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What is the primary objective of early childhood education according to newly enrolled students in a higher education preschool programme?

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Swedish preschools are mandated to three interconnected roles: to provide care for young children's needs, to support their learning and development, and to foster socialization into cultural norms and values. However, these roles are not necessarily valued equally by those entering the profession. This study examined how newly enrolled students enlisted in a preschool Bachelor programme prioritized these core tasks: care (*omsorg*), value fostering (*fostran*), and teaching/learning (*lärande*). The surveys were administered during the first week of the programme in 2015, 2017, and 2024. In the 2015 and 2017 cohorts, teaching was rated as the most important role (70% and 64%, respectively). By contrast, in 2024, the majority of students (57%) rated care as the primary task of preschool work. In all three cohorts, only 2-4% rated value fostering as the most important task. This low prioritization may reflect negative semantic association with the term *fostran*, or a belief that responsibility for fostering values is the role of parents rather than preschool staff. The survey serves as a baseline for discussing value-based education, teaching, and care in preschool practice. By situating the findings in relation to past and present curricula, the study highlights changes in students' priorities and attitudes over time.

Keywords: attitudes, preschool teachers, quantitative study, survey, value education.



1 Introduction

The role of early childhood education has received increased attention in societal debate and educational policy in recent years. Even though the Swedish preschool curriculum emphasizes the integration of care, learning and value transmission, there is limited empirical research examining how preschool teacher students prioritize these roles. This study investigates how newly enrolled preschool teacher education students view the relative importance of teaching, care, and fostering. In doing so, it contributes to research on teacher professionalism, curriculum enactment, and value-based education in early childhood settings.

Attitudes towards early childhood education are shaped by prevailing understandings of children and childhood, which have shifted significantly over the past century. The previously dominant view of the child as vulnerable, dependent and in need of care has been superseded by an image of the capable child with its own agency (Kjørholt, 2004, p. 37-49). Correspondingly, the role of preschools has changed from primarily serving as a place for minding children of working parents to functioning as democratic educational arenas where children have great influence over their own learning and development (Taggart, 2016). At the same time, practical conditions in early childhood education have shifted considerably. Throughout the 20th century, increased female participation in the workforce led to a steady rise in preschool enrolment, thereby expanding the sector's responsibilities and scope. A more recent trend is increased preschool enrolment of children in the youngest age groups (1-3 years) in Sweden (Skolverket, 2024). This shift implies that, despite more focus on democratic participation and learning, many enrolled children are very young and therefore in need of substantial care.

Fostran (fostering/upbringing), *omsorg* (care) and *lärande* (learning/teaching) constituted the three foundational pillars of the Swedish preschool curriculum at the time this study began (Skolverket, 1998), and they were emphasized as equally important. How these dimensions are viewed, however, is shaped by broader ideological and political trends in society, including shifts in language and changing connotations associated with key terms.

The attitudes expressed by the preschool teacher education candidates in this study are likely to impact both their motivations and their professional practice over their careers. Educators' mindsets toward the purpose of teaching, whether focused on skills, values or relationships, have

been shown to influence children's learning and feelings towards their school environment and interaction with peers (Rimm-Kaufmann & Sawyer, 2004). Consequently, the priority future preschool teachers give to care, fostering and teaching is also likely to influence the quality of early childhood education.

This study contributes to research in early childhood education, teacher professionalism and curriculum studies by offering a longitudinal, empirical examination of the value orientations of preschool teacher candidates. At the same time, it discusses how broader societal attitudes to learning, value transformation and childhood may shape the future direction of preschool practice.

1.1 Theoretical framework

Understanding how teacher attitudes influence educational priorities requires a theoretical approach that accounts for both individual dispositions and broader societal discourses. This study combines insights from semantic change theory and propaganda theory to explore how concepts like care, fostering and teaching are valued by preschool teacher candidates. Together, these theories are used to analyse how language and norms can shape both teacher identity and curriculum ratification within early childhood education.

The meanings of words are modified over time through the process of semantic change. Such change may involve a complete shift in meaning or more subtle shifts in connotations. These connotative shifts often occur through a process of elevation, in which a word loses negative associations and acquires more positive ones, or degradation, where a previously positive word becomes ill-favoured (Borkowska & Kleparski, 2007; Traugott, 2017). Semantic meanings can change over time because of cultural and political shifts, as well as important historical events (Baghana et al., 2019). They can also be influenced by policies or practices in our education system (Labraña & Billi, 2025). When particular phenomena or actions are repeatedly described as desirable, they tend to attain more positive connotations, and vice versa. Within early childhood education, the connotations of terms like “fostering” or “care” are not static; rather, they evolve through ongoing semantic change partially influenced by prevailing views on childhood and the role of teachers.

Attitudes towards certain societal phenomena influence our perception of related words. Conversely, our perception of a word's connotations can also influence how we perceive the phenomenon itself. When words associated with negative emotions are repeatedly used to describe

an educational phenomenon, that phenomenon is likely to become interpreted as undesirable. To further explain how these shifts in language and meaning affect teacher attitudes and professional practice, this study draws on the theory of spontaneous reproduction of propaganda (SRPT). Propaganda is information or communication designed to alter attitudes or change behaviours, for example, by creating loyalty narratives or by generating confusion through fabrications of counterfactual information (Hyzen, 2021). However, propaganda can also be reproduced unintentionally through the contagion of ideological ideas, a process described as the spontaneous reproduction of propaganda. Such reproduction may arise as a result of “in-group” constellations where shared values are reinforced, or through the involuntary or unconscious reproduction of class- or group-based attitudes (Tarín Sanz, 2018).

In this sense, education can function as a tool for propaganda, especially when its focus extends to promoting values and traits rather than knowledge. Apart from the intentional reproduction of values stated in curricula, educators may also reproduce values unconsciously. Such unintentional value reproduction aligns with the principles of *spontaneous reproduction of propaganda theory* (SRPT). This also connects to the cultural reproduction that occurs in the school system through what is sometimes known as the *hidden curriculum*. Preschools, in particular, serve as important arenas for transferring beliefs and values, many of which are passed on unintentionally (Gunio & Fajardo, 2018). One such form of transfer may involve teachers’ own views of the school system, including their assumptions about the primary goal of education. Teachers may prioritize learning, character development and the building of trusting relationships differently, and these priorities are likely to influence the way they teach, thus influencing the hidden curriculum as well.

1.2 Fostering/upbringing

Fostran (hereafter translated as fostering) refers to the transfer of norms and values. These may include desirable moral virtues or the adaptation of broader societal values such as human rights. Even though virtues and rights are often tightly connected, cultivating virtuous personal traits, such as honesty or courage, does not automatically lead to a better society in which human rights are upheld. Likewise, a society with extensive human rights does not necessarily consist of virtuous people motivated by internal rewards; compliance may instead be driven by external motivations such as penalties or positive incentives (Putman, 1987). Nevertheless, virtues and rights often overlap. Adaptation to societal norms often entails shifts in the individual virtues, as values such

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as democracy and human rights have no real meaning if people remain distrustful and intolerant of others (Hansen, Jensen & Broström, 2018; Ignatieff, 2017).

All forms of education impact personal traits, but fostering norms and values is more direct in its explicit aim to shape a child's personality. Ambivalence towards intentionally changing children's traits or enforcing particular values can be traced back as far as the Enlightenment. One of the fundamental ideas in Rousseau's *Émile*, for example, is that a child will develop into a more harmonious and morally superior person if shielded from the negative influence of society. Instead, Rousseau argues that a child's personality should be shaped primarily by nature and the child's own experiences (Rousseau, 2004). However, even within *Émile*, the tutor is actively engaged in nurturing characteristics such as respect, cleanliness, resilience to suffering and kindness towards others.

Another reason why many have reservations about altering a child's traits can be connected to historical misconduct. Authoritarian and despotic regimes have used value-fostering practices to increase acceptance of totalitarian or collectivist ideas (Novikova & Lewin, 1970). Negative attitudes towards fostering have also been shaped by discourses on power (Rantala, 2016), which highlight the asymmetrical relationship between adults and the children in their care. Taken together, these shifts have likely contributed to the semantic degradation of the word *fostering* over time.

Changing a child's personal traits is also strongly connected to discipline and other forms of coercion. In Sweden, the term discipline has similarly acquired increasingly negative connotations. This may help explain why disciplinary values are absent from preschool policy documents, even though they are important in everyday preschool practice (Emilson, 2018). In practice, discipline is communicated primarily through routines and rules, which can be taught directly, for example, through behavioural correction, or indirectly by asking questions, giving praise or deflecting attention (Rantala, 2016). Routines and rules in preschool settings mostly concern how children should treat each other and behave in ways that support a positive physical and social environment (Thornberg, 2008). They also help to improve children's self-regulatory abilities (Day et al., 2022). Even though self-regulation is widely recognized as beneficial to children, supporting their ability to form friendships and increase their likelihood of succeeding in future endeavours (Moffitt et al., 2011; Patrick, 1997), the term can still carry a somewhat negative connotation when applied to

young children. This may stem from its association with discourses of school readiness and becoming a productive citizen, like a cog in a wheel. A teacher's views on how values should be fostered are likely to affect how they endorse discipline and how they encourage self-regulation and virtues. These perspectives can affect both the individual child's character development and interactions within the group.

1.3 Care

The word care (*omsorg*) generally has a more positive connotation than fostering (*fostran*). Care is a fundamental part of human interactions, especially in the private sphere (Langford et al., 2017). We care for children and ageing parents as a natural and expected part of life. However, like many other aspects of human interaction, caring has become specialized and professionalized. As a profession, caring for children replaces forms of interaction that were previously done by family members without requiring any specific qualifications. This shift might help explain why occupations that involve meeting others' physical and emotional needs tend to have relatively low status (Symeonidis, 2015). Ironically, even though the word care often carries positive connotations, it does not necessarily enhance our perceptions or the societal standing of professional caregivers. Care appears to be less prioritized than learning and fostering in Swedish preschools, at least as reflected in the curriculum. At the same time, the growing number of very young children enrolled in preschool increases the need for environments where care is central. Despite this, although the word *omsorg* (care) is mentioned, policy documents offer no explicit definition of quality care. This may be because children's needs are highly varied, which makes it difficult to specify a uniform standard of adequate care.

Most would agree that good care involves meeting physical and emotional needs, but it is not clear what this entails in a preschool setting. In Swedish preschools, there are on average five children for every pedagogue (Skolverket, 2023), making it impossible to meet all the children's needs at every moment. Teachers may not always be able to identify each child's needs, and sometimes these needs must be prioritized. Meeting children's basic physical needs can be challenging in a group setting, and recognizing and responding to emotional needs is often even more complex.

Defining good care is complicated because it usually depends on the development of trusting relationships. Trust takes time to establish, as a child needs to evaluate the behaviour of the

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caregiver across multiple interactions to assess reliability and honesty (Davies, 2019). This temporal dimension of trust building presupposes that both children and staff remain at the same preschool for several years. In many parts of Sweden, the mobility of both preschool staff and children is high, resulting in children being presented to new teachers regularly (SCB, 2018). Just like the concept of care, the term trusting relationships carries positive connotations and is often associated with private, emotional interactions rather than with professional ones.

The lack of specification of good care in the curriculum may also be because it entails a certain level of compassion and emotional involvement from the caregiver (Taggart, 2016), which is hard to professionalize and reduce to bullet points in a policy document. Although emotional availability and compassion may be innate or developed through practice, they are not static traits. A caregiver's ability to recognize and respond appropriately to children's needs can be negatively affected by factors such as stress (Taggart, 2016). It is therefore unsurprising that staff well-being and preschool group size affect preschool staff sensitivity, and therefore the overall quality of care (Gerber et al., 2007).

The way teachers view care in preschools is likely to influence their work in multiple ways. Developing caring relationships requires not only time spent in sustained interaction with children, but also a personal investment expressed through emotional availability. Such investment has significant implications for everyday preschool practice, as trusting relationships affect children's well-being and increase participation and cooperation in preschool activities (Davies, 2019). Trust is also important for children's learning abilities, as they are more receptive to new information when it is conveyed by teachers they trust (Pesch & Koenig, 2023).

1.4 Learning/Teaching

Although the term *lärande* is strictly translated as learning, its use in the curriculum perhaps aligns more closely with *teaching*. A teacher may foster, care for or teach children, but learning is an internal process that takes place within the child and cannot be directly enforced or easily measured. As Biesta (2011) notes, the concept of learning can be vague because it can refer both to a process and to a product, thereby making the term inherently ambiguous. In this paper, *learning* is used to refer to the child's inner developmental process, whereas *teaching* describes the perspective and actions of the teacher.

The difference between teaching and learning is greater than just perspectives. While it is often assumed that children will learn what is being taught, this is not always the case. Children may already know the content and therefore learn nothing new, or they may pay attention to aspects of the activity other than those intended by the teacher (Vallberg Roth, 2010). Teaching usually involves a defined goal or aim, perhaps most easily defined in school contexts where learning outcomes can be assessed through tests. In preschool settings, however, education is not evaluated in the same way, and children often learn in unplanned ways, without explicit instruction from teachers. When preschool teachers were asked to rate the situations for learning in young children, Swedish respondents most frequently chose “playing with peers” (Broström et al., 2014). The same study observed similar patterns across the other participating countries, where responses emphasizing social interaction and child-initiated learning were rated as important for children’s development.

Learning and teaching generally carry positive connotations, even though some forms of teaching have fallen out of favour. Terms such as *katederundervisning* (traditional teacher-centred learning) and *utantillinläring* (recital learning or memorizing) have at times been used almost as slurs. The inner process of learning tends to evoke positive associations as it entails a desired personal development. As Biesta (2011) observed, one learns to read or ride a bicycle, yet one picks up bad habits.

In the 1990s, the responsibility for preschools was transferred from the Ministry of Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education. This shift coincided with the development of the first Swedish preschool curriculum (Skolverket, 1998). One of the motivations for the reform was the ambition to increase the professional status of preschool teachers by highlighting their important role in supporting young children’s learning. However, the extent to which such structural changes influence teacher status can be contested, as factors such as teacher education quality, salary level and working conditions typically play a more decisive role (Symeonidis, 2015).

One way of increasing the status of an occupation is through professionalization, which is done by creating a degree of monopoly over specialized knowledge and core duties (Berntsson, 1999). In Swedish preschools, qualified preschool teachers have the primary role in the education of children, but staff without a university degree in early childhood education also play important roles in

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fulfilling the curriculum goals (Skolverket, 2018). When the work carried out by less formally educated caregivers is perceived as equal to that of certified staff, the profession's monopoly over its specialized duties is weakened.

The positioning of preschool as part of the education system, rather than as a form of social welfare, is likely to shape perceptions of the professional roles of preschool teachers. Such perceptions may also affect the profile of students who choose to apply for preschool teacher education programmes. Once in the profession, their views on teaching and learning are likely to influence how much time they dedicate to planning and evaluating educational activities. These views may also influence how they understand their roles in relation to colleagues without university degrees, who are often assigned a more caring role.

1.5 Fostering, caring and learning

Teachers' attitudes are likely to influence both the time and the personal investment they dedicate to different aspects of their work. Importantly, teaching, fostering and caring are not always competing aims in preschool; rather, they can be meaningfully integrated. Through practices such as scaffolding, preschool teachers can both care for and teach children and infants. For example, a preschool teacher may comfort a child who has fallen while also encouraging the child to take the next step by helping them regain balance, thereby combining care with pedagogical challenge (Gillespie & Greenberg, 2017). Caring values are also important in preschool, where children not only receive care but also learn to care and show compassion for others as part of a broader fostering process (Fugelsnes, 2018). Learning activities related to the local environment can also combine teaching content with the development of caring attitudes toward nature (Klaar, 2013).

Through disciplinary care, preschool educators can create children's well-being by supporting positive interactions with peers and adults, while educational care challenges children to develop and learn (Hansen et al., 2018). In both cases, educators also foster values by encouraging children to interact with others in respectful ways. Although the curriculum explicitly endorses a holistic approach that integrates fostering, caring and learning, this integration is not always easy or even possible in practice. Furthermore, educators' perceptions of the relative importance of teaching, caring and fostering may lead to an emphasis on one dimension at the expense of the others.

1.6 Aims and research questions

The aim of this study is to investigate the priorities that preschool teacher candidates assign to teaching, fostering and caring when rating the most important aspects of their future profession. The research questions guiding the study are as follows:

1. How do preschool teacher candidates rate the importance of caring, teaching and fostering in their future profession?
2. How have these attitudes changed over time (2015–2024), and what might these changes indicate about evolving perceptions of early childhood education in Sweden?

This study draws on data from a longitudinal survey and uses quantitative methods of analysis. The results provide a basis for discussing how preschool teacher candidates' attitudes relate to broader linguistic and societal trends, as well as how they align with historical and current Swedish preschool curricula. The implications of these attitudes on the quality of early childhood education are also considered.

2 Research methodology

The quantitative analysis of this study is based on survey responses from students participating in a bachelor's degree programme at Kristianstad University in Sweden. The survey was distributed and collected during the introduction of the first week of the programme among three different cohorts: 2015, 2017 and 2024. This ensured that the student's responses were not yet influenced by the programme's coursework or academic training. Instead, their responses reflect pre-existing conceptions of the preschool teacher role, shaped primarily by broader societal discourses and personal views rather than by university-led pedagogical training.

While the primary aim of the original survey was to investigate students' attitudes toward school subjects, a control question on the importance of care, teaching and fostering was included to contextualize their responses. These questions were not originally intended to serve as the main focus of analysis. However, the consistent and striking response patterns across cohorts indicated deeper underlying trends that warranted independent analysis and reflection. In the part of the survey analysed in this study, respondents were asked to choose the most important aspect of a preschool teacher's work. The available options were as follows: *omsorg* (care), *lärande*

(teaching/learning) and *fostrande* (fostering/upbringing). To enable connections between responses and variables such as age, sex and academic performance, the surveys were not administered anonymously.

The three specific years (2015, 2017 and 2024) were selected based on the practical availability of data, dictated by access to student cohorts in those years, and to capture a period in which shifts in attitudes might reasonably be expected. For example, between 2017 and 2024, the Swedish preschool curriculum underwent revision, during which the term fostering was removed. This makes the chosen timeframe particularly relevant for exploring potential shifts in how preschool teacher candidates prioritize different aspects of their future profession.

Diagrams and statistical analyses were carried out in Microsoft Excel. Some data were excluded from the analysis of how study success influenced survey responses. This exclusion included students who could not be identified (two in 2015, two in 2017). Their responses were still used in the main analysis but omitted from analyses relating study success to survey outcomes. For the 2024 cohort, study success could not be established as the students had only recently started the programme when the analysis was carried out.

The survey was given to the students in person during scheduled class sessions to optimize response rates. In 2015, 205 students were registered at the start of the programme, and 131 completed the survey (64%). In 2017, 187 were registered, and 124 responded (66%). In 2024, 73 were registered, and 51 answered the survey (70%). The response rates are likely underestimated as no attendance was recorded during the course introduction, and some students may have already left the programme, but remained on the course lists. In 2015, 20 non-response students did not complete any course credits and may not have attended the introduction. In 2017, this applied to 17 students. In 2024, five non-respondents were formally recorded as having left the programme three weeks after the survey was administered. In 2015, 11 respondents provided more than one answer to the question about their professional role (8%). In 2017, 36 respondents gave more than one reply (29%). In 2024, 9 respondents were unable to choose a single aspect as most important (18%). These respondents were excluded from the analysis.

A survey was chosen as the primary method because it enables the collection of standardized data from a large group of students across different cohorts, allowing for meaningful comparisons over time. While surveys do not offer the depth of insight afforded by qualitative methods, such as

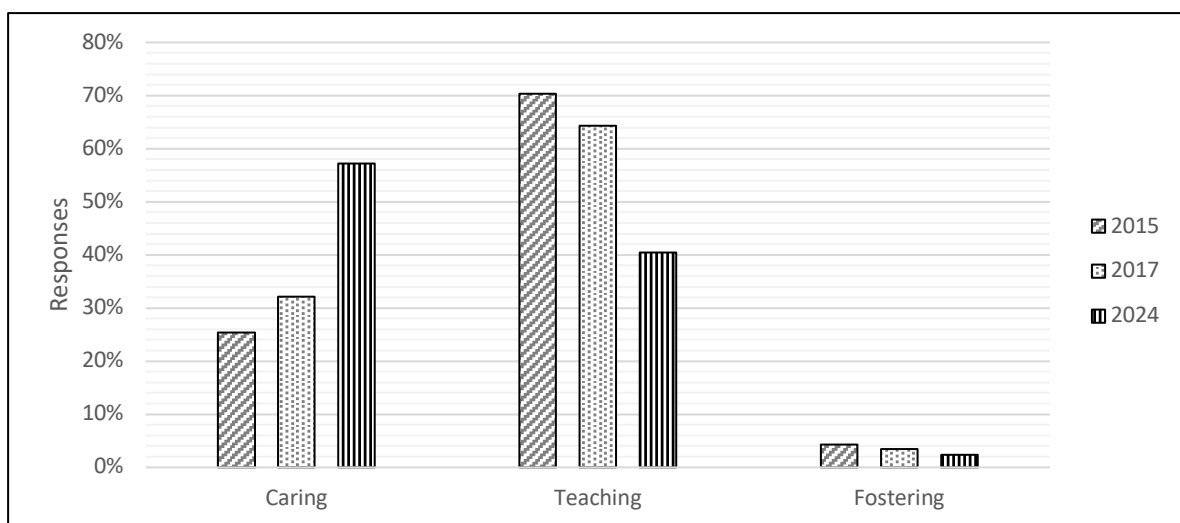
interviews, they are well-suited for identifying broad patterns, general trends and shifts in attitudes. That said, this method also presents limitations. Surveys constrain responses to predefined categories and lack the ability to probe deeper into participants' underlying motivations or attitudes. Although respondents were given the opportunity to comment on their answers, few chose to do so. Therefore, it is not possible within the current study design to discern why respondents prioritized one aspect over others. Investigating such motivations would require qualitative methods, such as interviews. The quantitative results and wording of past and current curricula are interpreted in the discussion using the theoretical approach of semantic change and SRPT.

3 Results

The number of students responding in each year was 131 in 2015, 124 in 2017 and 51 in 2024. Occasional missing data resulted in a slight variation in the sample size (N) across specific statistical tests. The results from 2015 and 2017 were very similar, and no specific year effect was observed: $\chi^2(2, N=205) = 1,17, p = 0,56$. Consequently, the 2015 and 2017 datasets are pooled in the rest of the analysis. In contrast, there was a significant difference in response patterns when comparing the pooled 2015/2017 data with the 2024 cohort: $\chi^2(2, N=247) = 21,0, p < 0,001$ (fig 1).

Figure 1.

Students' ratings of the most important aspect of their future work as preschool teachers. The columns represent the percentage of first-year students' responses in 2015, 2017 and 2024. The figure is based on 118 responses from 2015, 87 from 2017 and 42 from 2024.

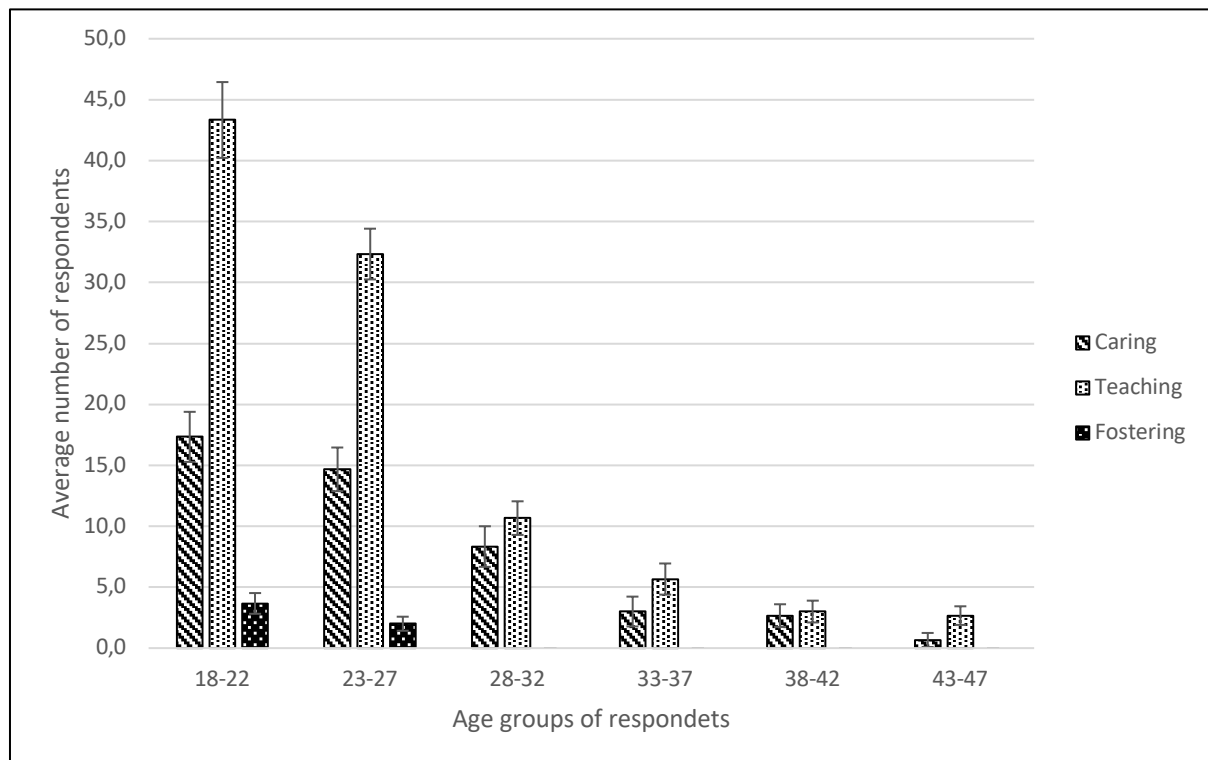


The most striking result is the extreme tilt towards teaching in 2015 and 2017, whereas in 2024, most students identified caring as the most important aspect of their future work. This suggests a substantial shift in attitudes towards caring during this time. In contrast, fostering was consistently rated as least important across all years. Assuming an even distribution of responses as the expected outcome, this expectation can clearly be rejected. Most of the respondents regard teaching as the most important aspect of being a preschool teacher in 2015 and 2017, whereas caring sticks out in 2024: ($\chi^2(2, N=247) = 131,2, p < 0,001^{**}$) (Fig. 1).

There were no significant differences in attitudes between drop-out students and those who completed the education in either 2015 ($\chi^2(2, N=118) = 1,02, p = 0,60$) or 2017 ($\chi^2(2, N=86) = 1,22, p = 0,27$). Age also did not appear to have an influence on student responses. Fostering was identified as the most important aspect only among some of the youngest students (18-23 years), and caring was somewhat more common among students aged 28-32 years. However, these differences were not statistically significant: ($\chi^2(10, N= 204) = 4,4, p = 0,93$) (Fig. 2).

Figure 2.

Response across different age groups, shown as a three-category distribution (teaching, caring and fostering), based on survey data from 2015, 2017 and 2024, (total of 246 responses). Error bars represent standard errors.



It is not possible to discern whether non-respondents were absent from the introduction session or simply chose not to complete the survey. However, it is possible to analyze potential response bias. Because respondents are identifiable, the identities of non-respondents can also be deduced.

The sex ratio in the preschool teacher education is generally very skewed, with only about one in twenty students being male. In 2015, about 4% of respondents and 3% of non-respondents were male. In 2017, 5% of respondents and 6% of non-respondents were male. In 2024, the cohort was smaller and included only two male students, one of whom completed the survey. Therefore, sex does not appear to have affected the tendency to respond to the survey. However, the number of male respondents is too low to allow for any meaningful analysis.

Age is another factor that might lead to response bias. In 2017, there is no significant difference in the age distribution of non-respondents compared with respondents, assuming an equal expected distribution: $\chi^2(6, N=64) = 9,5, p = 0,15$. In 2015, on the other hand, the youngest age groups (between 18-22) and the oldest age groups (43+) were underrepresented among respondents: $\chi^2(5, N=78) = 74,3, p = <0,001$. However, in real numbers, the oldest age group is quite small, consisting of only seven non-respondents and one respondent. These older age groups had to be pooled to avoid an expected value of 0. In 2024, the age distribution of respondents was not significantly different from that of non-respondents: $\chi^2(6, N=22) = 1,04, p = 0,98$.

Table 1.

Number of respondents and the distribution of their answers (in percentages) in 2015, 2017 and 2024.

Year	2015				2017				2024			
Age	Caring	Teaching	Fostering	Number of respondents	Caring	Teaching	Fostering	Number of respondents	Caring	Teaching	Fostering	Number of respondents
18-22	26%	69%	5%	61	26%	67%	7%	27	35%	59%	6%	17
23-27	24%	70%	6%	37	30%	67%	3%	33	86%	14%	0%	7
28-32	40%	60%	0%	10	36%	64%	0%	14	78%	22%	0%	9
33-37	0%	100%	0%	5	60%	40%	0%	5	50%	50%	0%	6
38-42	25%	75%	0%	4	67%	33%	0%	3	67%	33%	0%	3
43-47	0%	100%	0%	1	25%	75%	0%	4	-	-	-	0

4 Discussion

4.1 Fostering

Following completion of this survey in 2015 and 2017, the Swedish preschool curriculum was revised, and the term *fostran* (fostering or upbringing) was removed (Skolverket, 1998, 2018). The relatively low priority assigned to fostering by the students in this study may reflect that the term had developed negative connotations over time (Rantala, 2016), which may also explain why it was removed from the curriculum. Notably, however, with the exception of the strengthened focus on the natural sciences introduced in the 2010 curriculum (Skolverket, 2011), the major updates relate to the UN Convention on the Rights of a Child, as well as to social and economic sustainable development. These changes in the curriculum are phrased in a way that focuses on the democratic values and the rights of children in preschool, rather than on describing specific content to be taught. In other words, the purpose is to transfer societal norms, rather than deliver content knowledge. Moreover, norms and values are not confined to a single section of the curriculum; instead, they are integrated throughout the document as a whole (Skolverket, 2018). This is not surprising, as young children need to learn to socialize and interact with others in a respectful manner for preschool to provide a positive, safe and inclusive environment. However, the strong focus on norms and values is interesting in light of the simultaneous aversion to the term fostering. Although the word has been removed, value-related aims remain a dominating feature of both the present and past preschool curricula. This indicates a semantic shift rather than a change in attitudes. Still, this interpretation should be approached with caution. While the results show that few students prioritized fostering, the survey question does not allow us to determine whether this reflects semantic perception or an actual rejection of value transmission.

The results may also be interpreted as a rejection to engage in practices perceived as directly altering the personality of a child, an intervention that is more explicit in the notion of fostering than in broader concepts such as value transformation. Related words have also developed more negative connotations over time, indicating a rejection of the underlying concept rather than just the words alone. Fjellström (2004) argues that words such as “ethics” and “morals” have largely been replaced in official documents by terms such as “values” and “socialization,” which carry a more positive air. The former terms tend to evoke efforts to mould children into desirable citizens, whereas the latter are associated with creating and promoting an inclusive society. The type of values that schools are expected to instil in children depends on their historical setting. In 1944, for example,

official documents highlighted the importance of creating physically and morally strong individuals who were willing to sacrifice themselves and remain faithful to Swedish traditions and spiritual inheritance (SOU, 1944, p. 28). Although these moral values appear extraordinary today, they reflected the influences of the war affecting neighbouring countries at the time. Similarly, the values highlighted in the contemporary preschool curriculum reflect the priorities and concerns of our current society.

Identifying contemporary trends and oddities is more challenging than analyzing historical attitudes, as we are immersed within the present cultural context. However, certain discernible trends of our own time include a strong emphasis on democracy and inclusion, accompanied by an aversion to hierarchy, authority and power. These shifts help to explain why the word fostering has developed a negative connotation, given that it presupposes an embedded power structure between an authority figure and a subordinate (Rantala, 2016). In contrast, the word socialization indicates a more diffuse process in which children absorb the norms and values of the surrounding culture.

Regardless of the term used, the values taught in preschool encompass both societal norms, such as human rights and democratic rights, and values aimed at building children's moral competence and character traits. All types of value education ultimately seek to change the character of the child or young person, although this is most explicit when the focus is placed on cultivating moral traits. The curriculum specifically highlights desirable traits, including openness, respect, solidarity and responsibility. It also encourages children to become more independent and to collaborate with others. Rules and routines in preschool may serve as a way to stimulate positive traits by specifically helping children to learn to develop self-regulation. The ability to control one's emotions and postpone reward is foundational in the development of other traits, such as respect and responsibility, that the curriculum emphasizes.

Attitudes towards fostering among preschool teacher candidates may reflect not only semantic shifts and contemporary trends, but also broader changes in the role of the preschool itself. The replacement of the term daycare with preschool signals an increased emphasis on learning as the primary purpose. This shift can be interpreted as positioning fostering and caring as the parents' privilege and responsibility. However, considering the substantial amount of time many young

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children spend in preschool, this leaves limited time for traditional parental upbringing and fostering. In this study, there are only a handful of students who see fostering as the most important aspect of preschool education. These respondents are exclusively from the youngest age groups (18- 23 years). As this pattern remains in 2024, almost a decade later, it is unlikely to reflect a cohort effect. Instead, it suggests that attitudes towards fostering may change with age. However, this does not necessarily imply that students reject value education altogether. Several respondents provided comments emphasizing democratic values, inclusion and respect, which are core aspects of fostering, even though they did not select the term itself. This suggests that they may endorse the practices associated with fostering while distancing themselves from the word itself.

The low priority given to fostering in the survey may have meaningful consequences. If preschool teachers do not see fostering as a primary responsibility in their professional role, they may feel less motivated to invest the time and the effort required to try to change a child's behaviour or values. Moreover, if preschools do not actively support children's development of self-regulation by appropriately responding to antisocial conduct, opportunities for interventions become limited. For a working parent whose children spend much of their day in preschool, this leaves little time to identify and influence the child's behaviour.

The student candidates may have responded differently if fostering had been phrased as "transferring democratic and social values." This limitation highlights the methodological constraint of using a survey. It is not possible to know whether students' choices reflected principled views about professional responsibility or intuitive, emotional reactions to the specific words provided. Future studies might address this limitation by incorporating more elaborate open-ended responses or qualitative interviews to better understand how students interpret these terms.

I would argue that the negative associations attached to fostering are partly semantic but also stem from a reluctance to intentionally change children's personality traits. This extends beyond a word simply falling out of fashion and may have significant effects on preschool practice. Democratic values are often taught through a socialization process, where children learn by observing and participating in everyday interactions. Instances of disrespectful behaviour in individual children can be corrected through positive models provided by teachers or other children. In such cases, social cohesion and feelings of inclusion will still prevail, as long as transgressions remain relatively few. When a large number of children refuse to listen to one another or take turns, the preschool

environment can no longer be described as democratic and inclusive. If preschool teachers feel uncomfortable with challenging inappropriate behaviour in individual children, or feel it is the parents' responsibility, they will not be able to maintain the conditions necessary for a positive and well-functioning preschool environment.

The aversion to hierarchy, authority and power described earlier is not specifically mentioned as undesirable in the curriculum. Instead, it may reflect a reproduction of ideas and values in line with SRPT. Although the preschool curriculum highlights desirable individual traits, such as responsibility, solidarity and respect, the aversion to engage in direct fostering practices, combined with a strong focus on group dynamics and indirect socialization may inadvertently steer the preschool teaching in unintended directions. In this sense, a *hidden curriculum* shaped by pedagogues' own value orientations can influence preschool teaching beyond the curriculum's formal intentions. Bringing these values to light is important to evaluate whether preschool practices actually generate anticipated outcomes, or whether they are restricted by the beliefs of pedagogues. In other words, can democratic and inclusive preschool environments be achieved mainly through socialization processes, or do they require more direct interventions?

4.2 Care

Care appears to have held a relatively low status in both 2015 and 2017, with only around 30% of respondents rating care as their most important task. By 2024, this figure had increased to 57%, a shift that may reflect the increasing prevalence of early preschool enrolments. In Sweden, as many as 52% of 1-year-olds and 94% of 2-year-olds are in early childhood education (Skolverket, 2024). These age groups need a great deal of physical and emotional care, making the limited emphasis on care within the preschool curriculum particularly remarkable. Although one section is entitled "Care, development and learning," its only explicit reference to care is that "the preschool should offer children safe care and has an important role to play in helping to form the child's security and self-esteem. Education should be characterized by care for the child's well-being and security" (Skolverket, 2018 p.10). It is noteworthy that the word security appears twice, whereas references to physical and emotional needs are absent from the document. The only other passage that can be connected to care is the requirement to make sure that each child is "being given good conditions to build up trusting relationships and feel a sense of security in the group" (Skolverket,

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2018 p.16). However, it is not clear whether these trusting relationships are assumed to be between teachers and children or among the children themselves. Another mention of care appears in relation to respecting children's bodily and personal integrity in daily care. Depending on how this is interpreted by preschool teachers, such wording may unintentionally limit the extent of physical and emotional comfort offered to very young children, such as one-year-olds, who typically require close, responsive care. The only explicit reference to physical needs is the statement that children have the right to rest during the day.

One reason it may be difficult to describe what constitutes good care in a policy document is that caring relationships inherently involve emotional attachment, which is not easy to quantify. Compassion towards a child is necessary for forming secure attachments, but it is also very difficult to professionalize (Taggart, 2016). In practice, becoming too emotionally involved with the children in your care as a preschool employee would be seen as unprofessional. Equally, a lack of emotional engagement undermines the quality of care, as children are likely to feel the lack of personal engagement. According to Langford et al. (2017), the quality of care is rarely evaluated in terms of the well-being it creates, but rather by the harm that becomes visible when it is absent. This could be a result of the difficulty of assessing something as personal and emotionally charged as care, but it could also reflect an underlying devaluation of care within educational policy and practice. Twice as many respondents in 2015 and 2017 valued teaching, rather than care, as the most important work of a preschool teacher, even though many children in preschool are infants and therefore highly care dependent.

The low status of care can also be connected to the dominant discourses in early childhood education that centre on the "capable child," in which children participate in democratic preschools and have their own agency (Kjørholt, 2004; Taggart, 2016). Seen in this light, dependence on others for physical and emotional needs is construed as a deficiency (Langford et al., 2017). A further factor contributing to the devaluation of care is its historical association with tasks traditionally performed by women in the unpaid domestic domain. Focusing on children's need for care and attachment has therefore sometimes been viewed as reinforcing gender stereotypes (Taggart, 2016).

The status of care work in early childhood education may also be understood through the lens of SRPT. As preschools are increasingly seen as educational institutions rather than social care settings, an accompanying ideological shift in how care is perceived may follow. This shift may not

be explicitly stated in policy; instead, it may be reproduced in attitudes, professional hierarchies and curriculum omissions. In this way, the devaluation of care becomes culturally sustained and passed on unintentionally, thus shaping how educators prioritize and perform their professional roles.

The views on care in 2024 differ somewhat from earlier years, with almost 60% of respondents identifying it as the most important part of preschool work. This shift may reflect a change in attitude that corresponds to increased enrolment of infants in preschool. However, it could also reflect a difference in the student composition at the university level. In 2015 and 2017, high competition for admission meant many applicants being denied, whereas in 2024, the university struggled to recruit enough students to fill the programme. Since admission is based on academic grades, it is likely that the average academic level of students admitted in 2024 was lower than in previous years. This shift may also influence students' personal motivations for becoming a preschool teacher; their reasons may be more closely tied to an affinity for working with children, rather than a love for teaching as an academic or pedagogical endeavour.

The change in attitudes between 2015/2017 and 2024 is unlikely to be due to a semantic shift, since the word care is still positively loaded. Instead, it is more likely to be influenced by the respondents' attitudes towards care work, which are shaped both by individual preferences and by the broader social status afforded to care workers. Preschool teachers' views on caring can have important effects on how they prioritize their tasks and the pedagogical attitudes they bring into their professional practice. Preschools cater for children from one and five years of age, and they are often divided into age groups. The youngest children have the greatest need for close and consistent care. When educated staff prioritize teaching over caregiving, responsibility for these infants often falls to pedagogues without higher education. This ignores the important contribution that trained preschool teachers make to supporting early language development and motor skills, for example, in these age groups. In contrast, teachers that prioritize care are more likely to take on the important task of working with the youngest children.

4.3 Learning/teaching

The term *lärande* (learning/teaching) traditionally means the transfer of knowledge. However, as the term fostering has been phased out of the curriculum, it now appears to have expanded to include the transfer of values and the development of desirable personal traits. A majority of

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respondents in 2015 and 2017 viewed teaching as the most important aspect of a preschool teachers' work which suggests a semantic shift: teaching is increasingly understood as encompassing aspects previously associated with fostering, such as moral development and value transmission. This shift makes learning a more positively charged term, while fostering is avoided despite covering similar educational aims. From the perspective of SRPT, this shift may be understood as an unintentional ideological process. Educational discourse shaped through curriculum, teacher education and professional norms, may reproduce dominant societal values, such as cognitive achievement, while marginalizing less measurable, relational aspects like care and value formation. The preference for teaching among the earlier cohorts may therefore not only reflect conscious beliefs, but also an internalized hierarchy of professional tasks, shaped by cultural perspectives about what constitutes good quality early childhood education.

The positive attitudes towards teaching in preschool are almost ironic, since it was initially considered very provocative and controversial by many professionals in early childhood education (Broström, 2006). When the 1998 preschool curriculum introduced content within specific subjects, such as mathematics and language, concerns were raised that preschool would become more "school-like." A greater focus on planned, teacher-led activities was expected to reduce opportunities for child-initiated learning and playtime (Jonsson, Williams & Pramling Samuelsson, 2017). Preschool teachers report that their pedagogic work is more structured when clear learning goals are provided (Berg, 2022), but whether this has a negative impact on children's play remains unclear. In fact, many professionals integrate play with curriculum content (Berg, 2022), and play-based learning is identified in the curriculum as a foundation for children's development, learning and wellbeing (Skolverket, 2018).

The introduction of the preschool curriculum in 1998 (Skolverket, 1998) was expected to increase the status of preschool teachers. However, the curriculum does not give teachers a monopoly on the transfer of knowledge. In earlier versions of the curriculum, the participation of parents in preschool education was encouraged, but this has since been replaced with participation "in the evaluation" of the preschool education. This shift may represent an effort to increase the professionalization of preschool teachers. When parents are encouraged to take an active role in forming educational content, it can create the perception that preschool staff are "child-minders," carrying out tasks like those of parents (Berntsson, 1999).

A strong emphasis on teaching, as shown in the 2015 and 2017 survey responses, may influence preschool priorities in significant ways. Teachers who place greater value on learning and teaching than on care and fostering are more likely to invest time in planning and evaluating educational goals, rather than investing in the development of caring relationships. This tendency disregards the well-established understanding that well-being generated by adequate care is generally considered a prerequisite for learning in young children (Langford et al., 2017).

In 2024, attitudes towards caring had improved. A greater emphasis on care may overlap between the work carried out by preschool teachers and that of staff without university degrees. Although this could potentially weaken teacher professionalization, it may also support a more child-centred preschool environment that focuses more on children's needs. Moreover, prioritizing care may make the preschool workplaces less hierarchical. The shifting attitudes toward teaching, especially when seen alongside the devaluation of fostering and the recent rise of care, suggest a dynamic and evolving view of the preschool teacher's role. Teaching, once viewed with scepticism in preschool settings, now appears to carry professional weight and cultural legitimacy, perhaps due in part to its alignment with measurable outcomes and contemporary policy expectations. However, when teaching begins to encompass not only knowledge but also values and socialization, it risks obscuring the boundaries between pedagogical domains. From the perspective of semantic change and SRPT, such blending may lead to unintended consequences, where teachers adopt a language of learning while distancing themselves from the more relational, value-driven aspects of their profession. Maintaining balance in preschool education therefore requires attentiveness to how shifts in terminology reflect deeper ideological currents and a commitment to ensuring that teaching, caring and fostering are recognized as complementary, rather than competing, responsibilities.

5 Conclusion

This study set out to explore how preschool teacher education candidates in Sweden prioritize the three core elements of their future profession; caring, teaching and fostering, and how these priorities have changed between 2015 and 2024. The findings show that while teaching was the dominant priority in the earlier cohorts (2015 and 2017), a notable shift had occurred by 2024, with care emerging as the most highly valued professional aspect. Fostering, on the other hand,

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consistently received the lowest ratings across all three cohorts, thus raising important questions about how this concept is perceived and its relative position within current conceptions of preschool teaching.

These patterns suggest more than just a change in educational preferences. They reflect broader semantic and ideological developments. The decline in fostering may not be due to a rejection of value education itself, but rather to the increasingly negative connotations attached to the word itself. This interpretation aligns with theories of semantic shift, as well as with SRPT, both of which help explain how dominant norms and values are often unconsciously reinforced through language and professional discourse. In contrast, the rise in the value placed on care between 2017 and 2024, though likely driven by the rising enrolments of infants in preschool, may also reflect a counter-current to the focus on learning in early childhood policy.

The results have implications for curriculum interpretation, teacher training, and the ongoing construction of professional identity in early childhood education. If the language used in curricula and teacher education influences how professional responsibilities are perceived, then shifts in terminology, such as replacing fostering with more neutral or relational terms, may alter practice in ways that are neither intentional nor fully transparent. Thus, educators may embrace learning and care while simultaneously distancing themselves from morally formative work, even if such work remains a central aspect of their roles as preschool teachers.

Further research is needed to explore how teacher candidates interpret these terms in depth, how their views evolve over time, and how these attitudes influence classroom practice. Qualitative approaches could provide a richer understanding of the tensions between professional identity, policy language and everyday pedagogical decision-making. Ultimately, this study highlights the significance of language in shaping both attitudes and practice in early childhood education. By examining what teacher candidates prioritize, and how those priorities shift, we gain insight into the evolving meanings of care, learning and fostering, as well as the complex role teachers play in balancing these dimensions.

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