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Reflections on the Revised National Curriculum for Preschool in Sweden - Interviews with the Heads

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In Sweden a Revised National Curriculum for Preschool (Lpfö 98, rev. 2010) was implemented on July 1st 2011. The purpose of the revised curriculum was to increase the quality in the Swedish preschool by stressing the scientific basis. The aim was to explore how four heads of preschool reflect on the curriculum and the quality in preschool. This article is based on focus group methodology. The questions concerned reflections on the Curriculum for Preschool, systematic quality work and the role of the heads. The results showed that the most important factors concerning the revised curriculum were competent staff, attitudes and values, and systematic quality work. Important factors for quality work were competent staff, enough time for pedagogical planning and the children, low staff turnover. Important issues concerning the role of the heads were knowledge and understanding of the mission, systematic work and goals of improvement.

Keywords: preschool curriculum, preschool heads, focus group methodology, early childhood education, quality work

Introduction

The Swedish preschool applies to children between one and five years and primarily focuses on care, play and learning. When the children are six years old they attend a preschool class, which is a preparation for school. There are 290 municipalities in Sweden responsible for child care; preschool, school and leisure time activities in their immediate reception area. All children have the same and equal rights to education and children in need of special support at school/preschool are entitled to receive support within the regular school system (The

Swedish Education Act, 2010:800) i.e. equality in education comprises all children regardless of ability or disability.

The key concepts in the Swedish school, preschool and society are: democracy, solidarity, justice, equality and tolerance. According to Sweden's Official Statistics from October, 2010 a majority of all five year old children (94.5%) attend preschool and for the two-year-olds the figure is 87.3 per cent (www.skolverket.se, 2012-02-16). A majority of all children attend the municipal preschools (76.8%), while the remaining part chooses alternative solutions. Most parents work outside the home and for this reason child care, e.g., preschools need to be further developed. Hägglund and Pramling Samuelsson (2009) stated that the goal of preschool has not been used to promote children's learning but to strengthen the political agenda. They argue that the goal of the preschool is said to support parents' needs of child care, to support gender equality and to give all children equal opportunities for development.

Some children need to attend preschool in order to get social and intellectual stimulation and in this respect the preschool has a role to support child development. It is well-known from research that especially children from poor socio-economic backgrounds benefit from attendance in preschool (e.g., Karoly, Kilburn & Cannon, 2005; Sheridan, 2007) as preschool can compensate for deficiencies at home and support child development. This result is supported in a study conducted in South Australia by D'Onise, Lynch and McDermott (2010) who found that attendance in preschool 'conferred important income and educational benefits extending into late adulthood' (ibid., p. 322). The preschool thus has an important role in supporting child development and compensate for shortages in the child's immediate environments. Based on this it is reasonable to believe that high quality in preschool is vital for all children and a key concept in the systematic quality work.

This article focuses on preschool care and education, and the heads' views on the revised curriculum for preschool, quality work and the role of the heads. One critical point for raising

the quality in education is to improve the teacher education (Brodin, 2010), another that the education must rest on scientific basis and proved experiences. This has resulted in a need for research in the field.

The Swedish preschool and the curriculum

In 1998 Sweden got its first National Curriculum for Preschool (Lpfö 98) and from this appears the pedagogical mission. The main focus in preschool is on care, play and learning. Child care and preschool are today collectively named preschool. A national evaluation ten years after the implementation showed that planning, conduct and evaluation of pedagogical activities in preschool more or less looked similar to school (National Agency for Education, 2008) and that learning is a keyword also in preschool. Children need to play in order to learn and develop, and most researchers and practitioners agree that play, care and learning are closely related (Brodin, 2005, 2011; Johansson & Pramling Samuelsson, 2006; Pramling Samuelsson, 2005; Renblad & Brodin, 2012; Sandberg & Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2011; Vygotskij, 1978). Consequently, play promotes learning – learning promotes development. For this reason play and learning should be integrated as natural parts in daily life of children in preschool and Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson (2006) argue that play and learning are inseparable dimensions in preschool contexts.

The Swedish curriculum for preschool (Lpfö 98, rev 2010) is very much characterized by the knowledge and competence society in which children are regarded as social competent actors. The goals and guidelines are formulated in the Swedish Education Act (2010:800) and in the Curriculum for Preschool (Lpfö 98, revised 2010). ‘The goals specify the orientation of the work of the preschool and thus the quality development expected in the preschool’ (ibid., p. 8). The goals are set ‘to strive for’ in order to fulfill the mission of the preschool. It appears that what children are supposed to learn in preschool is in the curriculum defined in terms of goals to strive for at sight. The work in preschool is conducted in working teams and the team is responsible to inform the parents about the development and learning of their child and how the child experiences the preschool.

The main changes in the revised curriculum are that communication, mathematics, technology and nature science are highly stressed. The activities in preschool should be based on planning, documentation, follow-up and evaluation in order to improve the quality and outcome as all children have the right to an equivalent education. It also appears from the curriculum that the development and learning of each child should be followed, documented and analyzed in order to judge the activity (Lpfö 98, rev. 2010). The role and responsibility of the preschool teachers and the heads have also been clarified. Preschool education has to consider that children live in different life worlds and have different needs and prerequisites.

Preschool forms the starting point for lifelong learning with responsibility to develop the child's social and communicative competence and stimulate development and learning (e.g., Sandberg & Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2011). Reflection, cooperation, empathy and trust are vital concepts to consider for the preschool staff. The staff is enhanced to cooperate with the parents in order to meet the needs and prerequisites of each child and to establish confident relations with the children and their parents. However, it is important that the preschool teachers have scientifically based knowledge, and that their knowledge is searched for and regarded as valuable in society.

Previous Preschool Research

The views on children, child development, childhood, play and learning have changed during the last decades. Children are today regarded as social, competent actors in a globalized world and they have the right to a high-quality child care (Löfdahl, 2004; Sommer, 2005). The preschool have the role to care, educate, and foster children according to the national culture and value system (e.g., Alvestad & Berge, 2009; Johansson, 2007; Lee, 2005; Niikko & Havu-Nuutinen, 2009). Many researchers stress that it is important to revise the preschool education to meet the needs especially with regard to cooperation in a changing society (e.g., Seliverstova, 2006). According to OECD (2006) there are internationally two main

curriculum traditions; the Anglo-Saxon and the Nordic and central European. The Anglo-Saxon tradition stresses evaluation of the abilities and skills of the individual child based on tests and directed goals. The Nordic tradition has focus on the activities and the prerequisites in preschool.

The National Curriculum for Preschool in Sweden highlights lifelong learning and development of social and communicative competences to enhance learning. This increases the demand for a preschool with high quality based on research. Although preschool research has increased during the last decades, research is still limited. Sandberg and Ärlemalm-Hagsér (2011) highlight the fundamental values in the Swedish National Curriculum for Preschool and mention children's rights, gender equity and sustainable development as decisive for the quality. They conclude that research about fundamental values in preschool has improved and that the national curriculum can be used as a helpful tool for communication with parents. The curriculum also supports the professionals' learning experiences and the authors state that the revised curriculum may give new perspectives and changes in pedagogical activities in preschool.

The curriculum in New Zealand (Te Whāriki, 1996) is based on four principles: empowerment, a holistic development, an integral part of family and community and development in relationship with the environment. The aim to implement a national curriculum was to increase the quality in preschool. MacLachlan (2011) describes the development of the preschool education in New Zealand, and it appears that 'early childhood education as a formal construct' is relatively young. The curriculum in New Zealand comprises children from birth to school start at five. The school is voluntary until they are six years old, although approximately 90 per cent of all four-year-olds attend some kind of early childhood education. The goal of the New Zealand preschool is to see to it that the child grows up to a competent and confident learner with abilities to communicate and to attain a

healthy body and mind. The conclusion is that a specific early childhood education for at least three years' duration is needed, and that a national curriculum with inclusive education is developed. Research on the implementation must be conducted and in-service training for teachers to keep them updated on recent theories and research related to children's learning is a prerequisite. Also Blaiklock (2010) has studied the curriculum from New Zealand and states that the curriculum has a holistic and integrated nature, which means that subject content areas (e.g., music, art, science) can be overlooked. The approach is socio cultural with five strands: well-being, belonging, contribution, communication and exploration. Blaiklock is critical to the approach and argues that there is little evidence that the curriculum does support children to achieve the goals. He stresses that there is a need for carefully made evaluation research in New Zealand and comparative studies on curriculum from a global perspective. This is also of important from a Swedish perspective, but the most essential is probably to report the results of changes in the preschool systems in other countries in order to avoid 'to make the same mistakes' or 'to event the wheel' once again.

Pacini-Ketchabaw and Pence (2011) discuss challenges associated with a postmodern curriculum for early childhood education in Canada. They state that the curriculum should not be seen as neutral but rather as a historical and political document. In 2003 Canada was criticized by OECD for the lack of commitment in enhancing care and education of young children. Pacini-Ketchabaw and Pence (2011) state that the Canadian curriculum is a move away from the guidelines of the Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP). The DAP has previously dominated the Northern American way of thinking but the new regional curricula is based on post modernism (ibid.). The postmodern curriculum focuses on children within historical, cultural and social contexts and this means that Canada is approaching the New Zealand curriculum. 'They move away from standardized testing, acknowledge cultural and linguistic diversity (typically through the inclusion of indigenous issues) and propose tools

such as pedagogical documentation and learning stories as preferred methods for engaging in practices that value depth and context' (ibid. 2011, p. 4). The postmodern approach emphasizes that the curriculum should not be used for social control but for reflection and in collaboration with the children.

As appears from the above the global aim of curriculum work is primarily to increase the quality in preschool. The research on quality is thus a common concern, and the pedagogical quality needs to be systematically evaluated. High quality in education can be described as a learning context where all children are challenged and curious to explore the environment in order to reach their optimal potential of development (Vygotskij, 1978). Sheridan (2007, 2009) is concerned about the quality aspects in Swedish preschools. One of her theoretical approaches is Bronfenbrenner's ecological development framework; another is the socio cultural perspective. She stresses four quality dimensions: 'the dimension of society, the dimension of teachers, the dimension of children and the dimension of settings/learning contexts' (2007, p. 204). The four dimensions are evaluated with focus on structure, process and outcome. One of her standing points is that children have the right to influence their own situations and to let their voices be heard.

Sheridan has in different studies (e.g., 2007, 2009) focused on the quality aspects in preschool education. She states that high-quality in preschools can benefit children's learning, academic achievements and self-esteem. Sheridan refers to Donabedian (1980) as the first to define quality by describing quality in terms of structure, process and outcome and these aspects still need to be in focus when evaluating the quality. The methods thus must be transparent and have clear definitions of the theoretical basis and values. Other aspects on quality are collaboration and togetherness (e.g., Niikko & Havu-Nuutinen, 2009; Williams & Sheridan, 2006). Collaboration can be defined as interaction and a mutual engagement in an

activity towards a certain goal, and there is a global agreement by researchers that children learn and develop by doing things together and in collaboration.

In Sweden ECERS (Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale) (Harms & Clifford, 1998) is quite often used as a research tool among others to improve the quality in preschool (Andersson, 1989). ECERS has been used to study quality in preschool from a child perspective concerning participation, communication and different skills as stated in the national goals for preschool. This shows that high quality education requires good leadership.

In order to improve early childhood education we need to put light on the leadership, i.e., the heads of the preschools and the structure of the activities and environments (Ho, 2011; Williams & Charles, 2008). Management is a vital concept in leadership research and can be compared with how we today define a head. The role of a head is to be an administrator and a pedagogical leader (Nilsson, 2003). The head of a Swedish preschool is responsible for planning, follow-up, evaluation of the activities in preschool but also for the personnel and the financial matters. The role of the head of the preschool has changed during the last fifteen years and the heads are often responsible for more than one preschool. Harthley and Lee (2003) define leadership as visionary strategy and they mean that if a vision is transferred to the practice, the bands between preschool and society will be strengthened. This idea is also supported by Hujala (2004). Previous studies show that high quality in early childhood education resulted in higher study results for the children in school and the leadership was identified as a key factor (Stipek & Ogana, 2000). The competence of the heads concerning pedagogy, leadership, strategy and opportunities to get support is of great importance for the development of high quality in the preschool. Good leadership in preschool is thus decisive for development.

Aim and method

Target group

The municipality involved in this study is a small municipality with approximately 10.900 inhabitants in January 2012. There are 573 children (1-5 years) placed in eleven municipal preschools and 175 placed in four independent preschools. Eighteen children (1-5 years) attend family day care, today called pedagogical care, and four families are offering pedagogical day care in accordance with the Swedish Education Act (2010:800). The eleven municipal preschools in the area are led by four preschool heads. Totally 111 preschool teachers and child care workers are employed in the municipal preschools. The four private and independent preschools are not included in this study. The underlying intention was to strengthen the development of a deep connection between preschool activities, education and research, i.e. to intertwine theory and practice. The leadership in education is of great importance but few articles related to leadership in preschool have been found in data basis (e.g., Leeson, Campbell-Barr & Ho, 2012). Leeson *et al* state that the significance of leadership in preschool is often undervalued and the relationship between policy, quality and leadership is an issue that needs to be critically explored (ibid.).

The aim of the study was to explore how the heads of the preschools reflect on and interpret the revised curriculum and quality work in preschool. The research questions were:

- How do the heads interpret and reflect on the revised curriculum and the systematic quality work in preschool?
- How do the heads interpret their role and responsibility?

Focus group methodology

The study is based on focus group methodology, which is one of many qualitative approaches (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002). A focus group is a qualitative research approach in which a

group of people are asked about their perceptions, opinions and attitudes towards a concept or event (Crockett *et al*, 2009). The size of the group may differ from a few persons up to large groups.

In our study the target group consisted of all the heads (N=4) of the eleven preschools in the municipality. Focus group methodology was chosen in order for all informants to be able to express their opinions, make common reflections, and share experiences in a social context. The choice of focus group methodology was also based on the kind of reflective data we required. The method is also timesaving, and rich data can be collected relatively quickly. The four heads (three female and one male) were between 50-63 years of age. They had a long practical experience from early year's education (22-30 years) and as heads for preschool (5-15 years). All four have an academic national education for rectors of schools or preschools. They also have in-service training on children in need of special support. The choice of municipality depends on the fact that Jönköping University has an established cooperation with the small municipality included in this study. In order to reach saturation four focus group meetings, each lasting for two hours a time, took place. The follow-up sessions made it possible to confirm and expand the previously undertaken discussions. The discussions were tape-recorded, transcribed, analyzed and reported in a narrative form. One of the members of the project team was the moderator of the focus group and took notes. Her role was to keep the discussion on track in order to obtain the information needed. The tape-recorded discussions have also been validated by a peer reviewer and the results have been discussed in the research team and with the heads of the preschools and seem to be credible. At the end of the third and fourth meetings the heads were asked to write down the factors on a piece of paper. A number of factors were visible, and the next step was to value and select the three most relevant items.

Four group meetings (totally eight hours) have as mentioned above taken place with the four heads. The group interviews were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. At *the first and second group meetings* the informants were encouraged to highlight what they considered important with regard to quality work in relation to the revised curriculum for preschool. An inquiry guide was elaborated based on the first and second meetings. *The third and fourth meetings* had the character of in-depth interviews. The main question was how the heads thought that the revised curriculum would influence the quality and development of the preschool. They also discussed what quality is and what the role of the head of the preschool is. The themes were thus the revised curriculum, systematic quality work and the roles of the heads of the preschools.

Results

The results are reported under the three themes mentioned above. Their reflections have been summarized as narratives in running text. In this study quotations have been used to illustrate the thoughts and reflections of the heads. The quotations are translated from Swedish to English by the project team, and have as closely as possible followed the original texts. The heads of the preschools are also called informants.

Reflections on the Swedish National Curriculum (Lpfö 98, rev. 2010)

The first Swedish national curriculum for preschool was implemented in 1998 (Lpfö 98) and it resulted in increased staff education. The informants state that they experienced a very positive spirit and that they felt proud of their profession. One of them expressed:

When the curriculum was implemented I experienced a huge pride among the preschool staff. They had got a curriculum and their work was stressed and valued. The status changed from being baby-sitting to a pedagogical activity.

The revised curriculum (Lpfö 98, rev. 2010) substituted former documents. From this point the six-year-olds could attend a preschool class and the increasing number of toddlers changed the whole preschool as an institution. Lifelong learning was emphasized which is exemplified by the following quotation:

On one hand the need for care increased ... on the other hand the curriculum put pressure on planning, i.e. that the activity was planned as a pedagogical activity. The planning is connected to a learning perspective instead of doing – an activity perspective.

The heads reported that in 1990 a majority of the staff in preschool was day care or nursery staff. The heads declared that a conscious effort from the municipality has been to employ preschool teachers as soon as a vacancy arises. This has resulted in a majority of preschool teachers among the staff. The dominating goals were norms and values, development and learning, and children's influence. Focus on cooperation between home and preschool and the need to establish good relations with the parents was stressed. The informants state that they have developed routines for communication, how to leave and pick up the children, developmental dialogues, parental meetings, and celebration of seasonal feasts. Still there is a shortage of cooperation.

The heads of the preschools believe that the government's intention with the revised curriculum was to increase the focus on learning, especially on lifelong learning, which was confirmed by all the heads.

The curriculum for preschool is the first step to syllabus and goals.

The heads point out that there are many detailed goals in the revised curriculum, and they are not sure how the preschool teachers will handle it. One of the heads also comment that children's abilities and opportunities for development is in focus and for this reason a

common use of language is evident. They all agreed that one way to handle the goals in the curriculum is to analyze the practice in order to find out how many goals the preschool staff has to handle in everyday work. The heads were anxious to point out that planning and conduction of activities in preschool is complicated as the group of children varies from day to day and many children attend preschool on ruling time schedules. The informants stated:

We need another kind of planning. Focus must be on how to plan and conduct an activity despite the different child groups.

The mission of preschool is to be a complement to the home while school is compulsory. An important change is the stress on competence and in-service training of the preschool teachers.

It has not earlier been that clear – the requirements on competence.

However, one of the informants points out that the requirement on competence has been there all the time. The informants interpreted the revised curriculum as an increased responsibility to see to it that the revised curriculum is followed, that they have an extended responsibility on an individual level and that the working team participate and conduct it. Many of the day care staff has had difficulties in accepting the revised curriculum and declare that they have been working in preschool for many years and state that they have the same tasks as the preschool teachers. The leisure time leaders have the same opinions. The heads of the preschools stress that it is important to value the different pedagogical tasks and to illuminate the strength of the different professional groups. They stated that the preschool teachers are responsible for the planning and practical activities based on the steering documents and that the heads have the role to give the staff the necessary prerequisites. The informants stated that no other period in life contains so much learning as the first five years in life and this was described as follows:

The development from toddler or preschooler is enormous and no other pedagogues experience the same. From a small child without spoken language and without being

able to walk to a child who owns the language, can walk and run and can manage to do many things by him- or herself. Only the staff in preschool gets this exclusive experience.

One of the informants highlighted the task to support the children to develop curiosity, pleasure and ability to play and learn. The heads discussed motivation, the desire to learn and how to maintain it later on e.g. in school. Other aspects mentioned were to create routines and feeling of security, to respect and listen to the children, to involve children in activities in order for them to feel participation and reciprocity. Socialization and communication are also on the agenda for discussion but as one of the heads commented:

The preschool teacher is not intended to learn or teach the child – we build new knowledge and learn together.

The informants talked about the stability in the professional groups, that there is a need for continuity and that the physical environment and material is of high quality. The heads stated that it is a pedagogical challenge to separate care from learning and agreed that there is no opposition between learning in early ages and joyful creation of meaning. They therefore found it important to connect needs, interest and goals in a positive and pleasurable way. The four heads stated that they needed in-service training e.g. in early childhood education in order to support the staff to feel satisfied with their work.

The heads of the preschools stated that it appears from the revised curriculum that the preschool teachers are responsible for documentation and follow-up. The analysis includes how children's abilities and knowledge continuously change concerning 'goals to strive for' in relation to the prerequisites. The informants said that the issue of assessment and visualization of the individual learning in preschool is very difficult. They point out that the preschool teachers' work should focus on the group and preschool as an institution. But at the

same time the staff must see to the development of each child in order to find out how to get on to stimulate the individual child. One of them said:

Most parents don't ask what their child has learnt in preschool, they wonder if their child is developing in accordance with age.

The informants commented that other areas of parents' interest concerns peer relations and how their child acts. They discussed if this can be regarded as a kind of assessment and continued to discuss child development. All preschool teachers have been trained to observe different steps in child development one of the heads pointed out and also learned to react when a child does not develop as expected. The heads agreed that this is actually a form of assessment and one of the heads said that at parental meetings the parents sometimes ask the preschool staff what the child has learnt. One of the heads added that when the child is five years old, the preschool teachers are requested to fill in a paper concerning their views on the child's development. This is required by the child care centre (BVC), and this is an assessment, she stated. The heads of the preschools stated that the activity in preschool should be assessed and evaluated - not the individual child. But in order to do that it is necessary to analyze the child's learning and development. The informants mean that the requirement of documentation in the curriculum must be taken into consideration.

One of the informants tells that in 2008 The National Agency of Education evaluated the results of the implementation of the curriculum for preschool, and it appeared that the goals of cooperation were not attained. Many attempts have been made to cooperate but for practical reasons it has been difficult. Cooperation between preschool class, school and leisure time centre have more frequently been established. "Sometimes it is a question of physical distance", she says and "cooperation in a spontaneous way is rare". The informants mention that they have started to build up closer relations between the different school units.

Certain work has been done but mainly with focus on staff exchange.

In connection with the implementation of the curriculum a number of preschool teachers have taken a course in leading of dialogues. Focus has also been on quality work, documentation, visualization of the activity and of children's learning. One of the informants pointed out:

What I realize is that my eyes have been opened for documentation but what does the documentation lead to?

The heads confirm that a lot of documentation is going on with photos and what children utter in different learning contexts but they wonder what it leads to. They state that the next step is to analyze the documentation and that the improvements need to be developed in connection with the curriculum. Another aspect stressed is that the curriculum puts higher requirements on competence development. The four heads also agreed that it is important to have all staff members on the same track. "Preschool must be joyful, safe and instructive for the children", was a comment.

The final question to discuss was: What is your contribution to the proceeding implementation of the curriculum? To sum up the informants highlighted good working environments, competent staff, quality work, cooperation with parents, richness of experiences, a variety of activities, attitudes and values, structure and routines. Process directed work and cooperation within the municipality and a common platform for pedagogical planning will be required. Most important for living up to the revised curriculum was according to the heads 1) competent staff, 2) attitudes and values and 3) systematic quality work.

Reflections on the systematic quality work

Two of the informants stated that the concept quality is often used without reflection on what it really means. One head argues that one should talk about the right quality in relation to the mission and prerequisites and she means that one measurement of quality is how satisfied the children and the parents are with the activity. When measuring quality a number of self reports are used to compare the results with the goal attainments. But the heads also commented that

At the same time self reporting is difficult as you normally don't want to undervalue your own job. It is difficult to analyze your own work in a critical way.

From this perspective, the heads commented, it is positive with other forms of evaluation of the activity, e.g. parental questionnaires. At school the number of children reaching the goals is easier to assess in order to pass and to have zero tolerance against insulting treatment. They mean that it is more difficult to describe what quality is at preschool.

The informants said that as soon as they see that the staff focuses on children's observed and documented development and learning it is possible to note what quality is and to reflect on it.

When we work in teams and have challenging dialogues about the pedagogical mission where you share opinions and thoughts the quality is visible in preschool.

The informants also meant that when it is visible that the staff has created environments that are chosen by many children and that a creative activity is going on this is a measure of quality. The children are mirrors of the quality in different ways.

If a group of children is safe and confident they take responsibility for themselves and their own learning and they dare to express their opinions.

The informants stated that when preschool teachers are involved in the activity, it is provided that a higher quality is obtained but they mean that it is not possible to draw such a

conclusion. They state that quality is about values and prerequisites, that the staff has ability to work to prevent insulting behavior and conflicts. They also mean that quality is how to use the resources and organize the work.

The informants believe that lack of competence is a hinder for quality work, and the more difficult it is to recruit competent staff the more it will influence the preschools. They state that their presence at the preschools may be of importance. The informants are critical to their own work and state that they ought to be present when the preschool staff is planning. They agree that opportunities for communication need to be created, as it is difficult to discuss when the regular activity is going on.

If the staff starts to find shortages – it takes so much energy that you cannot focus on the mission.

The informants state that it is a balance between time for planning and time spent with the children. However, there are different competencies among the staff and this may also be an obstacle as they may regard planning and conduction differently. But the heads agreed that on one hand the turnover of staff may be an obstacle but on the other hand this may reduce the stagnation in a group. The size of the preschool is also of importance and a small preschool on the countryside is therefore more vulnerable when it comes to distribution of the work. To sum up the important factors concerning quality work are: 1) competent staff, 2) enough time both for pedagogical planning and for the children and 3) low staff turnover.

Reflections on the role of the preschool heads

The role of the heads started with a discussion on their professional role. The heads of the four preschools mentioned that they were formerly called Rectors of the preschools but they have the same tasks and responsibility as earlier. They stated that they are pedagogical leaders and have an overall responsibility for the activity to be conducted in accordance with the

curriculum and the mission at large. The heads pointed out that the pedagogy in preschool aims at forming an entity of care, education and learning, but at present care takes much more time than it used to be as many toddlers today attend preschool.

We need to open our eyes to see that care also comprises learning and stop thinking that only care or only learning is important

The informants argue that it is necessary to analyze what kind of activities the preschool staff does with the children in preschool. One of the heads asked “How do we think about this and how can we help the staff to see?” They agreed that it primarily is a question of creating prerequisites, to have good planning, working environment and facilities but also to look for relevant material for competence development for the staff in order to find new ways of doing things. The most important is to make use of the existing competence in order to develop the preschools. They also had ideas of how the staff could exchange experiences in a local district. They regarded it a way to develop the work in the municipality

The informants highlighted the importance of collaboration in the entire school system and stressed that a common language is needed. They highlighted a collaboration concerning the common document for pedagogical planning, aimed at increasing the quality and to get a similar way to conduct the work at the municipal preschools with regard to planning, documentation and evaluation. The heads reported that this has been received positively by the preschool staff that experienced that they got support for their job. They also focused on the opportunity for exchange and that they have the same framework for their job. With regard to the responsibility for the quality work the informants consider it important to plan and follow up the activity. The heads also stressed that time for meetings ought to be planned and that there is a need for clear expectations on the staff.

... that we think about what high quality planning means, that we think about what aim we have and where we are going.

In order to get an idea of the children's experiences of preschool, the informants stressed the importance of cooperation with parents and children. They stated that together with the yearly conducted parental questionnaire made by the municipality a good view is given of the activity. With regard to follow-up and evaluation of the activity the informants stressed the difficulty in knowing what work and what areas of improvement that existed. The heads stated that there are materials to be used for evaluation but there is mainly self reporting material. They questioned that 'one way to develop the evaluation could be to evaluate the activity in the light of the assessment of the school inspectorate'. The heads also stressed that it is important to avoid focusing on all issues in the curriculum at the same time. The implementation of the revised curriculum and new ways of thinking about quality work require new methods to get an honest picture of the activity.

The informants argued that it is important to keep the different prerequisites of the preschools in mind. One of the heads said: "What is important in the beginning may not be important at the end". A plan can be revised but "the staff sometimes has difficulties to change directions" as they are very goal directed.

The question is how we can work in order to make the staff engaged and participating in order to make the priority theirs?

The final question discussed was about factors of importance for high quality in preschool based on the heads' experiences. The heads highlighted: knowledge and understanding of the mission, competence to conduct the work, systematic work, reflecting and analyzing staff, and goals of improvement. The most important factors were according to their experiences: 1) knowledge and understanding of the mission, 2) systematic work and 3) goals of improvement.

Discussion

This study is based on focus group interviews with the four heads of the preschools in a Swedish municipality. The aim was to explore how they reflected and interpreted the revised curriculum, the quality work in preschool and the role of the heads of the preschool. The research questions were: How do you interpret and reflect on the revised curriculum and the systematic quality work in preschool, and how do you interpret your role and responsibility?

The results showed that the heads of the preschools were positive to the revised national curriculum and they felt that the status of their profession was raised. They pointed out that the most important factors when implementing the curriculum were to have competent staff, to work with issues related to attitudes and values, and to develop the systematic quality work in preschool. The heads argued that the curriculum is the first step towards syllabus and goals in preschool.

From a global perspective different traditions exist, e.g., the Anglo-Saxon and the Nordic and central European traditions and this is evident in the curricula from different countries (OECD, 2006). The preschool teachers in Sweden are trained to look at child development in order to be able to inform the parents and also the child care centers (BVC). In principle all Swedish children attend the BVC that are assessing the development and skills of the child from one to five years of age. The concept 'pedagogical documentation' is closely connected to the Reggio Emilia inspired preschool, but we argue that this is also a way to assess the child. We believe that it is difficult to know what kind of support to give to each child to promote child development if you have not assessed the child's prerequisites (Blaiklock, 2010; Renblad & Brodin, 2012).

The heads experience difficulties in assessing and visualizing children's learning and there is a need to develop tools for measuring learning in accordance with the curriculum (Renblad & Brodin, 2012). At present the preschool should be evaluated and not the child. The child's learning should be analyzed in order to develop the preschool and this is complicated for the

staff (Sheridan, 2009; Sandberg & Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2011). This topic will need to be researched in the future.

The preschool teacher training in Sweden is on an academic level and the scientific bases is also stressed in for instance New Zealand, Finland and Russia (e.g. MacLachlan, 2011; Niikko & Havu-Nuutinen, 2009; Seliverstova, 2006). The preschool has for all children an important role for child development but especially children from poor socio-economic backgrounds benefit from attendance in preschool. This is also supported in research by Sheridan (2007) and D'Onise, Lynch and McDermott (2010). From this point of view a high competence of the preschool staff is essential.

Quality in preschool can be defined from different perspectives e.g., structure, process and outcome (Sheridan, 2009) based on four dimensions; society, child, teacher and the learning context. The heads of the preschools focused very much on these topics in the discussions. The stressed that competent staff, enough time for pedagogical planning and the children, and low staff turnover were important for the quality in preschool. Structure is already a great part of the job but more efforts need to focus on process and outcome. It appears from one of the heads that quality is a leading concept and essential, but the heads found the quality concept difficult to define e.g., is happy children and satisfied parents a sign of high quality? It is reasonable to believe that this is the case but it is also necessary to look at the children and see how they develop in comparison with the goals in the curriculum (Renblad & Brodin, 2012). Williams and Sheridan (2006) also highlight the cooperation as a quality factor, although they focus on cooperation between the children.

A qualified leadership is of great importance for development of the preschool (Harthley & Lee, 2003; Ho, 2011) and Ho highlights the importance of structure and good leadership in order to raise the quality in preschool and the heads in our study were very much aware of this issue. The heads statef that they had the power to influence the quality in preschool by

employing mainly preschool teachers for the pedagogical work. To have two categories of staff members in the preschool is often complex. The child care workers stress that they do the same tasks as the preschool teachers. However, the heads were anxious to point out that the two different groups of professionals have different tasks. In the revised curriculum the responsibility of the preschool teachers has been clarified.

The heads of the preschools are responsible for leading their staff in their everyday work concerning care, education and learning. As mentioned above we experience that the heads are sometimes insecure of how they should support the staff in the preschools. Lack of time is one reason for not being able to give full support, another reason may be how they prioritize their tasks. The heads of the preschools stressed that it was important to have knowledge and understanding of the mission, to be able to conduct a systematic quality work and to improve the goal.

Although the heads of the preschools started on different points of view, they mainly ended in an agreement with regard to the factors of importance. In most cases the results led to an agreement and it is reasonable to believe that this is due to the fact that they all had long experience, similar educational background and a desire to reach consensus. There was no disagreement among the heads. The data collection was timesaving and resulted in a rich material. We regard the validity in this study to be high as the group met several times and discussed the questions from different perspectives. The research team and the informants found the results correct and agreed on the final results.

Conclusion

Preschool is unique as the children spend their first five years there and these years are the most intensive years for learning in childhood. We also feel that in order to support curiosity and promote learning new pedagogical tools need to be developed. This has implication on later school work and lifelong learning. Pedagogical methods to maintain motivation is

required. Blaiklock's (2010) suggestion is that comparative studies are a way for future development in the field and we believe that exchange of ideas and global cooperation is a relevant solution. Future research questions to be solved are the preschool teachers' attitudes to the revised curriculum and to exert how well the curriculum supports children in need of special support and their learning. The connections between care, education and learning need to be studied from different perspectives.

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