<http://www.diva-portal.org>

Postprint

This is the accepted version of a paper published in *Early Child Development and Care*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Brodin, J., Hollerer, L., Renblad, K., Stancheva-Popkostadinova, V. (2015)
Preschool teachers' understanding of quality in preschool: a comparative study in three European countries.
Early Child Development and Care, 185(6): 968-981
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2014.974035>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:hj:diva-25200>

Preschool teachers understanding of quality in preschool

A comparative study in three European countries

J. Brodin, L. Hollerer, K. Renblad & V. Stancheva-Popkostadinova

The aim of this article is to highlight the concept quality with special focus on preschool teachers understanding and compare what preschool teachers in Austria, Bulgaria and Sweden regard as quality. Although quality is at high degree a subjective concept, some aspects are regarded decisive for good quality. A questionnaire was distributed to 45 preschools. Data has been stored, processed and compiled with the web-based program 'Netigate'. Totally 117 preschool teachers answered the questionnaire. The results between the three countries have been compiled, processed, ranked and compared and show a glaze of different ways to interpret quality, although there are also similarities. Many differences are related to social, cultural and financial issues in the countries per se but there are also organizational and structural differences. Further comparative research need to focus on modes to improve the quality in preschool and on increasing children's influence.

Keywords: quality, preschool, comparative study, preschool teachers

Introduction

In the United Nation's Declaration on Human Rights (1948) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (UN, 1989) the right to education for all children, adolescents and adults is stressed. Education is highlighted as a human right and all children have the right to get education that does not discriminate on grounds of disability, ethnicity, religion, language, gender, capabilities and so on (UN, 1989). Most countries have today national documents regulating education, e.g. state investigations, curricula and education acts.

Learning and education start in early childhood and continue during the whole lifetime. In today's global and multicultural society education has to take new demanding challenges into consideration, in order to give all children equal opportunities in school. In many countries preschool is valued as important as school and constitutes part of the regular school system (e.g., New Zealand, Norway, Sweden), in other countries preschool is still a question of day care for the youngest children (e.g., Austria, Bulgaria). A majority of all preschools involve children up to the age of six years. This study is one out of four sub-studies in the longitudinal project *Systematic quality work in preschool* conducted in Sweden.

The concept quality is an honorary word in many contexts and it is used both in education and care as well as in various social services all over the world, but what does quality in preschool mean? First of all we would like to state that the meaning of quality vary between

different cultures, societies and educational settings (Renblad & Brodin, 2012; Sheridan, 2009). From the Swedish National Preschool Curriculum (Lpfö 98/2010) appears that quality should be evaluated with regard to a number of different aspects e.g., organization and leadership, competence of teachers, density of teachers, size and mix of the child groups, and indoor and outdoor environments. However, the teachers' attitudes to preschool, i.e., ways of working, interaction between the children and between the children and the teachers and parental cooperation are also vital factors for the quality. Furthermore the activities in preschool per se must be followed up and evaluated in order to form the basis for making changes for improvement (Brodin & Renblad, 2014a). Our interpretation is that quality in preschool should be based on how the activities are conducted to promote child development and learning in an optimal way, i.e. in the 'best or most efficient way' to learn for the children involved.

Children are today regarded as competent social actors with an obvious right to be listened to and the environment is essential for the child's development and well-being (Brodin & Stancheva-Popkostadinova, 2009; CRC, 1989; Sommer 2012). Structure of the activities are also important as well as the processes and outcome. However, the outcome must be evaluated for each child and answer the question: Does the child develop and learn in an optimal way? If not, what can be done to support and enhance the child's development and learning? The main reason for evaluating the quality is to be able to increase the knowledge about how to make improvements in preschool in order to enhance child development and secure children's health and well-being (Brodin & Renblad, 2014b; Leeson, Campbell-Barr & Ho, 2012; Renblad & Brodin, 2012). The aim of this article is to highlight quality in preschool and compare data from three European countries. A brief description of the preschool systems in Austria, Bulgaria (both previous project partners) and Sweden will be presented, and the views on quality in preschool among 117 preschool teachers and child care workers (collectively called preschool teachers in this text) will be highlighted and compared.

Previous research

Participation in preschool is of great importance for child development and learning and the global interest for high quality is evident (D'Onise, Lynch & McDermott, 2010; Logan & Sumsion, 2010; Siraj-Blatchford & Woodhead, 2009). Although research on preschool has increased during the last decades, still few studies involve early childhood teachers. Fenech, Harrison, Sumsion, Press and Bowes (2008) have reported that more than 200 peer-reviewed

articles on quality in preschool and school showed that *only one* of the articles involved an early childhood teacher which is remarkable as they are a prerequisite for high quality in preschool. These researchers stress that it is important that different approaches and methods should be used in research concerning Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in order to get a wider perspective. “Early childhood teachers require federal ECEC policy to consider, promote and facilitate such understandings” (ibid., p. 13).

Sheridan (2007) stresses four dimensions to be regarded in order to develop pedagogical quality in preschool; the child, the parents, the teachers and the environmental aspects (settings, learning contexts) (ibid). These dimensions are thus the four main actors in preschool although also other aspects are involved, e.g. national regulations, rules and steering documents. As pointed out in the Swedish curriculum children’s learning should be evaluated in accordance with the goals in the curriculum. However, there is a controversy concerning assessment of the child versus evaluation of the preschool in Sweden. For instance have Sheridan, Williams and Sandberg (2012) pointed out that the preschool teachers have “conflicting and changing views” on the focus for evaluation (see also Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2013). Also other studies confirm that the preschool teachers experience difficulties in documenting and evaluating children’s learning and development (e.g., Brodin & Renblad, 2014c).

A study on quality in preschool based on focus group methodology was conducted from the perspectives of the heads of the municipal preschools (Brodin & Renblad, 2014a). The questions concerned reflections on the curriculum, systematic quality work and the role of the heads. The results showed that the most important factors for quality work were competent staff, enough time for pedagogical planning and for the children, and low staff turnover. This study was followed by a new study on quality with preschool teachers (Brodin & Renblad, 2014c). The teacher study was conducted with a questionnaire containing eight groups of questions with 54 sub-items. The results showed that the most important factors for improving the quality were teacher’s attitudes, the number of children in the group and the teacher density. The outcome of these studies shows that it is very much a question of perspective.

A comparative study focusing on quality improvements in early years’ settings was conducted in Hong Kong and England (Ho, Campbell-Barr & Leeson, 2010). Hong Kong was a British colony till 1997 and this has certainly influenced the education system. Both countries have developed a system where the parents get a ‘fee assistance’ for buying services for their children. In England the concepts early childhood education, early care and early

years education are used synonymously and include children up to five years, in Hong Kong early childhood education covers children from three to six years of age. The main question was to study how the quality in preschool could be raised. Ho (2011) states that quality assurance inspection is a critical factor that may positively influence the practice. The Hong Kong model is a centralised 'top-down' model with many regulations and rules, while for instance Sweden has a 'bottom-up model'. This means that many parties are involved in pedagogical planning and decision-making in the Swedish school. The schools in Hong Kong also get more funding if they reach the goals and 'pass' the evaluation of the inspectorate. The schools do not need to improve the quality standards and this will probably inhibit improvements. Our interpretation is that the schools just seem to do what they have to do - but no more. It is reasonable to believe that this is a waste of resources as the schools are not stimulated to make any improvements or challenges. In England all schools are required to meet the minimum standards set out by Ofsted in 2007 and the preschools have to complete a self-evaluation form which is not based on the bottom-up model. The service providers have to show that they cooperate with parents and how they view quality, meet the goals in the curriculum and after that formulate visions for improvements. This also results in improvements based on the demands to fulfil the requirements of the inspection per se. The awareness of this fact has caused some local authorities to withdraw the funding in order to offer parents free placements for their children until these schools have improved the quality of their settings (Campbell-Barr, 2009).

Documentation, follow-up and evaluation are aspects indicated in the Swedish curriculum in order to raise the quality and these aspects are used instead of the top-down criterion on quality in preschool as stated e.g. by Ho (2011) or the minimum standards as mentioned by Campbell-Barr (2009). The importance of the curriculum as a factor for high quality were ranked to the 11th position (ibid.) compared to a Swedish study that showed that the preschool teachers ranked the importance of the curriculum to the 12th position (Renblad & Brodin, 2012).

Aim of the study

The overall aim of this study is to increase the knowledge and understanding of the staff's views on quality in preschool in Austria, Bulgaria and Sweden. The aim is to find out how quality in preschool is understood by the preschool teachers. The main research question is

“What does quality in preschool mean in the countries involved”. Similarities and differences between the participating countries will be highlighted and our expectation is that the shared global experiences and knowledge will lead to development and improvements in the preschools (OECD, 2006, 2012; Taguma, Litjens & Makowiecki, 2013).

Target group

The target group consists of preschool teachers (including child care workers) from Austria (N=32, finally 29), Bulgaria (N=30) and Sweden (N=58), i.e., totally forty-five preschools with 117 persons are involved. A majority of the teachers is trained female preschool teachers. The teachers were informed about the project by the responsible participant in each country and were then asked to reply to the questions. The teachers have on a voluntary bases answered the questionnaire concerning quality. A minor decline of three persons from Austria arose due to uncompleted questionnaires, and data concerning quality were thus included from 29 preschool teachers.

Method

A brief information about the preschool systems in Austria, Bulgaria and Sweden is presented below. The information origins from national sources and official websites in the three participating countries, and for this reason they look a little different, although there are many similarities with regard to the information obtained.

A web-based questionnaire was elaborated and distributed to the preschool teachers. The questionnaire contained 21 statements concerning factors of importance for quality in preschool. It had four reply choices (don't agree, disagree somewhat, agree fairly well and agree completely). The original version was in Swedish and the questions derived from focus group discussions with the heads of the preschools in the municipality involved. The heads selected and evaluated what they considered as most important for improving preschool before distribution evaluated by six preschool teachers who were later on included in the study (Brodin & Renblad, 2014c). Many questions were related to structural and organizational issues on an overall level e.g. curriculum, national value system, education acts, while other issues were related to the organization of the work e.g. density of teachers, size and mix of the child group, pedagogical leadership. Some of the questions involved the teachers' education, competences, experiences, and in-service training. The questions related

to pedagogical work in preschool involved pedagogical planning, follow-up and evaluation, documentation of the work as well as evaluation of each child's learning, influence and general development. Questions about the environment were also included. It is evident that many aspects can be seen from different perspectives as the various aspects are intertwined. Some of the questions involved factors that are not possible to influence for the teachers, e.g. the curriculum and teacher density while others are possible to influence e.g. children's influence in the daily activities and the relations between children and preschool teachers. However, a goal directed work and willingness to make changes are necessary if the teacher shall be able to improve the preschool.

The questionnaire was originally elaborated by the Swedish team. The final questionnaire was translated into English and then to Bulgarian and German languages. After the data collection was conducted the questionnaire was retranslated into English and stored, compiled and analyzed by the Swedish team. From Sweden 58 preschool teachers replied and this is approximately twice as many as the other groups. The reason is that data from the Swedish group was collected more or less at the same time as the preschool teachers replied to a closely connected survey on quality work in preschool (Brodin & Renblad, 2014c). From Bulgaria 30 and from Austria 32 preschool teachers participated but three of the questionnaires from Austria were excluded as they were not fully completed with regard to aspects concerning quality. Some of the first presumptive project participants in Bulgaria had negative experiences of research and were ambiguous to participate in the project and consequently withdraw. Data have been stored and processed in a computer program (Netigate) and the results have been analyzed by ranking of the replies to the questions (Table 2) and comparisons between the countries (Table 3). The ranking of the factors of importance (Table 2) emanated thus from the Swedish questionnaire and this explains why the ranking is numbered (1-21) in accordance with the Swedish answers. Data have been read and analyzed in several steps in order to get a deep comprehension and have reported in the following country order: Sweden, Austria and Bulgaria (as Sweden was the starting point). The sample can be described as a convenient choice and answering to the questionnaire has been voluntary. As the results are summarized in tables and running text it will give a trend of what quality means in the preschools in three European countries. One difficulty has been that four languages have been used (Swedish, Austrian, Bulgarian and English) and this has been time consuming. International research with professionals working in "the field" often stresses demands to express themselves in their native languages.

The preschool system in Austria

In Austria preschool (Kindergarten) has a social pedagogical approach and it is voluntary up to the age of five. The parents have to pay a fee for participation of their child. The last year in preschool (5-6 years) is today obligatory and the government bear the costs. In Austria just above 83 percent of all three to five year olds attend Kindergarten (Statistik Austria: Kindertagesheimstatistik_2013, www.statistik.at/web_de/presse/071480) but the federal county Styria shows a little higher rate (88%). The responsibility for preschool is within the federal authorities and the social ministry is the main responsible for preschool. The preschool has a curriculum and some topics stressed in the curriculum are e.g. child development, ethics, communication, art and creativity, nature and technology (BildungsRahmenPlan, 2009). The curriculum for the vocational training of Kindergarten pedagogues is set by the Ministry of education. Preschool teacher education is five years for training of students between 14-19 years or a post-secondary 2-years' training for students from 19-21 years. The training is on diploma level but work is progressing to strengthen the training (OECD, 2006). The teachers in preschool are called Kindergarten pedagogues.

Kindergarten is not part of the Ministry of education but part of the legislation of the federal authorities/ communities. Consequently there are about nine different ways to adopt the curriculum. Since 2009 all nine federal states have agreed on a kind of national curriculum for children in their last year in Kindergarten (Hollerer, 2014a, b). The responsibility for setting up Kindergarten, provision of teaching staff, implementation and legislation is either by the social, welfare, family, or infrastructural authorities of the federal states. The agreement is: The last year is obligatory for all children. Parents don't have to pay fees for this year.

Children in Austria start school when they are six years old and education follows a primary curricula. The regular school belongs to the national authorities and the ministry of education is the authority responsible. Teachers for the primary schools are trained on a post-secondary level during three years (between 19-21 years). Their professional title will be primary pedagogues. Statistics from the federal county Styria shows that 88 per cent of the pupils may follow an adapted curriculum and they are accompanied by teachers who have training for special needs and preschool. Pupils with special needs attend inclusive primary

schools or special needs schools during the first four years in school (Sonderpädagogischer Förderbedarf, 2013).

The preschool system in Bulgaria

Bulgaria has a long tradition in preschool education. In 1869 an unknown Bulgarian teacher formed the first preschool group of children in the frame of elementary school (Kolev, 2012). An education act (Zakon za Norodnoto Prosveshenie) in 1891 introduced compulsory kindergarten attendance free of charge. Children aged from three months to three years may attend nursery (*detska yasla*). Nurseries are organizationally separate entities, where medical (nurse/midwife) and other specialists (teacher/educator, babysitter) carry out nursing, training and education of children. The nurseries are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health and are not considered part of the education system. Pre-primary education embraces the children between 3 to 6/7 years old. Attendance in Kindergarten is optional (Dynot, 2014). The Kindergartens operated under the Public Education Act from 1991 (Zakon za Narodnata proshveta). The part three of this Act regulates organization, activities, types, staff etc. for kindergartens. With the changes in 2010 the last two years of pre-primary education (i.e. between the ages 5 and 7) are compulsory. The biggest part of Kindergartens are run by the State (over 95 %), but in the recent years the number of private kindergartens is growing (Dynot, 2014).

The Kindergartens' curriculum is based on the State educational requirements. The focus is on the Bulgarian language, maths, social aspects, nature, art, and learning by play (Iordanova, 2014). Twenty-six percent of the Bulgarian children do not attend kindergarten because their parents do not want them to, but due to the shortage of preschool facilities. Staff involved in kindergartens are preschool teacher (bachelor or master degrees), music teachers (bachelor degree in Music pedagogy), speech therapist (bachelor in Logopedics), nurse (bachelor degree), babysitter (secondary education). There are possibilities for postgraduate training of the preschool staff, organized by Ministry of Education and the kindergarten itself.

While preschool education is not a requirement, there exist impressive facilities, sufficient to enroll the entire child population in all-day kindergartens. However, attendance is decreasing mainly due to the high unemployment rates and the economic difficulties encountered by many families. Furthermore the number of preschool children (2-7 years) rapidly decreases due to falling birth rates. In 2013/2014 83,5 per cent of the children in this age group attended kindergarten (National Statistical Institute, 2014). In consequence to the

decreasing enrollment, preprimary education enhances the intellectual development of youngsters and prepares them for a smooth transition to school. Kindergarten attendance is socially desirable; most of the children who are not enrolled in preschool education come from low-income families where one or both parents are unemployed. The Bulgarian curriculum thus focuses on the Bulgarian language, maths, social aspects, nature, art, and learning by play (Iordanova, 2014). Twenty-six percent of the Bulgarian children do not attend kindergarten because their parents do not want them to, but due to the shortage of preschool facilities. The Bulgarian government has established national laws and regulations to protect children and their families and promote the provision of high quality early childhood education (Saber Country report, 2013). It appears that there are problems in Bulgaria due to financial shortcomings and about fifty percent of all children below the age of six are at risk of poverty or social exclusion (ibid.). However, Bulgaria has intentions to raise the quality in preschool and the goals are: to establish an enabling environment, to implement preschool widely and to monitor and assure the quality. The parents have the right to decide where to enroll their children – in day care or school, adding that 160 Bulgarian municipalities have declared desire and readiness to introduce preschool classes.

The preschool system in Sweden

The Swedish Education Act for knowledge, choice and security (2010:800) comprises all types of schools and providers of education and has a clear and simple structure with uniform rules for all. Preschools have the same status as other schools and it appears from the Education Act and the Curriculum for Preschool (Lpfö 98/2010) that teaching should be goal-based processes, led by preschool teachers and teachers, with purpose to develop the child and support learning. The Swedish preschool is globally recognized as a pattern or a model when high quality and accessibility are discussed (OECD, 2006; Taguma, Litjens & Makowiecki, 2013). The Swedish system includes all children from one to five years of age and the parents pay a small fee for their children. Children from three years have the right to attend preschool 15 hours/week free of charge. Preschool classes are arranged for the six year olds. Generally, children start preschool when they are 12-15 months and approximately 90 percent of all children aged four and five years attend preschool. The majority of the preschools are run by the municipal authorities, and they are obliged to offer preschool activities for children between one and five years and preschool classes for the six year olds according to the Swedish Education Act (2010). All children, i.e. both typical and atypical children, are

comprised in the act. The Swedish preschool is aimed at giving all children pedagogical stimulation and support for their social, cognitive and communicative development based on the prerequisite of each child. The majority of the children with different kind of disabilities are today attending preschools and for these children the support and challenges they experience vital for their development and mental well-being (Brodin & Lindstrand, 2010; Brodin & Renblad, 2014b; Sandberg & Ärlemalm Hagsér, 2011). Focus in the curricula is on play, learning, interaction and participation and these activities are the corner stones in the Swedish preschool. About 53 percent of the staff working in preschool has an academic education.

The Swedish preschool is part of the family policy which enables parents to work outside the home and unite family life and working life. Most families with children in Sweden make use of the preschool activities, and the expression “a school for all” include all children and is based on an ideology and a humanitarian view of life concerning equal value and equal opportunities for all children in accordance with the CRC (1989).

Although the municipalities are responsible for most of the preschools, some preschools are run by private companies, parent cooperatives or non-profit organizations (NGO's). A preschool group can consist of children of mixed ages (1–5 years), toddlers (1–3 years), preschoolers (3–5 years) or sometimes of age specific groups (e.g., 3 year olds). The preschool is an important part of children's everyday lives.

Results

The results are reported in three tables and running text and the results are reported in the following order: Sweden, Austria and Bulgaria. The first table is a compilation of the preschool systems, the second is a summary of the results and the third is a ranking of the ten most important factors for quality in preschool according to the preschool teachers (n=117) from 45 preschools. The teachers from all countries have pointed out that all 21 factors of quality are important to improve the quality.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

From Table 1 appears the preschool systems in the three European countries and similarities and differences are visible. The interest to improve the quality in preschool is obvious in the countries involved and an increasing number of families are today using the preschool both as

day care when the parents are working and as support for the children's learning and socialization.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Table 2 is a ranking of factors of importance for quality in preschool. The starting point has been Sweden and the factors concerning quality (numbered 1-21) have the Swedish answers. The results from Austria and Bulgaria have then been inserted in the table in relation to the Swedish numbering. Table 2 is the first step in the analysis in order to be able to compare what quality means in the three countries. We have then chosen to define and compile the ten most essential factors for quality (the top ten) from the preschool teachers' perspectives (Table 3). The ten factors constitute approximately half of the factors in the study.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Similarities based on the ten most important factors

It appears from Table 3 that six quality factors are relevant to all three countries, i.e., my own attitude, size of the child group, density of teachers, working climate, relation between children and adults, and pedagogical planning. Sweden and Austria emphasize the leadership and common values and Sweden and Bulgaria stress the importance of the active value system. None has ranked documentation among the top ten.

Differences – specific for each country

Sweden highlights follow-up and evaluation, while Austria highlights education of teachers, in-service training and competence of teachers. Bulgaria highlights the curriculum, children's influence and engagement and experience of the teachers.

Discussion

The aim was to find out how quality in preschool was understood by preschool teachers in Austria, Bulgaria and Sweden. The main research question was: What does quality in preschool mean in the countries involved? The study is based on a questionnaire answered by

117 preschool teachers. The prerequisites for preschool in the participating countries look different in many ways but there are also *similarities*.

The ten most important factors for quality in preschool appears from Table 3. Out of the top ten list six factors are highlighted by the preschool teachers in the countries involved. These are my own attitude, size of the child group, density of teachers, working climate, relation between children and adults, and pedagogical planning. These factors are issues reoccurring in many studies (e.g., Brodin & Renblad, 2014a,c; Logan & Sumsion, 2010; Sheridan, 2007) and this was no surprise. These factors are related both to structure and process and the structural factors are difficult to influence for the preschool teachers as they often deal about organization and financial matters on an overall level (e.g. policy).

Swedish and Austrian preschool teachers have ranked the pedagogical leadership and common values ranked among the top ten, while the Bulgarian teachers gave it very low ranking. Although all countries are working with these topics the goals are still not attained and in some cases this is a result of the socio- and economic situation in the country but it may also be a prioritisation. As appears from various preschool studies the leadership role is often undervalued, despite that many researchers have pointed out the leadership as decisive for development and quality improvements in preschool (e.g., Brodin & Renblad, 2012; Ho, 2011; Leeson, Campbell-Barr & Ho, 2012). The same situation concerns common values (UN, 1989). Another factor on the top ten list in Sweden and Bulgaria is active value system. The importance of a national curriculum for preschool is highly stressed and has for long been on the agenda in Sweden. Austria seems to have easier as the curriculum is federal and only the last year in preschool is affected by a national curriculum.

There are also *differences* among the three countries. For instance, the social and economical conditions in each country affect the situation in preschool, but also the ministry responsible for preschool issues differs. In Sweden the Ministry of education is the responsible authority, in Austria the Federal authorities and in Bulgaria the Ministry of health is responsible for preschool. The different ministries responsible for preschool may show what importance preschool is ascribed in the different countries but it can also be a result of a strong social family policy (e.g. Bulgaria) or a social pedagogical approach (e.g. Austria). In 1998 the responsibility for preschool in Sweden was transferred from the Ministry of social affairs to the Ministry of education. At the same time the Swedish preschool became part of the general education system and got its first curriculum for preschool (Lpfö 98). The

curriculum was revised in 2010. All three countries have an approach towards lifelong learning that starts in preschool and it appears that the countries have reached different steps and that the work is still going on. Preschool thus rests on different educational, social and cultural value systems (see Table 1).

Sweden and Bulgaria have a national curriculum and the teacher training is on university level. Austria has a federal curriculum and a teacher training on a diploma level. The ranking of the importance of the curriculum among the ten most important quality factors is by Bulgaria on the 2nd place, while Sweden has put it on the 12th and Austria on the 21st place. Although it appears from the SABER Country report (2013) the curriculum is *one* factor for raising the quality in preschool, the preschool teachers in Bulgaria are the only who has placed it on the top ten list.

The academic level on teacher training has been highly stressed in Sweden during the last decades (Brodin & Renblad, 2014a; Sheridan, 2009). The teacher training is in Sweden 3,5 years, in Bulgaria 2.5 years and in Austria 5 years alternatively 2 years at college for Kindergarten pedagogues. Austria is the only country who has highlighted education of teachers and in-service training among the ten most important factors for quality. In spite of the fact that these quality factors are stressed in official steering documents in Sweden and Bulgaria from the responsible authorities, the preschool teachers do not rank these factors as one of the top ten. From OECD (2006) it appears that Austria has a shortage of educated preschool teachers which might be a reason for this. Another reason may be that the financial situation in Bulgaria at the moment makes it necessary to focus on other issues, e.g. to establish more preschools widely in order to assist the families working opportunities. Bulgaria highlights the experience of the teachers among the top ten. In Sweden the discussion about teacher education and in-service training have gone on for many years and it is remarkable that the preschool teachers do not count these factors among the top ten.

Sweden has ranked follow-up and evaluation on the 10th place, and Austria and Bulgaria has ranked these factors almost in the bottom. One explanation to this may be that the heads of the preschools are responsible for the quality assurance. They are in collaboration with the teachers obliged to follow-up and evaluate the activities in preschool concerning children's learning and development. Previous studies (e.g., Sheridan et al, 2012) have shown that the preschool teachers find it conflicting to conduct the evaluation, but other studies have highlighted that some teachers also find it complicated (Brodin & Renblad, 2014c).

Children's influence and engagement in daily activities are highlighted in the UN Convention (CRC, 1989) and this is also stressed in various documents in the countries who have ratified the CRC. Bulgaria is the only country who has put it among the top ten. It is remarkable that neither Sweden nor Austria has it on the ten most important factors. Children's opportunities to influence their daily lives are necessary and in the Swedish society participation and influence are keywords. However, the mission of the CRC has not been attained and this is a problem per se as the right of the child is more or less neglected. It does not help that most countries have ratified the CRC if it is not implemented in real life. The influence of children and that their voices must be heard must be reality. Still it is a lot of work to be done to reach these goals. We also realized that the preschool teachers ranked the environment and the parents' engagement fairly low, as these factors have been regarded as important in other studies (e.g., Brodin & Stancheva-Popkostadinova, 2009; Stancheva-Popkostadinova & O'Connor, 2008).

Documentation has not been ranked as an essential factor for raising the quality in preschool in Sweden (e.g. Brodin & Renblad 2014c), and it appears from the Austrian and Bulgarian teachers that documentation is not a hot issue in their countries. In Sweden documentation is discussed in terms of the preschool activities not in each child. In Austrian Kindergarten the children are not assessed but in Bulgaria evaluation of the children's abilities, skills and development are documented as a matter of self. The focus to assess children's abilities is regarded as important in order to give all children the best opportunities to learn and develop. The main question is why Sweden does not prioritize this as many children need extra support to learn and develop. From the Swedish curriculum for preschool (Lpfö 98/2010) the tasks of preschool appear and many of them focus on development of different skills and abilities to be promoted. Generally, preschool is seen as the first step in lifelong learning and therefore forms the basis of preparation for learning in school.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that it is a small number study (117 preschool teachers), another that we cannot be sure that the preschools attending this study really are representative for all preschools in respective country. However, the need for comparative studies is evident in order to increase learning and develop of new knowledge in the global society. Another limitation in the study is the difficulties caused by working with different native languages

(Swedish, English, German, and Bulgarian). The difficulties mainly concerns the translations and that some nuances may be lost on the way. This has caused the study to be very time-consuming.

Conclusion

The results show that there are both similarities and differences how the preschool teachers conceive quality in preschool. Among the top ten factors six are the same. There are both factors related to structure and process. There are also differences on what the concept quality means. These are related to economical and cultural differences. An underlying factor explaining the variety in ranking can be discussions due to improvement and development going on in the countries involved. What are the national challenges just now and how do the preschool teachers handle these challenges? This question is one important topic that need to be highlighted in future research.

References

- BildungsRahmenPlan (2009). Bundesländerübergreifender BildungsRahmenPlan für elementare Bildungseinrichtungen in Österreich. Wien: Charlotte Bühler-Institut und Bundesministerium für Unterricht, Kunst und Kultur, August 2009.
- Brodin, J. & Lindstrand, P. (2010, 2nd ed.). *Perspektiv på en skola för alla* [Perspectives on a school for all]. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Brodin, J. & Renblad, K. (2012). *Kvalitén i förskolan påverkar barns välbefinnande. Förskolechefer syn på den nya läroplanen och kvalitén i förskolan* [The quality in preschool affects childrens' well-being. Preschool heads' views on the curriculum and quality]. *Socialmedicinsk tidskrift*, 4-5, 416-424.
- Brodin, J. & Renblad, K. (2014a) Reflections on the revised national curriculum for preschool in Sweden. Interviews with the heads. *Early Child Development and Care*, 184(2), 306-321.
- Brodin, J. & Renblad, K. (2014b). Does the quality in preschool affect children's health and wellbeing? *International Journal of Child and Adolescence Health*, 7(1), 71-78.
- Brodin, J. & Renblad, K. (2014c). Early Childhood Educators' Perspectives of the Swedish National Curriculum for Preschool and Quality Work, *Early Childhood Education Journal*, First published online. DOI: 10.1007/s10643-014-0657-2, 2014.
- Brodin, J. & Stancheva-Popkostadinova (2009). Early Intervention in Children with Intellectual Disabilities. In Anal of Union of Scientists *Science, Culture and Education*, 2009, 215-220. Blagoevgrad: Faculty of Public Health and Sport.
- Campbell-Barr, V. (2009). Contextual issues in assessing value for money in early years education, *National Institute Economic Review*, 201(1), 90-101.

- D'Onise, K., Lynch, J.W., & McDermott, R.A. (2010). Lifelong effects of attendance at kindergarten union preschools in South Australia. *Australian Journal of Education*, 54(3), 307-324.
- Dynot (Dynamic Onlinetool for Guidance). Education in Bulgaria. <http://www.dynot.net/index.php?Itemid=72> [Accessed 6 April 2014]
- Fenech, M., Harrison, L., Sumsion, J., Press, F., and Bowes, J. (2008). *A multi-perspective approach to quality in ECEC. Consideration for the national quality framework*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Brisbane, Nov 30 – December 4, 2008.
- Ho, D.C.W. (2011). Identifying leadership rules for quality in early childhood education programmes. *International Journal of leadership in Education*, 14(1), 47-59.
- Ho, D., Campbell-Barr, V., & Leeson, C. (2010). Quality improvement in early settings in Hong Kong and England. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 18(3), 243-258.
- Hollerer, L. (2014a). Reports on psychology and inclusive education from various European member states. Brussels. www.nepes.eu. (downloaded 17.07.2014).
- Hollerer, L. (2014b). Gemeinsam Übergänge gestalten- Die Bedeutung der Leitung für die Transitionsprozesse: Kindergarten-Schule; in: Koch, B. (Hg.) (2014). *Handbuch Kindergartenleitung*, 387-395.
- Iordanova, E. (2014) Kindergartenpädagogik – Online Handbuch. Probleme der Vorschulbildung in Bulgarien am Anfang 21. Jahrhunderts. www.kindergartenpaedagogik.de/2195 (downloaded 16-07-2014).
- Kolev, J. (2012). The National Originality of the Bulgarian Preschool Education (in Bulgarian, Йордан Колев, Националната оригиналност на българското предучилищно възпитание) *PEDAGOGY. Educational Journal*, 84 (1), Sofia, pp, 8-17.
- Leeson, C., Campbell-Barr, V., & Ho, D. (2012). Leading for quality improvement: A comparative research agenda in early childhood education in England and Hong Kong. *International Journal of Leadership on Education: Theory and Practice*, 15(2), 221-236.
- Logan, H. & Sumsion, J. (2010). Early childhood teachers' understanding of and provision for quality. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 35(3), 42-50.
- National Statistical Institute (2014). Education and Lifelong Learning. <http://www.nsi.bg/en/content/4769/education-and-lifelong-learning>
- OECD (2006). *Starting strong II. Early Childhood education and care*. Paris: Author.
- OECD (2012). Quality Matters in Early Childhood Education and Care: United Kingdom (England), Starting strong III: A quality Toolbox for ECEC. OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264176867-en>
- Ofsted (2007). *Inspection of early years provision from September 2008: A consultation document*. London Crown Copyright.
- Renblad, K. & Brodin, J. (2012). Kvalitén i förskolan påverkar barns välbefinnande. Några förskolechefers syn på den nya läroplanen och kvalitet i förskolan [The quality in preschool influence children's well-being. Preschool heads' views on the revised curriculum and quality in preschool]. *Socialmedicinsk tidskrift*, 4-5, 416-424.
- Saber Country Report (2013). Bulgaria. Early Childhood Development. World Bank. www.worldbank-org/education/saber (downloaded 10.07.2014).
- Sandberg, A. & Ärlemalm-Hagsér, E. (2011). Swedish National Curriculum. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 36(1), 44-50.

- Sheridan, S. (2007). Dimensions of pedagogical quality in preschool. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 15(2), 197-217.
- Sheridan, S. (2009). Discerning Pedagogical Quality in Preschool. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 53(3), 245-261
- Sheridan, S. & Pramling Samuelsson, I. (2013). Preschool a source for young children's learning and well-being. *International Journal of Early Years Education* 21(2-3), 207-222, DOI: 10.1080/09669760.2013.832948.
- Sheridan, S., Williams, P., & Sandberg, A. (2012). Systematic Quality Work in Preschool. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 2012, (45)123-150. DOI 10.1007/s13158-012-0076-8
- Siraj-Blachford, I. & Woodhead, M. (Eds.) (2009). Effective early childhood programmes. *Early childhood in focus* (4). Milton Keynes: Open University.
- Swedish National Preschool Curriculum (Lpfö 98/2010). Stockholm: Ministry of Education.
- Skolverket [The Swedish National Agency for Education]. (2010:800). *Ny skollag och förtydligad läroplan för förskolan: Skolverket ger förskolechefen stöd* [New education act and clarified curriculum for preschool: The board of education support the heads of the preschools]. Stockholm: Skolverket.
- Skolverket [The Swedish National Agency for Education] (1998, 2010): *Curriculum for preschool* Lpfö 98, Curriculum for preschool Lpfö 98, rev. 2010, Curriculum for school Lgr 11, 2011 www.skolverket.se,
- Sommer, D. (2012). *A childhood psychology: Young children in changing times*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sonderpädagogischer Förderbedarf (2013), Cis-online. S. 11- 13.
http://www.cisonline.at/fileadmin/kategorien/SPF-Schulen_Klassen_Schueler-1213_detailliert_19.5.2014.pdf. Download: 16.07.2014.
- Stancheva-Popkostadinova, V. & O'Connor, B. (2008). Teamwork between professionals and parents of children in the field of intellectual disabilities. Learning exchange between students in Bulgaria and Australia. *Science, Culture and Education*. South West University, Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria.
- Statistik Austria: Kindertagesheimstatistik_2013 [http://www.statistik.at/web_de/presse/071480, \(downloaded 16.07.2014\)](http://www.statistik.at/web_de/presse/071480_(downloaded_16.07.2014))
- Taguma, M., Litjens, I. and Makowiecki, K. (2013). Quality Matters in Early Childhood Education and Care. Sweden. OECD.
- UN (1948). United Nation Declaration on Human Rights. New York: United Nations.
- UN (1989) United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child. New York: United Nations.

Table 1

Summary of the preschool systems in Sweden, Austria and Bulgaria

	Sweden	Austria	Bulgaria
Responsible Ministry	Ministry of Education	Federal authorities	Ministry of Health
National curriculum	Yes	No	Yes
Level of preschool teacher education	University level	Diploma level	University level
Teacher education	3,5 years	5 years or 2 years*	2,5 years
Professional title	Preschool teacher (children 1-7 years)	Kindergarten pedagogue (children 1-6 years)	Nurse (children 1-3 years) Kindergarten pedagogue (children 3-7 years)
School start	6-7 Years flexible	6 years	6-7 years flexible

*2 years training on post-secondary level

Table 2

Ranking of factors of importance for quality in preschool

	Sweden	Austria	Bulgaria
My own attitude	1	1	8
The size of the child group	2	3	1
Density of teachers	3	2	5
Pedagogical leadership	4	7	20
Working climate at preschool	5	4	9
Relation between children and adults	6	5	4
Active value system	7	11	10
Pedagogic planning	8	9	3
Common values	9	10	18
Follow-up and evaluation	10	20	19
Children's influence and engagement	11	17	6
Curriculum	12	21	2
Experiences of the teachers	13	12	7
Education of the teachers	14	6	11
In-service training and competence of teachers	15	8	12
The mix of children	16	15	21
Documentation	17	19	15
Preschool's premises	18	13	13
Preschools inner environment	19	14	16
Preschools outer environment	20	16	17
Parents engagement	21	18	14

Table 3

A comparison of the ten most important factors for quality in preschool

Ranking	Sweden	Austria	Bulgaria
1.	My own attitude	My own attitude	Size of child group
2.	Size of child group	Density of teachers	Curriculum
3.	Density of teachers	Size of child group	Pedagogic planning
4.	Pedagogical leadership	Working climate	Relation between children and adults
5.	Working climate	Relation between children and adults	Density of teachers
6.	Relation between children and adults	Education of teachers	Children's influence and engagement
7.	Active value system	Pedagogical leadership	Experience of teachers
8.	Pedagogical planning	In-service training and competence of teachers	My own attitude
9.	Common values	Pedagogical planning	Working climate
10.	Follow-up and evaluation	Common values	Active value systems