“Now I feel much safer in my role and I always have my education to lean on”

Examining preschool teacher competence and its relation to education and practice through the eyes of preschool teacher students with prior work experience in early childhood education.

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Abstract

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Raising the qualification level for preschool staff is often seen by policymakers as a means of improving the quality of preschool. However, research examining the relation between qualifications of preschool staff and preschool quality has given inconsistent results. This suggests that one’s competence as a teacher is not necessarily reflected by one’s level of teacher qualification. The aim of this study was to contribute to knowledge about preschool teacher competence and its relation to education and practice. This was accomplished through documenting and examining perspectives on preschool teacher competence from currently enrolled Swedish preschool teacher students and recently graduated Swedish preschool teachers, who have prior work experience in early childhood education. In particular, this study focused on gaining a deeper understanding of which competences preschool teacher students and preschool teachers attribute to their education. Interviews were conducted with one preschool teacher education student and two recently graduated preschool teachers. The findings showed three competences reported as important by the participants: critical (self-)reflection, the competence to listen to the children, and the competence to care. Moreover, the participants believed that being confident in one’s profession, knowing why they are doing what they are doing, and the competence to reflect are competences gained in preschool teacher education. Lastly, the participants described a connection between theory and practice, which suggest that students with prior work experience do not experience a ‘reality gap’ between their education and the practical field. The research conducted in this study contributes to what is known about teacher competence and, more specifically, it gives more insight into the development of competence in preschool teacher education.

Keywords: preschool teacher education, preschool teacher competence, prior work experience, theoretical and practical knowledge
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1 Introduction

There is a general agreement that high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is beneficial for children, parents, and society (OECD, 2006). High quality ECEC is among other things related to better child developmental outcomes (OECD, 2001; OECD, 2006). A factor that is valued as significantly important regarding ECEC quality is teacher competence (Urban, Lazzari, Vandenbroeck, Peeters, & Van Laere, 2011). To ensure competent staff a Bachelor’s degree is an increasingly common requirement for working in a preschool (Barnett, 2003). However, solely increasing preschool teachers’ qualifications has not consistently been found to be associated with improvement of classroom quality or children’s academic gains, for the possible reason that other factors such as preschool teacher education is not adequate (Early et al., 2007). This suggests that policy reforms regarding the educational level of preschool teachers to ensure competent staff are possibly not the most effective. For this reason, preschool teacher competence and preschool teacher education needs to be studied in more detail.

As mentioned previously, some countries have the policy that preschool teachers need to have a Bachelor’s degree, including Sweden. As a consequence of a shortage of preschool teachers (i.e. teachers with the relevant university training) in Sweden, there is not enough qualified staff working in direct contact with the children (OECD, 2012). Because of the lack of preschool teachers 50% of the staff working in Swedish preschools is unqualified or has only followed upper secondary education regarding early childhood (OECD, 2006). Given the complex relation between ECEC quality and educational qualifications of preschool teachers together with the general perception of policymakers that with a shortage of qualified preschool teachers the quality of preschool education is at risk, there is a need to first raise the question about how preschool teacher students, with prior work experience, reflect upon preschool teacher competence. Reflections on preschool teacher competence by preschool teacher students, with prior work experience in early childhood education, has not been a focus of study in Sweden, while there has been research conducted regarding the perspectives of Swedish preschool teacher students and the perspectives of Swedish preschool teachers on preschool teacher competence (Lillvist, Sandberg, Sheridan, & Williams, 2014; Sheridan, Williams, Sandberg, & Vuorinen, 2011).

It can be assumed that preschool teacher students with prior work experience have developed competences during practical work in preschools before the start of their
education and have developed theoretical competences that are learned in preschool
teacher education. Specifically regarding theoretical knowledge and practical experiences
Lohmander (2015) found that students and teacher educators experience a gap between
theory and practice in the education of preschool teachers. Students found it difficult to
bring university-based learning, that was considered abstract and distant, together with
workplace-based learning, which was considered concrete and immediate. This suggests
that not all teacher competences can be learned at preschool teacher education.
Therefore, it is important to specifically study how students with prior work experience
reflect on preschool teacher competence in order to explore which competences they
attribute to their education.

The aim of this study is to investigate reflections of currently enrolled preschool
teacher students and recently graduated preschool teachers with prior work experience in
a Swedish preschool prior to the start of their studies. Through semi-structured interviews
knowledge is gained about the participants’ perspectives on preschool teacher
competence and their reflections on change in their perspectives which they attribute to
their education. Themes resulting from the analysis will be compared with what is known
in the literature about preschool teacher competence in Sweden. This kind of information
widens our understanding of what quality in preschool teacher education means and may
give us important insights how to redesign preschool teacher education programmes so
that they can flexibly adapt to students with different ECEC backgrounds.

2 Background
In this section, what kind of professions exist in a preschool and what kind of education
is related to a certain profession is introduced first. Thereafter, there will be elaborated on
what preschool teacher competences have been described in prior research. Finally, the
problem versus theory and practice in preschool teacher education, and in particular,
competences related to preschool teacher education will be discussed.

2.1 Training programmes of preschool staff
There are three different types of staff working in the Swedish preschools, namely
preschool teachers, barnskötare and uneducated staff. Preschool teachers is the group of
staff with the highest educational background related to early childhood education
(Johansson, 2006). Preschool teachers have a university degree, while barnskötare have
followed gymnasium, a upper secondary educational programme, focusing on working in
preschool or in a children’s hospital. Uneducated staff has no prior education related to early childhood education and care. Differences between the tasks of preschool teachers and barnskötare exist according to preschool teacher students and preschool teachers (Kuisma & Sandberg, 2008). The responsibility for the pedagogical tasks often lies with the preschool teachers, whereas barnskötare focus more on care (Kuisma & Sandberg, 2008). An equal balance between children’s learning, caring, upbringing and social support is recommended for ECEC services (UNESCO, 2010).

The curriculum of the Swedish preschool teacher education programme has been shifting focus the last decennia. Since 1962, preschool teacher education was provided by Pre-school Teacher Training College (Korpi, 2007) where according to Carlgren and Marton “practice was perceived as applied theory” (as cited in Lohmander, 2015, p. 169). In 1977, it became a part of the university system. The preschool teacher education programme has been reformed in 1993, 2001, and in 2011. The programme of 1993 was criticised for being too abstract and not well grounded in practice, so workplace-based learning was emphasised more in the programme of 2001. The 2001 programme had field school practica that were integrated in the theoretical courses, however, the 2001 programme was criticised for not having enough grounding in research. Hence, the focus of the current preschool teacher education lays on workplace-based learning and a scientific and critical approach and has distinct field practica courses separated from the theoretical courses (Lohmander, 2015).

Nowadays, the Swedish preschool teacher education programme is 3,5 years (7 semesters). The content can be different at universities given the fact that the national curriculum gives every university the freedom to decide how they want to organize their education. The programme aims to let students develop a professional identity as a preschool teacher (Sheridan, Williams, Sandberg, & Vuorinen, 2011). The current preschool teacher education programme consists of three areas that line up to a total of 210 ESCT. The three areas are general education core courses (60 ESCT), preschool education courses (120 ESCT), and field school practica (30 ESCT) (Lohmander, 2015).

2.2 Preschool teacher competence

The concept of competence is not well defined in the existing literature (Ellström & Kock, 2008). It sometimes is described as ‘fuzzy’ because it is hard to define a concept that is used in many different ways (Le Deist & Winterton, 2005). An example of a definition of competence by Ellström is “the capacity of an individual (or a collective) to
successfully (according to certain formal or informal criteria set by oneself or by somebody else) handle certain situations or complete a certain task or job” (as cited in Ellström & Kock, 2008, p. 6). More specifically, teacher competence is connected to a profession and therefore distinguishes itself from other competences (Vuorinen, Sandberg, Sheridan, & Williams, 2014). An example of a description of teacher competence, as seen from an interactionist perspective, is that teacher competence is “a multidimensional construct composed of interrelated dimensions on several ecological system levels.” (Lillvist et al., 2014, p. 13). Furthermore, preschool teacher competence is described as “a result of societal values and expectations about what constitutes of a “good” preschool teacher, based on what competencies, skills and knowledge are valued in today’s society” (Lillvist et al., 2014, P. 13). Thus, preschool teacher competence can be seen as something that changes from time to time because of the influence of society.

In the last decennium, two studies investigated how preschool teacher students and preschool teachers reflect on preschool teacher competence. Sheridan et al. (2011) were motivated to study the perspectives of preschool teachers on preschool teacher competence driven by the impact of the continuous socio-political changes in the macrosystem on what is perceived as competent (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The motivation of Sheridan et al. (2011) to study preschool teacher competence was the, at that time, recently changed preschool teacher education programme in Sweden. Three intertwined dimensions of preschool teacher competence, as perceived by preschool teachers, were described: “competence of knowing what and why”, “competence of know-how”, and “interactive, relational and transactional competence” (Sheridan et al, 2011).

The first dimension, “competence of knowing what and why” reflects the ability of teachers to have a critical reflective view on and the ability to describe and talk about the meaning of preschool pedagogy in relation to the goals in the curriculum. Three subcategories within this dimension are ‘content knowledge’, the ‘competence to reflect’, and ‘self-education and will to change’. ‘Content knowledge’ refers to the teacher’s knowledge of the content areas addressed as goals in the curriculum. ‘Competence to reflect’ reflects the competence of teachers to reflect upon their own working approaches. ‘Self-education and will to change’ relates to the idea of lifelong learning. Abilities that teachers related to self-education are openness, flexibility, engagement, motivation, and a wish to change.

The second dimension, the “competence of know-how”, consists of competences regarding skills and acting/doing. It is described to be in the middle of practice and
theory, and can be understood as the ability to approach the curriculum goals and concretise them into content. The dimension contains three subcategories. First, the ‘competence to lead’ is being described as to be social, engaged, create relationships, to be a role model, while at the same time pursuing goals. Second, the ‘competence to organize’ reflects the ability to work with the physical environment, the structure of the day, pedagogical processes, content and activities alongside working with the children and the carrying out administrative tasks. The last subcategory, ‘doing things simultaneously’, reflects the competence of preschool teachers to do different things at the same time.

The third and last dimension is called “interactive, relational and transactional competence” and it consists of four distinct competences. First, ‘communicative competences’ reflects the ability to make dialogue and to listen to others as well as knowing how to communicate in certain situations. Second, ‘social competences’ relate to the competence to know how to behave and interact with different kind of people, such as children, parents, and colleagues. Third, ‘competence to care’ reflects providing care and having a caring attitude to promote children’s wellbeing, learning and development. Lastly, ‘didactic competences’ consists of multiple specific competences regarding knowledge about creating conditions for children to learn as well as the importance of capturing the children’s interest.

The second study investigated preschool teacher competence as reported by Swedish preschool teacher students. This study found that these students describe the construct of preschool teacher competence within six different dimensions, specifically general pedagogic competence, specific content competence, distinct teacher competence, play competence, competence of child perspective, and collaborative and social competence (Lillvist et al., 2014).

The two previous mentioned studies give an idea of what is considered a competent preschool teacher according to preschool teachers and preschool teacher students. It is important to know what is perceived as preschool teacher competence, however this does not say anything about where preschool staff develops these competences. This is imperative to identify given the fact that policymakers expect preschool staff to develop as a competent teacher during preschool teacher education. The following section will describe what is known about the relation between theory and practice regarding the development of preschool teacher competence.
2.3 Preschool teacher professionalization: Theory vs. practice

How do you become a competent teacher? In the eyes of many policymakers a university degree leads to competence as a teacher (Barnett, 2003). However, others state that “the explicit professional development of preschool staff will no longer take place during their education, but will begin when they start to work in preschools as teachers” (Johansson, 2006, p. 44) and that not all competences are learned during preschool teacher education (Lillvist et al., 2014). Firstly, students have indicated that during preschool teacher education they don’t believe they develop ‘general pedagogical competence. This reflects that they only to a small extent learn about what being a preschool teacher involves or study competencies needed in order to lead and organize preschool activities with children. Secondly, most students reported that they did not develop ‘specific content knowledge’ and ‘the competence to play’ during their education. However, these areas are found to be important to work according to the curriculum (Lillvist et al., 2014). This suggests that preschool teacher competence is not only the result of preschool teacher education, but other factors appear to play a part in developing competence as well.

Preschool teachers’ perspectives on the university degree requirements for preschool teachers is not always positive. The teachers are concerned that only focusing on getting a high degree to become a competent teacher can lead to a staff with a high level of theoretical knowledge which they cannot put into practice (Ackerman, 2004). These findings relate to a study that investigated preschool teacher professionalism in Sweden as seen by preschool teachers and preschool teacher students. This study found that the concept of professionalism can be seen in two ways. Professionalism of preschool teachers can be ascribed to knowledge gained via their academic education, as well as to practical experiences (Kuisma & Sandberg, 2008). Furthermore, preschool teachers and preschool teacher students stated that the core of their profession is developed during further training, such as in-service training (Kuisma & Sandberg, 2008). Other findings show that teacher competence develops through gaining experience of practical work in the preschool (Lillvist et al., 2014). Thus, the results show that besides university-based knowledge, practical experience and in-service training play an important part in the professionalization of preschool teachers.

Similarly, Lohmander (2015) talks about a gap between theory and practice in the education of preschool teachers. One of the aims of her study was to explore preschool teacher students’ and preschool teacher educators’ views on approaches to bringing theory and practice together in education. Findings showed that workplace-based
learning was highly valued by the teacher educators and the students. Some students believed that the work setting is the place where you will really learn the profession of a preschool teacher, which suggests that practical experience is valuable besides university-based theoretical knowledge and perhaps most important. Furthermore, the study showed that students experienced a ‘reality gap’ between theory and practice, which indicates that students have difficulties applying what they have learned during preschool teacher education into practice. Furthermore, the study of Sandberg, Lillvist, Sheridan and Williams (2012) showed that differences between preschool teachers with and without work experience regarding play competence exist. Play competence consists of attentive, cognitive, and organizational competence. These competences can be described as having empathy and encouraging play, having knowledge of play and challenging children through play, and stimulating play environments. Participants with less work experience rated their play competence lower compared to participants with more work experience. These differences regarding the amount of work experience and how preschool staff rates their play competence suggests that play competence develops during practical experience in the field. This raises the question of how students with prior work experience in an early childhood setting experience their education. Therefore, research regarding preschool teacher competence and preschool teacher education is important to gain more information about what competences preschool teacher students with prior work experience develop during preschool teacher education.

3 Research aims and questions

The purpose of the current study is to contribute to knowledge about preschool teacher competence and its relation to education and practice. This is accomplished through qualitative interviews with currently enrolled preschool teacher students and recently graduated preschool teachers, with prior work experience in early childhood education, regarding preschool teacher competences and preschool teacher education.

The research questions this study will focus on are:

1) How do currently enrolled preschool teacher students and recently graduated preschool teachers understand and define teacher competence?

2) How do currently enrolled preschool teacher students and recently graduated preschool teachers, with early childhood work experience prior to the start of their studies, reflect on their preschool teacher education and their development as preschool teachers?
4 Methods

In this qualitative study reflections of preschool teacher students, with prior work experience, on preschool teacher competence and their development as a preschool teacher were explored. Semi-structured interviews have been conducted to gather information from recently graduated preschool teachers and a preschool teacher student.

4.1 Participants

In order to explore perspectives on preschool teacher competence and preschool teacher education one currently enrolled preschool teacher student and two recently graduated preschool teachers were interviewed. In table 1 information about the participants is shown.

Table 1. Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Previous education</th>
<th>Working years prior to education</th>
<th>Age group experience</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Term of PTE at moment of interview</th>
<th>Year of graduation PTE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eva*</td>
<td>Barnskötare education</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helena*</td>
<td>Barnskötare education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofia*</td>
<td>Barnskötare education</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>Preschool/afterschool</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. PTE = preschool teacher education, * names of the participants are pseudonyms.

The recruitment message for gaining participants stated the characteristics of the desired participants, namely currently enrolled preschool teacher student with at least six months work experience in a preschool prior to the start of their education. Only students who were in their last year of preschool teacher education were asked to participate. This was decided to make sure that they would have spent enough time in preschool teacher education to be able to make valid claims about what kind of competences are being learned in the education. Also, preschool teachers that had recently graduated, not earlier than graduated in the year of 2017, were asked to participate in the study.
4.2 Documentation methods

Semi-structured interviews. Given the focus of this study on characterizing preschool teacher students’ understanding of preschool teacher competence and their development as a preschool teacher, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each participant. A semi-structured interview refers to a context in which the interviewer has a series of questions that can be asked in a non-specific order. Furthermore, there was the possibility for the interviewer to ask further questions in reaction to what a participant said (Bryman, 2012). The interviews were held at a setting that was most convenient for the participant. The interview with Eva was held at her home, the interview with Helena was held in a room at the university library, and the interview with Sofia was held at the preschool she is working at.

During the interview something to drink and eat was provided. The participants were told that they can ask for a break at any time during the interview and decline to answer any questions they did not want to answer. The interviews started with some questions that elicited background information of the participants. Thereafter, the participants were asked to describe why they wanted to become a preschool teacher, what they think are important tasks of a preschool teacher, and to elaborate on their journey from first working in a preschool without a degree to working in a preschool with university-based knowledge. This produced narrative of the participants’ development as a preschool teacher. Specific questions that have been used to guide the interviews can be found in Appendix A. The interviews have been audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

4.3 Analysis methods

The data of this study has been analysed using thematic analysis, analysis of narrative and thematic narrative analysis. First, the transcripts of the interviews were read. Thereafter, thematic analysis (Bryman, 2012) has been used to analyse what kind of competences the preschool teachers and the preschool teacher student found important. The analysis started by marking the parts in the conversation where the participants talked about what is important in the profession of a preschool teacher. These parts were roughly categorized in themes. Only themes that were mentioned by all three participants were included in the analysis. This was chosen so that a common view of what is being regarded as competence is established. In this way only those competences that were taken up as important by all three participants were analysed (research question 1).
It was difficult to capture which competences the participants attributed to their education and which to their practical work experience when only using thematic analysis. Therefore, analysis of narrative (Polkinghorne, 1995) was chosen as a second way for analysing the data in order to answer research question 2. This analysis started with marking all data where the participants referred to time (e.g. “… I did not see the play like as something that could be learnful but now I see like the play is the most important tool for learning”, as mentioned by Helena). In this way, it was possible to find all the moments from the data where the participants reflected on how they have changed or developed during their university studies. Subsequently, thematic narrative analysis was used to analyse themes in this data that focused on time references. Thematic narrative analysis is suitable to use for analyzing different kind of data, such as stories collected during interviews (Polkinghorne, 1995). This way of data analysis focuses on ‘what’ is said, rather than on ‘how’, ‘to whom’, or ‘for what purpose’ something is said (Riessman, 2008).

4.4 Ethical guidelines

Students and preschool teachers that agreed to participate in this study have signed a consent form (See appendix B). This consent form informed the participants about why the research is being conducted, what the participant can expect of participating in this study and that all gathered information will be anonymized. The form has also informed the participants that they could withdraw from participation at any time, for whatever reason, without consequences. Furthermore, the transcripts and audio recordings have been securely stored. Lastly, pseudonyms have replaced the real names of the participants in this study to protect the identity of the participants.

4.5 Validity, reliability and generalizability

Given the limited resources that were available for conducting this research, the transcripts of the interviews have been read by a student researcher and an advisor, however, the advisor only read it partially and not in depth. Nevertheless, certain actions have tried to ensure trustworthiness of the findings of this study. First, excerpts of the transcripts were included in the findings. Second, openness about why a specific method is used and how themes are established is given in the section ‘analysis methods’.

In this study only two recently graduated preschool teachers and one preschool teacher student have been interviewed. Furthermore, the participants have been following
preschool teacher education at the same university. Therefore, the generalizability of this study is low which means that the results of this study are not representative for the reflections of all preschool teachers students, with prior work experience, in Sweden and their reflections on preschool teacher competence and their development as a preschool teacher (Mukherji & Albon, 2015). However, the idea of this study was not to produce generalizable knowledge about teacher competence, but instead to give insight in how preschool teacher students with practical work experience reflect upon preschool teacher competence and their development during their education.

4.6 Limitations
Recruitment issues made it difficult to find participants. Last minute, possible participants did not have enough time to be interviewed. For this study only two recently graduated preschool teachers and one preschool teacher students was able to and interested in participating in this study. Therefore the data of this study was limited and conclusions have to be cautiously interpreted.

5 Findings
Research shows that competent teachers are related to high quality preschool provision (Barnett, 2003). However, what is considered a competent teacher and which competences are learned during preschool teacher education is not completely understood. The aim of this study is to contribute to knowledge about preschool teacher competence and its relation to theory and practice.

In the following sections reflections of Eva, Helena and Sofia on preschool teacher competence are presented. Furthermore, their reflection are described regarding how they have developed as a preschool teacher and which role their education has played in this development. Specifically, competences that they relate to their education will be reported. The findings are structured according to the two research questions.

5.1 Reflections on preschool teacher competences
The first research question is ‘how do currently enrolled preschool teacher students and recently graduated preschool teachers understand and define teacher competence?’ Three themes emerged in the interviews with Eva, Helena and Sofia, namely 1) critical (self-)reflection, 2) the competence to listen to the children, and 3) the competence to care. These competences were addressed by all the participants.
5.1.1 The competence of critical (self-)reflection

The findings show that Eva, Helena and Sofia see critical (self-)reflection as an important competence that they use in preschool. In this study the ‘competence of critical (self-)reflection’ is understood as the competence to reflect on your own behaviour and that of others to improve preschool quality. The participants state that teacher reflection is important in organizing preschool so that it serves for the development of the children. They use reflection as a tool to look at situations from a different perspective. Reflection as described by the participants can happen at scheduled moments with a group of colleagues or more individually and situationally. One of the participants mentioned that taking a step back to reflect on a situation helps her to make a situation more valuable for the children by, for example, organizing a task in a different way. This can be considered more situational and individual. While reflection with colleagues is often done at scheduled times, for example in meetings of preschool networks.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that the participants see reflection not only as a tool that can be used in discussions with colleagues but they see value in reflecting with children as well. This was evident in the following excerpt:

… have in the back of my mind why am I doing this and why did it end up like this and not like this. And take the documentations with your team that you are working with, but also gave it back to the children is very important for them to see and talk about the learning… (Helena)

Moreover, Sofia described the use of pedagogical documentation as a way of reflecting on her work:

Hm I think those are the most important thing that… I mean you have to consider obviously the curriculum and the guidelines that we have and you also have to, I think, use pedagogical documentation. I think that is a very important tool so that you can uhmm have a way of … uhmm documenting what’s going on and something to refer back to and to reflect around when you talk together with your colleagues and also uhmm with the children if you show them pictures. This is what we did last week like you can see if there is a reaction from them. Something like that. And also when you evaluate your work to see if there is an area that you self need
to improve on. That is also a good tool or a way to see what you have done and what you haven’t done. (Sofia)

The citation above shows that self-reflection is seen as important for improvement of the preschool teacher’s own work. To summarize, the participants see critical reflection as an important tool to reflect on their own work as well on that of others to improve children’s learning. The participants state that they use reflection individually as well as in group form with colleagues and with the children.

5.1.2 The competence to listen to the children
The second competence is ‘listening to the children’. The participants described this competence as following the children’s interests and being flexible to change. In their opinion, teachers should not lead the children, but it should be accepted that children possibly take an unexpected turn because of their own interests. This can lead to other learning outcomes than planned. Following the children’s interests makes learning meaningful according to the participants. In the following citation, Helena talks about the importance of following the interest of the child:

I1: … if you have to describe good preschool teacher practices what do you say is a good thing to do as a preschool teacher?

Helena: … one important thing [of being a competent preschool teacher] is you follow the children and they show you the direction. Not like they are the boss and they decide but you have to see what are they interested in so you don’t have like a path with you or arbete2 (work) that it should start here and end here because we start here but the children could take it like so many places.

Furthermore, Helena described that it is important to be flexible when listening to the children. It is seen as valuable to let children lead to a specific direction:

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1 I = Interviewer
2 Swedish words used during the interview will be written in italics and the translation will be given between the brackets after the word
Sometimes it is just like that. Sometimes I have been planning an activity, so a goal from the curriculum, but when you do the activity the children take another direction as well. So you have to be pretty flexible and I think that’s a big thing that I learned from when I hear that you don’t have to be strict and the children can like show the way and it’s ok to change the activity that children takes the activity and does it to their own. (…) Maybe my goal for this activity was uhm a goal for language but I got that goal but I also got mathematics because during the activity they starting to sort out things through colours or things like that and then you can connect other goals to one activity. So after, when you do one activity, you doesn’t just fulfil one goal you fulfil many goals yeah. (Helena)

Sofia explains very clearly the reason why it is important to follow the children’s interest:

I think what’s important is to consider that it’s important that the children have fun and that they are self-motivated in their learning process. Like if it’s something that engages them it is easier for them to learn a lot of things. They just absorb it automatically because they want to be curious and they want to go after it if they have that drive themselves. But they like… if we were to say only that you have to learn this they are not motivated. I don’t think that is so good. (Sofia)

Sofia claims that when children follow their own interest they learn more easily, because of their natural curiosity in a certain subject. Therefore, she thinks it is important to listen to the children and see where they are interested in so their motivation for learning will be high. The same idea was noted by Helena who stated:

Why should I do this when I don’t think it’s important or valuable to learn about it. It has to be interesting and it has to feel like it’s meaningful. So therefore we have to follow the children in their interest and they can lead the path and we can follow them. (Helena)

In summary, the ‘competence to listen to the children’ reflects the participants thoughts about children’s learning. The participants suggest that children learn better when
working with things they are interested in. Therefore, preschool teachers have to be able to listen to the children and be flexible to create the highest possibilities for learning.

5.1.3 Competence to care

All the three participants talked about the importance to care for the children, that is, to recognize their needs, to spend time with them, to make sure they feel happy and good about themselves. In this study, the ‘competence to care’ can be understood as the competence to act on the children’s needs and being with the children. In the following excerpt Eva talks about what she thinks is the most important task of a preschool teacher and there the importance of care, recognising their needs, becomes evident:

I: … what do you think is the most important task of a preschool teacher?
Eva: Oh the most important? (laughing)
I: Ja.
Eva: That’s a really tricky questions because it is so much. Uhm the most important… have the right approach I think for the children to uhm make them feel comfortable to make them feel happy about themselves and have the right way to meet the parents…
I: And is the approach do you think that to be… is there one approach that you have a preference for?
Eva: No I mean like förhållningssätt (approach towards others).
I: So an individual approach that you have like you look at every child..?
Eva: Yes every child’s needs and see every child, make them feel seen as well. I think that it is very important because if you don’t have the connection with the children you are not going to be a good preschool teacher. (Eva)

When Helena talked about what she thinks is an important task of a preschool teacher she stated that being with the children is more important than tracking their development with the use of making documentations:
I: … what do you think is the most important thing of a preschool teacher to do at the practice?

Helena: The most important thing is being with the children. That’s my number one. I can if the children were talking to high or something like this I could tell my principle ok if you put this much children I have to be with the children for their safety. And for the children to feel like they are being seen. If I don’t do that I don’t do my job. So I don’t want to put the documentation things aside but.. if I would I have to. Sometimes when my colleagues are sick and I am the only preschool teacher there with two subs my main goal is not document the children. My main goal is to be with the children so they feel safe. So that is also my main focus but I’m I really want to do the other things as well but if I have to choose one so are the children are the most important thing yeah. (Helena)

A similar statement was made by Sofia:

I: What do you think makes a good preschool teacher?

Sofia: … uhm I think one of the things that I also really like about my unit is a love for the children because I know that I could tell that everyone that works in my unit love the children. The children matters to them and they are down with the children which is something that I really think is important because in another place they uhm run around and do things and do other things when children play, but I think it is so important to be with the children on their level and interact when they are in preschool.

To sum up, the ‘competence to care’ is seen as one of the most important tasks according to Eva, Helena and Sofia. They believe being with the children, on their level and recognizing the children’s needs is crucial for being a ‘good’ preschool teacher.

5.2 Reflections on preschool teacher and development as preschool teachers
The second research question is ‘how do currently enrolled preschool teacher students and recently graduated preschool teachers, with early childhood work experience prior to
the start of their studies, reflect on their preschool teacher education and their
development as a preschool teacher?’ In this section reflections of the participants
relating to this question will be explored.

An interesting observation was that the participants sometimes found it difficult
to refer back to the time they were working prior to the start of their preschool teacher
education. They stated that a question was difficult or that they could not remember it.
What seemed easier for them was to compare the work and behaviour of barnskötare,
with a post-secondary education, to the work and behaviour of preschool teachers.

In the interviews Eva, Helena, and Sofia talked about what they have gained from
their education. A common statement among the participants was that their education
gave them more theoretical knowledge. They also talked about how following the
education changed how they execute their work as a preschool teacher and what they do
differently in their profession after their education. Three shared themes emerged from
the narrative thematic analysis: 1) ‘knowing why’ (the theoretical knowledge helps them
understand why they are doing what they are doing); 2) ‘competence to reflect’ (the
knowledge they have gained can be used as a tool for critical reflection); and 3)
‘confidence’ (the knowledge makes them more confident as a professional preschool
teacher). These themes will be discussed in the following three sections.

5.2.1 Knowing why
The first theme refers to knowledge about why they were doing what they were doing. In
the following citation Eva says she believes there is a purpose to what someone is doing
during activities in the preschool instead of just simply doing them. She did not have the
knowledge about why she was doing certain things before she started preschool teacher
education and believed this education would fill this gap:

I wanted to know more about what we are doing and we are doing this and we are
doing this and we are doing this, but why? And how does that uh this help the
children’s uh development. I did not have that knowledge so I could not.. I
wanted more experience of why we are doing what we are doing. (Eva)

Helena described play as an activity that was carried out when she was working prior to
her education as well as after her education. However, during her education she had
learned about play and now sees the activity of play in a different way than prior to her education:

… I did not see the play like as something that could be learnful but now I see like the play is the most important tool for learning. In play you can fit in so much. You can fit in language and mathematics and how we are towards each other. And you learn how to be a good friend, wait for you turn and you can go in different kinds of play and play something that you have been experiencing before and work that out through play. I have had a lot of play like in my education as well for the children, because I know it has such important role now. Before I worked I did not have the education I was like ok go play. (Helena)

Helena described how the education changed her perspective on play. First she saw play as an activity that you just do, but she did not know it could have a function for the development of the children. Now, when she has finished preschool teacher education, she knows the benefits of using play in preschool, because she gained knowledge about that during her education. Here, it is evident that the theoretical knowledge from preschool teacher education is connected to the practice. Another interesting finding was that Sofia seemed to have found theoretical support for the way she were working in preschool before she started studying:

Sofia: I have always liked to play with the children but it’s nicer now to know that it is actually very good for their development and that they can learn so much from it social emotionally and they can learn abstract thinking and they can learn cognitive skills so …

I: Is it more the knowledge behind it that you now know play is good?

Sofia: Yeah yeah absolutely.

Sofia addressed that she valued play when she was working prior to her education as well as, at the moment of the interview, when she is working in the preschool after her education. However, now she knows the possible outcomes of using play in preschool that she did not know when she was working in preschool prior to her education. In sum, ‘knowing-why’ refers to the knowledge the participants have gained from their education that makes that they now know why they are doing the things they are doing.
The participants gained theoretical knowledge about the value certain activities, and in particular play, can have for the learning development of the children.

5.2.2 Critical reflection

A second theme that emerged from the data was ‘critical reflection’, which refers to how the participants use the knowledge from their education when working in the preschool as a tool for reflection. The participants felt like they could contribute more to the evaluations in the preschool when they had the knowledge they gained from their education. This shows in the following example where Sofia talks about what she missed when she was working prior to her education which is a clear example of a connection between theory and how it can be used in practice:

Then uhm.. Oh … … It's hard to say like because … I mean maybe I missed like having some ideas of how you do writing because I had to learn that from my colleague, how you document. Documentation yeah. And uhm something else I was thinking of yeah sometimes when we had staff meetings and things… we were talking about the evaluation what you do once a year (…) we were talking about ways of doing it because there is not a set way that every preschool has to do this in a certain way. And when we were talking about it and how we should develop it and if you should have a template for something for it… I guess that it would have been nice to have to have known something and Piaget to contribute a little bit better. (Sofia)

Furthermore, Eva described the change she experienced from when she was working prior to her education as a barnskötare to how she is working right now in relation to reflection. In the following excerpt Eva talks about the helicopter view she developed during her VFU (practical course in the preschool teacher education programme) in the preschool during her education. Here she answers the question regarding the helicopter view when she will be working as a preschool teacher in the future:

Eva: Yes and I and I can as a student you can uh take the helicopter perspective a bit more than when you are in and working you are always focus on what you are doing right here right now and but we
can take a step back to see the big picture. So that I think was really
good to to get because it is really important for your work.

I: Ja and when you are working after that you will not be a student
anymore…

Eva: Yes (laughing).

I: So you don’t think you have time for the helicopter view or?

Eva: I think will be more aware of it. Take a step back, now is this what we
are really going to do and why. Why are we going to do this? Is this the
best for the children?

I: Aha that is an interesting point. So more about uhm…

Eva: More critical.

I: Yeah but also knowing that taking that step back to reflect is better than
being always there?

Eva: Yes, and not always be accepting things. Uhm…

I: Is that something you did before?

Eva: Yes I think. It’s our work and then we are going to this and then we are
going to do this and uhh…

I: And then… who told you that?

Eva: The bosses.

In the citation above, it is clear that when “the bosses” will tell Eva what to do, she will
reflect on this first in order to make the activity or situation as good as possible for the
children. Eva believes that when she will be working as a preschool teacher in the future,
she will not just accept things that supervisors will tell her to do if that is not the best for
the children. The change of being more critical and reflective after having followed the
preschool teacher education programme is seen not only towards being more critical to
ideas of supervisors but also towards being more critical regarding political implications
for preschool provision. This shows clearly in the following citation where Sofia reflects
on what she has gained from her education and what she did not learn in practice:

Sofia: Problematize things? Uhm I think that that is something that I really
take with me from my education.

I: So the critical view?

Sofia: Yeah critical.
I: Can I say that?
Sofia: That’s right. Because people that govern like politicians and things they have an agenda and you sort of have to say to this steering documents and the political influence like where do I come in to this and what is my… what is the most important that I think is for the child And also to sort of see through the agendas sometimes even. Like if the politicians things that because of the OECD reports and things they want to implement things in preschool so that the children do better on their results later on in life.

To sum up, ‘critical reflection’ refers to the ability to have a critical view on preschool practice and preschool provision. The participants describe that they have changed in the way they use critical reflection after finishing their education.

5.2.3 Confidence
The last theme that emerged among all the three participants was that they felt more confident because they have followed or are still following the preschool teacher education programme. The interviews showed that uneducated staff or barnskötare sometimes have to do the utvecklingssamtal (a conversation with parents about the development of their child), although they did not feel comfortable doing that. Helena explained that she missed the right language and terms to talk with the parents about the children, before she started studying to become a preschool teacher, that she has right now after following preschool teacher education. This shows for example in the following citation:

But then you were left alone with uh you have to have the development conversation I was not comfortable with that because I didn’t have the uh I didn’t know what to say because how could I know this uh something about this children because I didn’t have the education to know what to say or how to talk about children because maybe I was talking then I was talking the individual children but now when I have my developmental conversation of course I am talking about the children but I am talking about the children in a group, in our project, so the project leads the way in the conversation … (Helena)
Helena described that she feels more secure in doing the developmental talks with the parents, because she feels that because she has followed the education she knows what she is talking about and how she should talk about the children during the conversation.

In the following citations it shows that the education made Helena feel more confident in her role as a preschool teacher as well, especially when being confronted with parents:

> We are talking about believing in the future and the lifelong learning and like education and *undervisning* (teaching). I was not talking like that before [my education] and now I feel much more safer in my role [as a preschool teacher] and I always have my education to lean back on. I can tell the parents: This is my profession and I know what is best for your children right here right now. We also have to have the [developmental] conversation, but you have to believe in yourself, in your role, that I have the education so I actually have proof that it’s better to work this way. (Helena)

Moreover, the participants do not only feel more confident as a preschool teacher when they are confronted with parents. It appears that they also feel more secure in their role as a preschool teacher during times of evaluation with colleagues. This shows in the following excerpt where confidence and theoretical knowledge are clearly connected:

> … sometimes when we were discussing things in the team if I said something and I didn't feel thought out well then I would take a step back. But like now I have lots of tools to argue. I was thinking like I was thinking back then if I had the training then I could argue for what I want and I wouldn't take that step back so much you now. (Sofia)

In sum, the theme ‘confidence’ refers to how the participants describe to feel more confident and comfortable in their profession as a preschool teacher because of their education. They have for example more tools to argue during evaluations. Moreover, they feel more confident in contact with parents.

**6 Discussion and conclusions**

If we believe policymakers, the requirement for preschool teachers to have a Bachelor’s degree is one of the most important factors to guarantee high quality preschool teaching
(Barnett, 2003). However, research shows that highly qualified preschool teachers are not always related to a higher level of quality in preschool (Early et al., 2007). The aim of this study was to contribute to knowledge about preschool teacher competence by investigating reflections of currently enrolled preschool teacher students and recently graduated preschool teachers with work experience in a Swedish preschool prior to the start of their studies.

The reflections of the Swedish preschool teacher student and preschool teachers were measured using semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis, narrative analysis and thematic narrative analysis. This study found three preschool teacher competences that were described as central by the participants: the competence of critical (self-)reflection, the competence to listen to the children, and the competence to care. The findings of this study are partly in line with previous studies, but differ in certain aspects that will be discussed next.

The competence of critical (self-)reflection can be interpreted as the ability to reflect on your own behaviour as a preschool teacher and that of others to improve preschool quality. This competence shows some resemblance with ‘general pedagogical competence’ as described by Lillvist et al. (2014) and with the ‘competence to reflect’ described by Sheridan et al. (2011) where reflection is also understood as a tool to improve preschool quality. The ‘competence to listen to the children’ shows similarities with the ‘competence regarding the child’s perspective’ (Lillvist et al., 2014) and with ‘didactic competences’ as described by Sheridan et al. (2011). In this study this competence can be understood as following the child’s interests and being flexible to change accordingly. Eva, Helena and Sofia described the importance of listening to the children in relation to their learning. They believed that listening to the children and following them in their interests will make the children more prone to learning. The ‘competence to care’ is similar to the one described by Sheridan et al. (2011). It can be understood as to act on the children’s needs to elevate their well-being. Being with the children when they need support to feel safe was described as more important than documenting the children’s learning development. The feeling of safety and the well-being of the children seemed to be the first ‘need’ that must be fulfilled, thereafter, learning can be possible. These findings show that the participants mentioned mostly competences that fall under “interactive, relational and transactional competence” as described by Sheridan et al. (2011). Taken together, preschool teacher students, with
prior work experience in ECEC, describe partly similar teacher competences as what is described by preschool teacher students and preschool teachers in previous research.

Furthermore, the participants talked about how their education changed them as a professional preschool teacher. This study found that the participants related gaining theoretical knowledge to their preschool teacher education. The preschool teacher student and preschool teachers thought they gained knowledge from their education that made them feel more confident in their role as a preschool teacher (‘confidence’) and they knew more about why they were doing things instead of ‘just doing’ certain activities (‘knowing why’). Moreover, they stated that after their education their ability to critically reflect has grown and that they can participate in discussion regarding evaluation of the preschool and regarding work that is done at the preschool (‘competence to reflect’). The role of preschool teacher education in the gaining more confidence doing specific tasks in preschool is a new phenomenon that is not addressed in previous research. These competences are different from ‘distinct teacher competence’, ‘collaborative and social competence’, and ‘the competence of the child perspective’ that students attributed to their education in prior research (Lillvist et al., 2014). This assumes that there are differences in how students with different backgrounds develop during preschool teacher education. Moreover, the role of preschool teacher education in the gaining more confidence doing specific tasks in preschool is a new phenomenon that is not addressed in previous research.

This study also found that the participants connected their knowledge from their education to their work in the practice. This is different from earlier studies that claimed that there is a gap between theory and practice (Kuisma & Sandberg, 2008; Lohmander, 2015). While students in the study of Lohmander (2015) were concerned about applying theory in practice, this study suggests that it may be easier for students that have prior work experience in a preschool to make a connection between the practical field and theoretical knowledge during and after the education. The ‘reality gap’ between theory and practice may not exist for the participants in this study given the fact that they had work experience in a preschool prior to the start of their studies. If these findings are indicative for all preschool teacher students, with prior work experience, there may be a more effective way to realise competent preschool staff, especially for the people that have prior work experience in early childhood education. These findings challenge the policy of having preschool teachers that are highly educated to achieve high quality preschools. Future research should focus on the question if another form of education for
experienced uneducated preschool staff or for experienced barnskötare may be more cost-effective and less-time consuming for achieving high quality preschools.

When comparing the findings from the first and the second research question, it is interesting to note that the participants find being reflective and critical as a preschool teacher important as well as that they attribute the ability of ‘critical reflection’ to their education. However, the other competences that were addressed, the ‘competence to listen to the children’ and the ‘competence to care’, were not clearly connected to the preschool teacher education programme as described by the participants. It seems like not all competences that were described to be of importance are learned in preschool teacher education. This is similar to what is found in previous research (Lillvist et al., 2014).

Given the fact that this study together with other research have found that there appear to be competences that are not learned in preschool teacher education, increasing preschool teachers qualifications may not be the best way to enhance preschool teacher quality.

Future research should investigate the competences that preschool teacher students, with prior work experience, believe to develop during preschool teacher education on a larger scale with a bigger sample to be able to generalize the findings. Moreover, a longitudinal study that interviews first year preschool teacher students, with prior work experience, followed up by interviewing them when they are recently graduated would be a good way to investigate the change in their perception of what preschool teacher competence is. This way students perception of competence is measured at the start of their education and can therefore not be unconsciously influenced by the education that they have followed. Accordingly, the findings will not rely on what the participants believed their view on preschool teacher competence was before they started studying but will represent their actual perspective on competence at that time.

To conclude, preschool teacher competence consist of several categories and not all these categories of teacher competence are related to preschool teacher education. Therefore, policymakers that only view the level of qualification for preschool staff as an indicator of competence may have to reconsider their policies. Otherwise, valuable time and money that is meant for improving preschool quality will be used inappropriately.

7 Strengths and limitations
A strength of this study is that it is the first study with a focus on preschool teacher students with work experience prior to the start of their education. Previous research has not been taken into account the backgrounds of different preschool teacher students, yet
practical experience showed to be of importance regarding the development as a preschool teacher (Lohmander, 2015). This study gives new insights in how students with prior work experience reflect on their education and shows that the ‘reality gap’ in preschool teacher education, that had been mentioned in prior research, is not experienced by preschool teacher students, with prior work experience, in this study. This suggests that there are differences in how preschool teacher education is experience by students with and without prior work experience. Furthermore, it is the first study that suggests a connection between preschool teacher education and the level of confidence preschool teachers experience, which, at the time of writing, has not gotten attention in research yet. Moreover, this study contributes to research regarding preschool teacher competence and widens our knowledge about the development of preschool teacher competences during preschool teacher education.

In addition to strengths, the following limitations have to be taken into account. First of all, both the participants and the interviewer were not speaking in their mother tongue language during the interviews. This sometimes led to situations where the participants and the interviewer could not fully express themselves due to a lack of vocabulary in the English language. Despite the language barrier, the participants and the interviewer helped each other and asked for clarification whenever possible. Secondly, the participants all studied or are currently still enrolled in the same preschool teacher education programme. Therefore, claims regarding the ‘reality gap’ can possibly also be explained by the fact that the preschool teacher education programme at the university of the participants is more effective in connecting theory with practice compared to the programmes at other universities. Lastly, the participants were not specifically asked about their preferred pedagogical approach, but during the interviews it became evident that one of the participants had a preference for working according to the Reggio Emelia approach. The participant had become familiar with that approach in the period she worked prior to her education. In spite of all preschool teachers having the same curricular goals to strive for in preschool (Korpi, 2007; Skolverket, 2011), a different approach of working with the children can possibly cause dissimilarities between the participants believes about teacher competence and in how they prefer to work towards the goals in the curriculum. Therefore, the preference for a pedagogical approach can possibly have influenced what the participants believe are important preschool teacher competences.
References


Appendix A: Interview guide

Interview guide

- Introduction of myself and the study
- Students names.
- Age.
- How long have you been studying?
- Have you studied something else before? Barnskötare?
- How much practise experience do you have? In what kind of setting did you work? What kind of tasks were you allowed to do? How many months/years of practical experience did you have prior to your studies? With which age group did you work?
- Did you work in a preschool next to your studies?

- What was the reason you wanted to study to become a preschool teacher?
- What expectations did you have regarding the preschool teacher education programme? Did the programme fulfil these expectations? How?
- (Describe how it was to work in a preschool without a preschool teacher degree.) Now that you have (almost) finished studying, does working in a preschool feel the same as before? Or is it someway different now? Can you describe what has changed? You can for example describe situations or events in which you felt that you are now doing something differently.
- Can you give me an example of a challenge you faced at the beginning of your teaching career that you nowadays don’t see as a challenge anymore. Can you name another one?

- What did you do during VFU? Was this different than when you worked in a preschool before you started studying? How? Are there any incidents or situations that you remember particularly well or that were somehow important for you?

- What do you think makes a good preschool teacher? What are the most important things in a preschool teacher’s work? Where have you learned about these practices?
- Do you remember moments or situations with your studies that somehow changed you / felt important to you professionally / influenced the way you thought about yourself as a preschool teacher? Do you want to share these with us/with me?
- Which courses of the preschool teacher programme do you consider useful? Can you describe a situation in which what you learned in this course helped you? How would you have managed this situation prior to your enrolment in the preschool teacher education programme?
- Has the preschool teacher education added something on your prior work experience in the preschool? What has it added on your prior experience?

- What do you think is the most important thing to you as a preschool teacher that you have gained from working in a preschool setting?
- Was there something you did not learn from your studies but only in practice? Was there something you specifically learned at the preschool teacher education and not in practice?
- Were there any situations when you were dissatisfied with your studies? Or were there any situations you felt like it did not help you to become a competent preschool teacher?
- Were there any subjects during you education that you did not understand why they were studied?

- How would you develop the preschool teacher education programme? What were the best and the worst memories that you have of your studies? I would love to hear any memories, or stories, or situations that you remember, that were somehow important to you, from the time of your studies?
- Has the preschool teacher programme helped you develop as a preschool teacher? In what way?
- If you could re-start your teacher training programme, what would you emphasize more?
Appendix B: Adult consent form

Adult Consent to Participate in Student Research
International Master's Program in Swedish Preschool Education (Edusare)
Spring 2018

Karen Sanders is conducting a study as part of her requirements for successful completion of the Thesis Project course in the International Master's Program in Swedish Preschool Education (Edusare) at Jönköping University. The general focus of the study is to examine pedagogical and didactic questions concerning preschool policy and practice. More specifically, this research study examines how (a) preschool teacher(s) (student) reflect on their education and their practical work experience in regard to their development as a preschool teacher.

Karen Sanders is conducting this study in order to (a) contribute knowledge to our overall understanding of preschool education; (b) gain experience conducting empirical research in education; and (c) fulfill requirements needed to graduate with a master of science degree (60 credits) from the International Master's Program in Swedish Preschool Education in the School of Education and Communication at Jönköping University.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do one or more of the following

___ Participate in an interview or interviews related to the research topic.
___ Grant your permission to be observed engaging in daily school activities.

Any information that is gathered will be anonymized to ensure that you cannot be identified. Additionally, all information gathered will be stored securely to prevent loss or theft.

You have the right to withdraw your consent to participate in the study at any time, for whatever reason, without any consequences.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this research study and/or your participation, please contact Karen Sanders (saka1718@student.ju.se) and/or the course leader and master's program director, Robert Lecusay (robert.lecusay@ju.se).

If you agree to participate, please print and sign your name below. You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records

Participant’s contact number and/or email: ______________________________

Date: ______________________________

________________________________  ______________________________________
Participant Name (printed)               Participant Signature

________________________________  ______________________________________
Student Researcher Name (printed)               Student Researcher Signature