

# Preface

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## **Childhood Learning and Didactics**

The articles in this volume are all related to the National Research Schools of Childhood, Learning and Didactics (RSCLD). The research schools are an expression of a government interest both to strengthen education and research in early years—especially in areas like language, values, science and mathematics—and to involve preschool teachers and teachers in research development. The role of research in developing ECEC and school policies has also increased. Different research programs and school research institutes are funded with the aim of contributing to policy making, research-based recommendations and better practices.

The Research Schools of Childhood, Learning and Didactics focus on the development of knowledge in relation to preschool and school in the early years. They draw on the institutional cooperation between five universities/university colleges in Sweden: Gothenburg, Linköping, Karlstad, Kristianstad and Malmö University (host university). The contributing researchers represent subjects such as pedagogy, subject theory and didactics, and present a thematic, multi-disciplinary approach to ‘Childhood, Learning and Didactics’. RSCLD is anchored in the respective teacher educations at the five contributing institutions. To date, we have administrated three different research schools for preschool teachers and teachers with this focus.

An important and emphasised part of the program is to problematise and develop subject-specific didactics as a field of research, beyond the prevalent focus on older children. Questions to do with children’s learning, didactic choices and educational positions need to be problematised and re-examined at a time with many societal changes.

New formations of childhood and learning in transgression force us to meet demands for new and viable knowledge. In this context, subject knowledge and didactics are scrutinised as educational practices in preschool and school for early years. The research schools pay special attention to the child’s perspective, to democracy and to children’s early mathematical and linguistic development related to multimodal media, subject theory and

teaching practice. The research schools are also examining how the fields of natural science and sustainable development, as well as value education, are realised in preschool and in the early years of school.

Early Childhood Education and Care has never been in focus as much as in recent years. In OECD- EU- and national governing documents and agreements, one repeatedly finds expressions like 'Start Early - Starting Strong - Readiness for School'. To draw quotations from some influential documents and researchers, 'Improving pre-primary provision and widening access to it are potentially the most important contributions that school systems can make to improving opportunities' (OECD Starting Strong 11), and 'Early skills breed later skills because early learning begets later learning. ... Investment in the young is warranted' (Heckman & Masterov, 2007).

### ***The Swedish preschool***

Sweden has an integrated and comprehensive ECEC system under one ministry, Ministry of Education and Research. In an international context, the contemporary Swedish preschool is often held up as a good model of Educare, that is, a preschool that includes quality care and education and where the professionals traditionally have held a strong position. After a foundational phase for a model with a combination of care and education and a slow quantitative development, Swedish preschool was radically expanded in the last decades of the twentieth century. Eighty-five percent of the children in Sweden take part in ECEC 2013. (Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2014).

In its Starting Strong reports (2001, 2006, 2012), the OECD has highlighted two different traditions. The first, the Anglo-Saxon tradition, has been focusing on school-like content in preschools, where assessments and evaluations focus on the individual child/student. Examples of countries in this group were Australia, Canada, France, Ireland, Great Britain and the United States. In the second, the Nordic and Central European tradition, the evaluations have been focusing more on the preschools preconditions for children's learning and on the activity itself (Bennet, 2008). The Swedish –and Nordic–preschool has been characterised mostly by a social pedagogical approach with an emphasis on children's participation and democracy and with traditions encouraging play and relationships and a holistic, child-centred approach (Karila, 2012; Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2013).

In the past decade, there has been an obvious and ongoing shift influencing the Nordic countries to turn towards more of a learning paradigm, and

legislation regarding early childhood education institutions has recently been renewed in all Nordic countries. The revised Framework Plan describes the societal role of ECEC and emphasises the importance of bringing up children to participate actively in a democratic society. A change to enhance learning is stressed in the curriculum and in plans in all Nordic countries. The curricula also have a significant intertextual relation to international policy documents and agreements: they interact with the international documents and illustrate the internationalised context in the approach to children, learning and preschool opportunities. The curricula in Norway and Sweden, for example, are aligned with international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

The Swedish national preschool curriculum, the Educational Act and the supporting material distributed by the National Agency have placed ECEC institutions in the discourse of education. While the national curriculum describes values, content, responsibilities and the overall task for preschools, it is up to the municipalities and the ECEC institutions to formulate and develop methods for practice. The decentralised system allows for professional autonomy, such as freedom for preschool staff to develop educational practices based on local analysis and freedom for municipalities to formulate strategies to develop staff's knowledge and competence. The national curriculum describes goals to strive for in preschool—not the outcomes for the child.

The aspirations for ECEC are high in Sweden, as in many countries and international organisations. The European Commission puts it as follows: 'Europe's future will be based on smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Improving the quality and effectiveness of education systems across the EU is essential to all three growth dimensions. In this context, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is the essential foundation for successful life-long learning, social integration, personal development and later employability' (Brussels, 17/02/2011).

Preschool and the growing focus on learning in the early years can be problematised and discussed as an expression of a social investment strategy as it implies a positive relationship between early childhood education programs and children's later success in life and a country's economic success (Heckman, J.J., Moon, S.H., Pinto, R., Savelyev, P.A., & Yavitz, A.Q. 2010; Jönsson, Sandell & Tallberg Broman, 2012). It can also be discussed as illustrating the 'Global Education Reform Movement', which consists of increased bureaucratic control, standardisation and a focus on literacy and

mathematics—even from early ages—and a test-based accountability (Hargreaves & Sheffield, 2009).

The articles in this volume all illustrate the growing focus on early years—especially in certain areas like language, science, maths and values—in a globalised, segregated and rapidly changing society. They illustrate the ongoing changes in the field of early years' education and discuss dilemmas, didactic enhancements and the importance of the teachers' awareness, interest and knowledge. In addition, the articles exemplify the growing interest for research-based practice, teacher participation in research and the importance of both the children's participation and their perspective.

### ***The contributing authors in this volume***

The first article is written by Susanne Thulin, PhD in pedagogy, and Agneta Jonsson, PhD in child and youth science. Both authors have been research students in the research schools and are now working at Kristianstad University as Senior Lecturers in Preschool Teacher Education. In their article, 'Child Perspectives and Children's Perspectives – a Concern for Teachers in Preschool', the importance of the communicative approach of teachers related to children's learning and to the concepts of child perspectives and children's perspectives is discussed. Instead of separating these concepts, the authors argue that it is important to turn attention toward the consequences of the one on the other. One point of departure is that teachers in early childhood education ought not only to grasp children's understandings, but teachers also have to make use of children's experiences in the continuing learning process to be able to support children's learning. The authors finish the article by arguing for the weight of pedagogical awareness where a child's perspective and children's perspectives are kept together both in didactic discussions and in encounters with children. This basis is of special concern for how teachers make use of children's own perspectives in preschool and ultimately in children's learning.

The second article is written by Annika Måansson, Senior lecturer, Reader in education at Malmö University, and Lena Rubinstein Reich, professor in education at Malmö University. Both are tutors and lecturers in the research schools. Their article, titled 'Democracy in Research Circles to Enable New Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Didactics', concerns participation in so-called research circles, as well as participatory and democratic ideas arising in those circles as they relate to perspectives on early childhood education. The article draws its argument mainly from material recorded from

two specific research circles: one on ‘Gender’ and the other on ‘new subject didactic challenges in preschool’. Aspects of Democracy have been slightly more formal: equal participation, horizontal relations and knowledge that informs standpoints. One outcome is that the diversity between the circles resulted in variations concerning form and content that could be discussed as related to aspects of democracy. The authors conclude that ‘research circles and their background ideology can contribute ideas that can be applicable in preschool practice. Teachers can transfer the circles’ values to children’s learning groups and further develop the participatory and democratic aspects of the early childhood education didactics in preschool’.

The third article, ‘Children’s Use of Everyday Mathematical Concepts to Describe, Argue and Negotiate Order of Turn’, is written by Mats Bevemyr, Licentiate student in the research school. The aim of Bevemyr’s paper is to illuminate children’s use of everyday mathematics in their social interaction. This article gives a detailed analysis of how four- to five-year-olds utilise everyday mathematical concepts to describe, argue and negotiate order of turn in their interaction around a computer at a Swedish preschool. Bevemyr’s analysis shows that the children use various expressions that can be interpreted as everyday mathematical concepts as communicative cultural tools in their social interactions. Furthermore, the results show both that the children have actual use for these concepts in their argumentation for order of turn and that the concepts they use seem to be most sufficient in their argumentation in this situated activity. Bevemyr argues that the everyday mathematical concepts used in the analysed activity have the potential to form a foundation for developing more formal mathematical concepts, and he concludes the article by saying, ‘Hopefully, it will inspire preschool teachers to place a mathematical gaze on children’s everyday activities, illuminate the “hidden mathematics”, and help children develop formal mathematical concepts in similar preschool activities’.

The forth article, ‘Socialisation Tensions in the Swedish Preschool Curriculum: The Case of Mathematics’ is written by Dorota Lembrér, former PhD student in the research school, and Tamsin Meaney, professor in mathematic didactics for early years at Malmö University and tutor in the research schools. From the preschool curriculum, the goals and guidelines that describe what preschools and the adults working in preschools should provide to children are analysed to investigate if tensions between the production and reproduction of cultural knowledge as components of socialisation are connected to the global issue of schoolification. As there is an in-

creased focus on mathematics in the revised Swedish curriculum, the mathematical goals are analysed and compared with the other goals and guidelines. The results describe societal expectations of children's needs to acquire the skills to perform as member of their society (becoming) or as knowledgeable participants (being) in preschools. The findings suggest that the goals and guidelines are in conflict in the different sections of the curriculum. The mathematical goals have a strong emphasis on preschool children becoming mathematicians, potentially restricting teachers' possibilities in planning activities to value what children already know and can do. This can be considered an example of schoolification in which the kind of socialisation that preschool children receive is restricted to ensuring that they become the kind of mathematicians needed for school learning.

Barbro Bruce, Senior lecturer at Malmö University's Faculty of Learning and Society (Department of School Development and Leadership) and tutor in the research schools, has written the fifth article, 'Inviting Small Children to Dialogue—Scaffolding and Challenging Conversational Skills'. The purpose of the study described in the article was to learn of how to scaffold and challenge conversational skills in children at an early stage in language development. The theoretical framework highlights the importance of being an active language learner (i.e., language skills are mastered by being used in social interaction). The presented results come from dialogues between speech and language therapists and children aged five to six whose language development has been found to be delayed for their age. Bruce wants to emphasise that the results underline the importance of relating to the child's focus without being soliciting, that is, to comment and give feedback rather than use many questions and imperatives. Professional behaviour, such as elicitation strategies to make children actively participate in dialogues, is driven by your own awareness and skill as a conversational partner. Such awareness is something that can be studied, evaluated, taught, learnt and implemented by preschool teachers, as well as by parents. With a genuine interest for the intention and message of the child—as well as with knowledge of the child's language ability—you offer the child the scaffolding he/she needs in order to manage at his/her peak of capacity.

The sixth article has three authors: Carina Hermansson, Tomas Saar and Christina Olin-Scheller. Carina Hermansson is a former PhD-student of RSCLD and now Senior lecturer of literacy at Malmö University. Tomas Saar has been active in the research schools as a coordinator and supervisor since the start in 2008; he is a trained preschool teacher and Senior lecturer,

Reader of education at Karlstad University. Christina Olin-Scheller, PhD and Senior lecturer, Reader of educational studies at Karlstad University, has been active as a tutor in the research schools. The article, 'Rethinking "Method" in Early Childhood Writing Education', describes and problematises how a method-driven writing project of a fictional narrative, 'My Story', transforms and emerges over a period of five days in a Swedish early childhood classroom. The article provides an empirically based understanding of how this writing project emerges in relation to material and discursive conditions emphasising the forces, flows and processes at work; it shows how, at different times, the method-driven project comes to a stop, takes new directions or activates unforeseen affects, and opens for new becomings. Providing a range of empirical examples, the article's authors describe ways that the method is embedded in and driven by, on the one hand, affects that change the method, the text production and the writing-learning subject. On the other hand, the method also has an explicit and formalised side, possible to articulate and predict. The authors take an explicitly critical approach to discussing the implications and possibilities of teaching methods of writing as dynamic processes that continually open for a variety of assemblages, flows and forces.

The last article in this volume is written by Camila Löf, PhD in education, researcher at the Research & Development Unit for Education, Malmö City, and previously associated with the RSCLD network as a PhD student. In her article, 'Didactics for Life?', Löf explores how the national value-system is realised in a Swedish compulsory school. Ethnographic data is combined with video recordings of a 5<sup>th</sup> form class in a compulsory school in Sweden. In the task of strengthening togetherness within groups of children, establishing common values becomes central. A local working plan is formulated by the school to point out learning objectives and ways of working in the classroom. Nevertheless, the teacher is left alone with her own interpretations of what values to establish. With childhood sociology as a starting point, the analysis focuses on constructions of childhood through local interpretations of the value-system: Which values are established in the classroom interaction? Which view on children, teaching and learning permeates the work? Which childhood is constituted through teaching? Löf emphasises the teacher's perspectives on the school's work with the value-system, and Löf's results suggest that the values and norms constructed in local school practices and alleged to be part of the value-system are based on teacher's own interpretations of what children need.

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