings for the children during their transition year.

This study found that the teachers understand the role of the preschool class through a metaphor that characterizes preschool class as an island, isolated from preschool and school, but that has a one-way bridge to primary school. This image illustrates the lack of cooperation between the preschool class, and the teachers do not try to follow up the children’s level from preschool. The teachers, instead of using the curriculum of preschool class, prefer to use the primary school curriculum. They reason that it is best to arrange their teaching in terms of the knowledge requirements that children should achieve by the third grade of the compulsory school. According to previous research, this practice is counter to the more balanced (between preschool and school) view of preschool class as it places more emphasis on a more academic, school readiness position (Ackesjö, Lago & Persson, 2018).

This study found that the teachers believe that the upcoming change making preschool class compulsory will be beneficial for the children’s education, lifelong learning and development. The teachers argue that children will be able to attend school daily and to have continuity to the new knowledge, which according to the Swedish government, was one of the reasons to transform the preschool class as a mandatory year (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2017). According to the collected data, it is apparent that as the teachers already work in a more schooling way, the preschool class is located in the
school premises and the preschool class becomes mandatory, it will become more like school instead of something in-between, as was the initial goal.

7.1. Future Research

There is a need for research that investigates how preschool class teachers and fritispädagoger plan and implement activities in preschool class. Also, my research for this paper suggests that it would be useful to understand, through a holistic approach, the preschool class teachers, principals and fritispädagoger’s perspectives regarding the new policy. Finally, there is a need for research that examines how the preschool class in schools that emphasize outdoor education function to supports children’s transitions into for primary school.

7.2. Limitations

In this research there were found a variety of Swedish articles and books, based on previous research about preschool class in Sweden, which due to the limited time and the difficulty to translate them there was a limitation to analyze them. More deep research in Swedish policy and research would be efficient to analyze.

8. Reference List


Science, 19(4) 1-13.


Cork:OMEP/University College Cork. doi:10.21427/D7X90P


9. Appendix

Appendix A. Interview guide

PART 1.

• When and where did you get your teacher degree (what kind of degree)?
• How long have you been teaching in general?
• How long have you worked here?
• Have you worked elsewhere with preschool children?
• How do you become a teacher?
• What is most fun/hard?
• How many children are in this class?

PART 2

• Can you describe the daily program?
• What kind of activities do you have every day – examples
• What do the children seem to like the most/least with the activities?
• In what way do you consider these activities differ from what they did in preschool and what they will do in school?
• Do you have any collaboration with the preschool teachers (from where you get your children)? If so what do you collaborate about?
• Do you have any collaboration with the school teachers (to whom you will leave the children)? If so what do you collaborate about?
• How would you describe the preparation you do for the children starting school? What is important to prepare them for?
• Describe an example of the children participating in activities of preparation
• Could you give me an example of preparation in that… and in that… the last 2 months?

PART 3
• What guidelines do you follow when you prepare class: The school law, the curriculum, guidelines from Skolverket (be prepare to show them the guideline)
• Do you have any particular “pedagogical philosophy” that guides your work? Which in that case?
• Do you feel your “pedagogical philosophy” differs from that in the preschool and the school respectively? If so, how?
• How do you know what children have already learned and how do you follow up?

PART 4
• Do you agree about this change?
• Will you change the way you construct the activities?
• Why do you believe preschool class becomes mandatory?
• What kind of changes do you believe that may occur in the curriculum goal and guidelines?

General questions
• What advice you would give to someone who would like to become a preschool teacher?
• Are you satisfied with the work you do?
• If you could do something differently what would you do?