

Minding the gap Dilemmas in a didactic and pragmatically informed teaching approach in preschool

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Since the term “teaching” was apostrophized in the revised curriculum for Swedish preschool, preschool teachers seem to have been struggling with the concept in their day-to-day practices. The current article is based in a collaborative R&D programme aiming at further developing knowledge about what may characterize teaching in preschools. In this article a didactic and pragmatically informed teaching approach with focus on values is analysed. The aim is to understand preschool teachers’ interpretations of the didactic *why* question, which plays a central role in teaching from a pragmatic perspective. The material underlying the teaching approach consists of a total of 364 documents, including 64 video recordings. This was carried about in about 120 preschools and/or preschool departments in ten Swedish municipalities. The analysis takes a didactic approach and can be methodologically described as abductive analysis. The results indicate that the question “why?” in didactic and pragmatically informed teaching with focus on values is characterized by ethical dilemmas concerning rules and norms in preschool practice. Consequently, the ethical dilemmas are constituted as didactic dilemmas, in which preschool teachers, in co-actions with children, focus on values in teaching situations, and for which preschool teachers need to take actions without offending colleagues, children or parents.

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Introduction

In Sweden, 85% of all children aged 1–5 attend preschool (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2020). When preschool became a national school form in Sweden (SFS 2010:800), teaching gained a prominent position. International measurements, however, point to several areas of potential improvement in Swedish preschools, not least importantly with regard to conditions for teaching in preschool. For example, as measured by the OECD, Sweden is below average for child-to-teacher ratios (OECD, 2017, p. 43), and the number of teaching hours for children. As teaching was enhanced in the revised curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2019) teachers have struggled with the concept – both in preschool practice and in teacher training.

From the international perspective, longitudinal research indicates the significance of preschool teachers for the quality of education and thus childhood learning and development (e.g., Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2010). Persson (2015) emphasizes that earlier research has presented results indicating that quality in preschool education is a combination of responsive care and high-quality teaching; the latter is designated “instructional quality” in the international research literature. There is, however, real need to clarify how teaching can be delivered in preschool as a form of schooling, and significant differences in how preschools approach the pedagogical task have emerged (e.g., Skolin-spektionen, 2018). Moreover, it stands out as crucial to further understand what responsive care may be in relation to teaching.

When the Swedish Education Act of 2011 entered into force, the work of preschools regarding norms and values was also accorded a stronger position (SFS 2010:800), legitimizing the preschool to influence children’s attitudes through socialization in pedagogical practice (cf. Johansson, Emilson & Puroila, 2018; Löf & Tallberg Broman, 2018; see also Sheridan & Williams, 2018). Policy documents applicable to preschools emphasize certain specific values to which individual children, and childhood more generally, should be related – both in terms of care and of values education (see Noddings, 2015). In preschool practice, interpretations of this task are interwoven with children’s age and gender, as well as social and cultural factors. In other words, the choice of which values and norms are especially important to address varies from one practice to the next and is highly dependent upon individual interpretations of the needs of preschool children (Vallberg Roth & Månsson, 2008; see also Löf, 2011 and 2018 for a similar discussion of values work in schools). The legitimation of the preschool to foster certain values and norms entails a simultaneous shift in the family–preschool relationship, where the preschool is given/assumes the right to shape children into new social citizens (Löf & Tallberg Broman, 2018). This calls for critical reflection, both within preschool practice and in teacher education, on how teaching with focus on values can be organized.

Aim

In light of the above, it is interesting to study both of these strengthened mandates – teaching and values. Drawing upon experiences from a didactic and pragmatically informed teaching approach with focus on values, the aim of this article is to understand preschool teachers’ interpretations of the didactic *why* question, which plays a central role in teaching from a pragmatic perspective (Hedefalk, 2014).

In relation to the *why* question, in a pragmatic perspective we pay particular attention to identified gaps, or “problematic situations” (Hedefalk, 2014). We ask, “What problematic situations are identified in the preschools that are collaborating in the project?” and ‘How do teachers deal with dilemmas that occur?’ In our analysis, we apply the “Didaktik” premise, deriving from the continental–Nordic tradition (cf. e.g., Gudem & Hopmann, 1998).

Setting – didactic and pragmatically informed teaching approach

This article is based on a three-year collaborative project within an R&D programme where the parties involved tried several different theory-informed teaching approaches¹ (Vallberg Roth, Holmberg, Ljöf & Stensson, 2019). In this context, teaching means that the teacher is pointing out something to someone (Doverborg, Pramling & Pramling Samuelsson, 2013; Vallberg Roth, 2020). Preschool teachers, principals and administrative managers are the target group of the programme, while children in preschool – whose opportunities for care, play, learning and development form the core of the activities – are the ultimate target group. The aim of the research project within the R&D programme is, in collaboration with preschool teachers, preschool principals, administrative representatives, and researchers, to further develop knowledge about what may characterize teaching in relation to scientific grounds and proven experience. This was carried out in ten Swedish municipalities, between 2016 and 2018 (Vallberg Roth, Holmberg, Ljöf & Stensson, 2019).

As a whole, the urgency and usefulness of both the R&D programme and the general research programme, such as this study, may be interpreted as very high as regards the potential of the project to contribute to professional judgement, critical reflection and the utilization of scope. Overall, this knowledge makes it possible to contribute over the short and long terms to the further development of both teaching and teaching education to improve all children’s chances in life.

Dedicated reference material, presenting teaching from a pragmatic perspective and in terms of reflective learning, with reference to Dewey (1916/1966), Burman (2014) and Hedefalk (2014), has been prepared to support the programme participants (Vallberg Roth, 2016). Burman (2014) points to “learning by reflective experience”, where the word *experience* can express that this involves experiencing a situation and not just carrying out an action, which the word *doing* in “learning by doing” could suggest. The orientation is children’s meaning-making in sustainable development, and the focus is the didactic questions of *what*, *how* and *why*: questions about teaching content and teaching that children encounter in preschool; why they encounter this particular content and these particular teaching methods and the conditions they provide for meaning making.

¹ The study was carried out within the framework of the *Teaching in Preschool* R&D programme. The article is based on the final report on the research component of the R&D programme. The programme was carried out in collaboration among ten Swedish municipalities, the independent Institute of Innovation, Research and development in Schools and Preschools (Ifous) and Malmö University (MAU). The study was co-funded by MAU and the ten municipalities: Bjuv, Landskrona, Lidingö, Strängnäs, Svedala, Trelleborg, Uppsala, Vaxholm, Åstorp and Österåker. The research group thanks everyone who participated and contributed material and points of view in analysis and discussions.

Some of the main concepts in the reference material are “stand fast” and “gaps”. Interaction refers to situations when there is interaction between people or between people and artefacts (referring to physical, intellectual, and social reality). “Stand fast” refers to when the action is flowing and divides into even currents; words and concepts in conversation stand, and what is said does not need to be explained. “Gaps” can be observed when someone hesitates, or attention is paid to something in a way that is unfamiliar or outside the norm.

In problematic situations, gaps manifest in the form of hesitation, doubt, or lack of information. In teaching contexts, although numerous modes of action can work in the situation, only *one* is privileged and implemented, which means that the participants have consciously or unconsciously chosen one action over another. In teaching situations and interactions, teachers can intervene, direct children’s attention, and provide support for progressing through the situation, which privileges certain actions while excluding others.

Accordingly, the participants in this programme have identified gaps in the preschool practice. With those gaps in mind, they have planned and conducted a teaching approach that may progress interaction and/or meaning making.

Method and theoretical approach

The research project was designed as a parallel series of collaborative trial teaching arrangements in the participating preschools (see Vallberg Roth, Holmberg, Lof & Stensson, 2019). The teaching arrangements were studied using texts such as teaching plans, as well as evaluations and the participants’ observations of preschool teaching, which were documented, videotaped and/or written.

Each participating municipality/responsible school authority participated through one or more development teams. The municipalities/responsible school authorities appointed the participants in the developmental teams. Based on input the participants then tried the theory-informed teaching arrangements in the municipalities without the presence of the researchers in the preschools. Professionals who worked in the preschools conducted and recorded the activities. Recorded data were treated confidentially and stored on a platform that was accessible to the researchers. One participant per preschool/department was appointed to enter the material on the platform. The appointed participants only had access to the material that they personally entered.

Material and analysis

In total, there is documentation from 120 preschools/departments involved in this teaching approach. The material underlying the analysis in the article consists of a total of 346 documents (planning, teaching and evaluation documents), including 64 videos at the preschool department level. There is about 300 minutes (roughly five hours) of video documentation in total. The written documentation comprises a total of about 75,000 words. A single preschool/department may have posted 1–9 videos of varying length for the same teaching approach. In some cases, the preschools/departments provided only videos and in others only written documentation.

The analysis can be described as abductive analysis, which involves alternation between empirically loaded theory and theory-loaded empirical matter, where each is reinterpreted in the light of the other (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). The analysis begins with an

empirically based, or material-based, analytical path and then transitions to a theory-based analytical path (cf. Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008; Rapley, 2011; Vallberg Roth, 2020).

The empirically based analytical path involves close examination of the empirical material. We have repeatedly read, listened to and viewed the material. Particularly prominent words have been noted. The empirical materials in the foreground for this article are the planning and evaluation documents in which the participants have personally expressed themselves regarding the didactic questions in general, particularly their expressions concerning the *why* question. *The theory based analytical path* focuses on distinctive traces with links to earlier research and concepts (see section “Distinctive traces”). The analysis is intertextual, where empirical and scientific texts are related to one another. In this analytical path, we refer primarily to pragmatically related and didactic concepts, along with references to the sociology of childhood. In practice, the analysis process is not as discrete as this description may suggest, but is more intertwined. The selection of examples, quotations and transcripts are chosen to exemplify variation and distinctive traces in the material in the most illustrative, clear and least bulky way.

As the empirical data is informed by the pragmatic theoretical framework, the abductive approach stands out in the application of theoretical terms in the material, when the teachers themselves, for example, use the terms “gap” and “stand fast”. The categorization in this study is determined by the approaches teachers (and children) take to move further into problematic situations: whether they fill in the gaps and find solutions using facts or value judgements. Against this background, we later widened the analysis with references to the sociology of childhood, which offers understanding of the mutual constitution of childhood and preschool (Corsaro, 2017).

Ethical considerations

The project complies with principles of research ethics applicable to research in the humanities and social sciences (Swedish Research Council, 2017). These require, among else, that all participants must be informed and invited to participate in accordance with the *information requirement*. All participation is entirely voluntary, and participants may withdraw at any time without stating any reason for doing so, in accordance with the *informed consent requirement*.

Registered information was treated as confidential and stored on a platform accessible to programme researchers. Planning documents and evaluation documents, as well as teaching documented on video, have been uploaded to a platform that meets the legal and security requirements applicable to Swedish government agencies. We coded all data production according to a system chosen by us, with fictitious names and code keys stored in the faculty’s locked file cabinet in accordance with the *confidentiality requirement*. Young children participated in the study and the informed consent of parents/guardians was required. The researchers have responsibility for protecting children’s privacy.

In connection to the *usage requirement*, information generated is used for research purposes and is reported by the researchers in a manner that protects the privacy of individuals.

Results

In the following section we present distinctive traces in the part of the material that covers the didactic question “Why?” We have chosen excerpts that display participants’ reflections throughout the teaching process (i.e., written and audio-/video recorded documentation from planning, teaching and evaluation of teaching activities). As we will demonstrate, teaching from a didactic and pragmatically informed approach is entangled with both ethical and didactic dilemmas.

Distinctive traces

A couple of particularly distinctive traces can be seen in the analysis of the *why* question – we have chosen to call them *gaps in time and space* (problematic situations connected to the didactic *where* and *when* questions), and *gaps that hinder interaction and relationships* (problematic situations that are connected to the didactic *who* question). In the following, first, we will present examples of how these distinctive traces are brought to bear in the empirical material. Thereafter, we display how the identifying of gaps in the everyday preschool practice shed light over power structures, norms and unquestioned rules. In the last results section, we contest the theoretical premise of gaps as problematic situations.

Gaps in time and space

The empirically based analytical path shows that the didactic *where* and *when* questions are embedded in the *why* question. About three quarters of the gaps are described with direct links to specific spaces – either physical or social – although most of the gaps occur indoors and are often temporally defined. For example, story time does not only happen in a specific place, but also at a certain time. Upon deeper analysis, however, it becomes clear that the problematic situations do not just *happen* at a certain time and in a certain place. The gaps are intimately entwined with aspects of time and space: for example, one gap has to do with the level of noise in the *mealtime situation* and how children and adults are supposed to/should act during this time.

Where the gaps happen is thus also a *potential* space for teaching delivery. In several cases, however, the teaching is continued somewhat later, in another setting. In other words: the problematic situation that is addressed in the *why* question may thus have to do with one space, while the teaching situation is later carried out in another. In certain cases, the teaching is limited to an isolated occasion/space/child, while in other cases it covers multiple occasions and various groups of children and different spaces. The teaching situation also varies widely in time/duration (from a few seconds to more than 20 minutes).

Several of the gaps identified by the teachers involve children’s or adults’ shared meanings about, and objections to (and/or boycott of) existing rules associated with activities or routines – *in time and space*. For example, the teachers see that the children have other uses for materials than those the teachers have planned and organized. What appears to be a problematic situation, where materials never seem to be “where they are supposed to be”, becomes the path into a teaching approach where children and teachers jointly find ways to organize the material. At another preschool, the children have creative ways of getting around the rule that “sand toys belong in the sandbox” by hiding the toys in their clothes so that they can take them to other places and other games:

The preschool has a rule “stand fast”, according to which sand toys belong in the sandbox and that is where they are used for digging. A gap arises when the children are playing a fun and intense role-playing game like Ninja Turtles and fill their pockets with spades, little rakes and other things that belong in the sandbox. These objects even stick out of their jackets. Their eyes are lit up about the game, but their gazes also show doubt about whether this is okay. The teacher is torn between “standing fast” or challenging the children to critically examine predetermined norms/rules. (Excerpt from a preschool’s planning document)

At this preschool as well, the gap is the start of a democratic decision process in which the children are allowed to be involved and decide how they will relate to the rule. The teachers explain the reasons for the rule and the children give their opinions about the possible uses of the toys. Together they come to a compromise that gives credence to both the children’s and the teacher’s perspectives. The various examples above indicate that the spatial situating of the gaps can be said to encompass not only situations that happen within the confines of a particular social or physical space but that may also have to do with something (objects, people, or activities) being *in the wrong place*, according to some of the actors involved.

In the process of identifying gaps in everyday routines, the participants discover organizational insufficiencies (and unreflected solutions) that not only risk limiting their own possibilities to see, help and teach children, but also risk affecting children in unintended ways. Side by side, the numerous gaps evince a complex weave of value conflicts in care relationships that interact with children’s inclusion, exclusion, and subjectification processes (see Nordin-Hultman, 2004) and individual needs. Moreover, in the context, the expectations upon the staff to provide care to all children based on their individual needs and situations sometimes seem difficult to realize. Several of the participating preschool teachers bring up that the problematic situations that occur are not only caused by opposing opinions or values but by organizational insufficiencies: they are didactic dilemmas that occur when they feel that they cannot, for various reasons, interact with the children as they would wish. Inadequate resources, such as time and routines, emerge in the material as a reason that educators (childcare workers and preschool teachers) cannot provide care and encourage the children to develop independence to the extent they would like.

Many values-based gaps can be understood as ethical dilemmas in childcare, where opinions about what is in the “best interests” of the child confront each other. The notion of what is “best” for the child is interpreted differently by different actors. Thus, ethical dilemmas are also constituted as didactic dilemmas.

Gaps that hinder interaction and relationships

In that the framework emphasizes children’s critical action competence and multivocal reflection, the *who* question is also didacticized (see Vallberg Roth, Holmberg, Ljöf & Stensson, 2019): the questions comprise reflections on, for example, *who* is allowed to decide and *who* can join in the play, or as in the example below, *who* is allowed to have a certain toy. The theme is common among the various gaps described by the preschools – issues of “mine” and “yours”, “I had it first” and “you put it down” appear to be a common and difficult-to-resolve dilemma in preschool. Several gaps occur in relation to children’s competition for toys, especially objects in short supply for various reasons. Preschools rarely have enough bicycles for everyone who wants to ride to do so at the same time. Could this be the reason

behind the common unwritten rule that “if you put it down, it is up for grabs”, which means the right to a toy ends when the child walks away from the toy?

The gap points out a value conflict, in which justice can be interpreted in different ways. The teaching, then, can revolve around questions such as: *Who has the right to a particular object? How long is someone allowed to keep a toy? When do they have to share?* and *How do you know if a toy is available?* As we can see, the questions concern *who* is allowed to do *what*.

This situation could be solved with help from a teacher – privileging one or the other rule. However, acknowledging this as a dilemma that is not easily solved can also be seen as an acknowledgement of each child’s emotions, ethics, and rights (cf. Johansson, 2001). Accordingly, not only is the ethical dilemma transformed into a didactic dilemma, the didacticization interweaves the two questions *who?* and *why?* This becomes especially clear in the following example, in which the *who* question is intertwined with both the *what* and *why* questions. When planning, a few teachers describe children’s competition for bicycles like this:

The gap is that there is an unwritten rule: “If you put it down, it is up for grabs.” Situations often arise in the playground related to bicycles or toys based on that if child has a bicycle, for example, and walks away from it for a while, the play and the right to have the object they have just given up ends. We do not know where this comes from or why the rule exists. It might be that the child has to put down the bicycle for a few minutes to go to the toilet. There are times when a child holds off on going to the toilet so that they will not lose the bicycle/toy they have at the moment. Children sometimes tell us they do not want to go inside to have a snack but when we talk more about it, it turns out that they actually do want a snack but do not want others to have the chance to take what they are playing with while they are inside eating. (Excerpt from a preschool’s planning document)

In their plan, the actions and reflections of both the children and the staff are emphasized. As we can see, the teachers wonder about the unwritten rule – it is unclear to them where it comes from and why. One possible reason that the rule came into existence at some point is that toys are supposed to be shared fairly and evenly among the preschool department, so that the same children do not always play with the same objects. The rule itself, however, seems to engender competition and conflicts among the children, often with an unfair outcome:

One of the oldest girls asks one of the younger girls to get off the bicycle when she comes out. The younger girl gives up the bicycle immediately. An educator notices the situation at once and approaches the girls and tells the older girl that the younger girl was not finished with the bicycle and that she has to give it back. She gives it back. One of the boys observes them, and he also wants the “best” bicycle. After a while, the younger girl gets tired of riding and gets off the bicycle. The boy takes over the bicycle, makes the “victory sign” with his fingers and exclaims, “I got it!” (Excerpt from a preschool’s planning document, cont.)

A picture emerges in the example of the bicycle as a desirable toy and status symbol. It is unclear whether this is due to the “if you put it down it, it is up for grabs” rule, but it is clear that the teachers do not find the rule to be an effective solution to the problem. The example can be interpreted in many ways. For instance, drawing upon childhood sociology (Corsaro, 2017) the situation can be understood from the children’s perspective. As we can see in the excerpt, the *who* rules are actualized through the teacher’s reflection on the children’s conflict about who is allowed to have the toy. Corsaro (2017) describes how children’s attitudes towards ownership and possession – and sharing – are transformed when they first arrive in preschool. At home, Corsaro argues, ownership is more tangible and conflicts about

possessions are most likely to occur when the child is expected to share with visiting friends. Even if the child learns to share, the loan is temporary and actual ownership is never challenged. The logic is different in preschool, where the children can only temporarily possess objects and things are never fully owned because they are the property of the preschool. In preschool, the children negotiate the joint ownership of objects and the ownership of the interactive spaces they establish in play. That this transition from the logic of the home to that of the preschool can be difficult becomes especially clear in the following excerpt:

There are several children in the group who believe they own some of the toys in the classroom, while other children know and have understood that the toys belong to all of the children in the class. (Excerpt from a preschool's planning document)

Corsaro (2017) argues that children's transition to preschool may be interpreted as an experimental period that is based on understanding "the collective". Johansson (2001) goes one step further and brings up the right to toys as not only a matter of ownership for the children, but also an existential question: the objects are part of children's lives in preschool and children express outrage when they are prevented from playing with a certain object. When other children, with the same sense of entitlement, lay claim to the same toys, the right becomes the subject of negotiations or a matter of (re)conquering the object, and norms are created and upheld regarding whose rights take precedence over whose.

Several examples highlight children's discussions, conflicts, or exclusion from and about various toys, which address questions of power, democracy, influence and turn-taking. The interactions related to toys seem to be closely intertwined with identity and position. In the teachers' description of the bicycle situation above, for example, the age of the children emerges as an important aspect of who the children interpret as having precedence. Although it is difficult to draw general conclusions from this isolated example, there may be reason to discuss the making of age in relation to how toys are distributed. What is the significance of the children's age in the context? Is there another unwritten rule here – that older children take precedence? Are the needs and actions of older children privileged over those of younger children?

There are also examples in our material in which participants indicate that gender is also brought to bear as a differentiating factor. There are numerous examples covering everything from the notion that boys are not supposed to wear pink rainboots to tacit agreements on gender-separated lines to the hand basin. In these approaches, teaching *about* social values appears as central in the preschool agenda to promote equality (cf. Ljöf & Tallberg Broman, 2018). An interesting aspect is that the value conflict occurs in relation to, on the one hand, children's meaning-making, and on the other hand to preschool teachers' interpretations of the preschool agenda. An ethical (and also didactic) dilemma that stands out as important to address in relation to this is the different opinions on preschool teachers' involvement in children's play – what is the better way of handling situations like this? Should teachers interfere in children's play? Should they not?

Several existing studies address similar issues, including that by Hellman (2013), which sheds light on children's applications of norms for boyishness and girlishness in inclusion and exclusion processes, and especially in play. Play, according to Hellman, should "not be considered only a positive state wherein children forget time and space in role-playing games. Play also encompasses power, inclusion/exclusion and the establishment of

hierarchies and dichotomous categories between different ages, different genders, or different expressions of boyishness” (2013, p. 93). What Hellman argues is that children, in play, benefit from norms to determine who is allowed to join the play and who is not. It is also in play that children stretch the boundaries of the same norms. In the play space, children can try new ways of being and acting (cf. e.g., Eidevald, 2009).

Some of the gaps seem almost to be prerequisites for children to find their way forward, learn and develop. This also applies to several closely related questions, such as the right to *share* their play worlds on the one hand and *protect* them on the other (cf. Johansson, 2001). This seems to be a recurring value conflict (Hedefalk, 2014) in our material, where it is manifest in that the two rules, “everyone can join in” and “being allowed to finish playing in peace” seem to collide:

The educators perceive a gap when various children tell them that they are not allowed to join other children’s play, but also as to how they can create opportunities for children to play in peace without it being taken for granted that someone else must be allowed to join them. How do we deal with this in the best way? (Excerpt from a preschool’s planning document)

As pointed out previously, the ethical dilemmas are also constituted as didactic dilemmas in the sense that the preschool teachers need to consider how to conduct the teaching situation without offending anyone – not children, nor colleagues or parents. If we, again, draw upon Corsaro’s (2017) reasoning on children’s peer cultures, we can see that children’s conceptions of friendship are also something that is transformed when children begin preschool (2017 p. 115). At home, “friend” is primarily a label for certain other children they know who have been designated as such by parents. In preschool, however, friendship is one of the factors that sets boundaries to interactive spaces. Children mark the boundaries of the interactive play space by determining who their friends are and who is not allowed to join in.

Notably, several of these examples are gaps that occur in the transition between activities and in one of the preschool’s many “connecting spaces” (corridors, storage rooms, etc.). In her analysis of the significance of educational settings to children’s subject-making, Nordin-Hultman (2004) notes that highly variable spaces (spaces with a variety of functions) allow children to be different. Further, the gaps in the transitions and the connecting spaces are interruptions that can be interpreted as opportunities. Biesta (2011) writes about “a pedagogy of interruption”, which he argues is a pedagogy that aims to keep the possibility of interruptions of the “normal” order open (Biesta, 2011, p. 94). He emphasizes the importance of allowing “uniqueness to come into the world” (ibid). It is thus a subjectification function that can be reinforced in a teaching situation that is open to the possibility of interruptions of the “normal” order (cf. Nordin-Hultman, 2004). Transitions can thus be interpreted as enabling interactions and subject-making.

Multivocal gaps and gaps-in-gaps

In the evaluations, where the participants look back to assess their work, however, some express that it was difficult to see – and perceive – gaps in the course of the day.

Hard to catch the GAP if it is not videoed. Difficult to capture the gap on film; it passes by in a flash. If I see something that I perceive to be a GAP, I tend to insert value judgements and interpretations when I discuss it with colleagues. (Excerpt from a preschool’s evaluation document)

Most of the gaps found in the comprehensive empirical material are of a value-judgement nature and concern matters of fairness, care and community. Many of the gaps are value conflicts (Hedefalk, 2014), i.e., ethical dilemmas in which, for example, different principles of fairness collide. In this context, multivocal didactic modelling stands out as crucial: allowing teachers to let children's interests and questions guide the directions of teaching. Planning, teaching and evaluating together with colleagues enables various interpretations of gaps, and thus the opportunity to find a variety of teaching content to fill said gaps. In this way, any downsides to that perceived as "good" or "right" (cf. Noddings, 2015) are also acknowledged.

Clearly, the categorization of gaps is not easily done, something which cannot be explained solely based on the teachers' personal values or educational backgrounds. The problematic situations that the teachers identify prove to be complex and appear multi-layered. A gap can be multivocal, meaning that it can encompass multiple voices and interpretations. In addition to the many voices within this didactic practice, as put by the teacher in the excerpt above, understanding a gap also demands a self-critical voice.

Some participants expressed that it had been difficult to document the situations while they were happening. In a teaching approach based on first identifying gaps, how are they supposed to prepare themselves for whether a gap will arise or when it does? And how should this be documented from an ethical and practical perspective? Another aspect brought to the fore was that we all may interpret situations in different ways: that which some consider a clear gap may be disregarded by a colleague who does not see the situation the same way.

This approach provides as many challenges as it does opportunities. We all have our own baggage filled with values and norms. Gaps appear differently to different people depending on what we are carrying with us. Something that is a big gap to one person might not be noticed by someone else. Our various levels of education in early childhood education may have an impact here as well, regarding gender for example. An aware educator who has taken gender studies would probably treat a boy wearing a dress differently from someone with no interest in gender issues. When you choose to pay attention to a gap in an assembly situation, we cannot predict how the children will react. This can trigger reactions from both children and educators, which may in turn create more gaps and discussions in preschool departments and working teams that we had not expected. (Excerpt from a preschool's evaluation document)

The excerpt above is packed with interesting reflections that challenge, and contribute to, the didactic and pragmatic approach. Let us begin by addressing the issue of the teachers' varying backgrounds and experiences, which seem to be significant to both the content and design of teaching. This is consistent with most subject-didactic studies that indicate that subject teaching is dependent upon teachers' knowledge of the subject (see e.g., Holmberg, 2014; Thulin, 2011) and argue that values should also be regarded as knowledge content, closely intertwined with teachers' knowledge of issues related to values (cf. Löf, 2017). The difference in teaching subjects we are accustomed to defining as fact-based and teaching with focus on values, however, is that the teacher's personal values may need to be factored into the equation.

Signs that one gap may encompass multiple other gaps also appear in the example. As stated in the preceding excerpt, it is not easy to predict how children will react to a particular encounter. How teachers interpret, or fill, a gap may trigger reactions that lead to new

gaps in an almost overlapping way. We saw an example of this in the excerpt about the bicycles in which the younger girl was expected to give up the bicycle to the older child, where that initially identified as a gap (lack of clarity about who has preferential rights to the bicycle) can be assumed to encompass several other gaps (unwritten rules that older children take precedence). Gaps that encompass value conflicts, gaps where different values collide, can be said to be another variant of gaps-in-gaps. One such example is the question of which principle should trump the other – such as the relationship between the two rules “everyone is allowed to join in” and “the right to play in peace.”

From an ethical perspective, the encompassing discussion on adults interfering in children’s play should be considered. Björklund and Pramling Samuelsson (2018) put forward three different positions, or lines of argument, in the debate: the first position argues for adults not to interfere in children’s play, which is the children’s world of their own. The second suggests that nearby adults can contribute to and develop children’s play, through offering materials or new experiences. Within the third position the preschool teacher is viewed upon as a participant together with the children. As a participant, the preschool teacher can didacticize the play and challenge what is taken for granted and problematize problem-solving strategies. According to Björklund and Pramling Samuelsson, all three positions should be considered in a preschool setting. It is, they argue, a matter of professionalism to understand when one, as a preschool teacher, should stay out of or be part of children’s play (*ibid.*, p.105).

Problematic situations – or new opportunities?

Due to the difficulty of predicting how involved parties might react to the encounter with the teacher, continuous ethical deliberations seem central to teaching. Other participants also express how the joint, collegial conversation about gaps has been inherently valuable to the extent that gaps cannot always be talked about as problematic situations, but rather as opportunities. The concept of “problematic situations” was thus challenged through the project. Gaps can certainly grate and feel problematic or uncomfortable when they arise, but the norm violations are not necessarily problematic per se. These norm violations can instead present an opportunity to adjust routines or negotiate new rules that make it possible to give the children (and staff) additional modes of being or action. Mayo (2004) argues that it is important to allow activities to be a little uncomfortable to prevent constraining norms from becoming entrenched. It is when everything is moving along nicely and feels comfortable, when our actions and habits “stand fast” (cf. Hedefalk, 2014 p. 24), that we are in tacit agreement as to what is “normal” or “reasonable” to do. These tacit agreements also encompass norms that exclude and permanently constrain certain people (cf. Mayo, 2004). Some habits and norms may even be offensive or discriminatory, but because they have been made into habits and norms, it is difficult for the parties involved to see that such is the case. When teachers or children take the initiative to repair the problematic situations and restore the “normal” order, reflections on the nature of the gap, what caused the gap, and how the gap can be bridged seem important. In other words: the problem with the problematic situations may be that they were *not* perceived as such until they were unpacked.

Against this background, one of the merits of the didactic and pragmatically informed teaching approach, as it emerges in the wealth of material, seems to be that staff are given the opportunity to notice the “problematic situations” in which the opinions of various

actors differ and – instead of hastening to “fill” the gap without further reflection – to take advantage of opportunities to discuss the issues with colleagues and children (cf. Dolk, 2013; Hellman, 2013). In this way, the joint discussions shed a multivocal light on the countless dilemmas that arise in the everyday preschool setting and illustrate the complexity of doing “the right thing” or being “fair”. Opportunities to discover each other’s differing opinions may strengthen children’s discursive skills (cf. Davies, 1990).

Discussion – characteristics of didactic and pragmatically informed teaching approach with focus on values

Based on a three-year collaborative R&D programme in which the participants have tried several different theory-informed teaching approaches, we have in this article analysed preschool teachers’ work with a didactic and pragmatically informed teaching approach with focus on values. We have paid particular attention to the didactical *why* question, which within this approach was based on identified gaps or “problematic situations”, and asked: what are the problematic situations that were identified in the participating preschools?

Multivocal, values-oriented didactics

There are abundant examples of “values-didacticized” teaching in the study material, where the focus is on values and is not only connected to *what*, *how* and *why* questions, but also to the *who*, *where* and *when* questions (Vallberg Roth, Holmberg, Ljöf & Stensson, 2019).

The difficulty of determining what situations are gaps and what might be the cause of the gaps is an important aspect brought to the fore in the participants’ reflections. The varying backgrounds and experiences of staff members are described as determinative of what is perceived as problematic, as well as for which teaching principle or principles could bridge identified gaps. As we have shown, the teachers in our project indicate that understanding of the gaps that arise in preschools is highly dependent upon their personal interpretation of which values should be emphasized, and what is “right” or “good”. The analysis of the many gaps indicates that the multivocal interpretation that is embraced by the teaching approach also promotes reflective learning among the staff. The joint reflections on their own and others’ interpretations of problematic situations, as well as what potential directions teaching may take to bridge the gaps, may add nuance to the understanding of the norms and values that are established – or broken up – in the preschool’s practices (cf. Corsaro, 2017; Hellman, 2013).

In relation to the *why* question, multivocal modelling (Vallberg Roth, Holmberg, Ljöf & Stensson, 2019) emerges as an interplay between explicit value gaps and fact-based gaps, but primarily value gaps. The material is dominated by gaps in which different ethical principles collide, such as “the right to play in peace” versus the rule that “everyone is allowed to join in”, or on being allowed to finish playing with a desirable toy versus the rights of other children to also use the toy. The value gaps also encompass the staff’s conditions and routines, where staff stress is balanced against children’s opportunities to for example practice problem solving.

Knowledge contribution in relation to early research

This article contributes with practice-theoretical knowledge drawing upon the combined didactic and pragmatic perspective. The contribution is thus both empirical and theoretical.

The empirical material engendered rich examples of collaborations between children and preschool teachers. The understanding of different values and the boundaries between value levels is complicated through joint reflections (cf. Colnerud, 2014) and various types of values (Hedefalk, 2014) are blurred. The participants' utterances on multivocal gaps and gaps-in-gaps challenge the theoretical premise.

The analysis results in an understanding of *multivocal values-oriented didactics* as characteristic of teaching based on a didactic and pragmatically informed approach with focus on values. The intertwined values and the interplay at various value levels bring multivocality to bear in various ways. This theoretical contribution can support teaching in a complex practice, imbued by values and norms.

Concluding discussion – usefulness

The question *why* is intimately intertwined with not only ethical but also didactic dilemmas concerning children's integrity and possibilities to learn and develop. Guided by the pragmatic framework, teachers in the current programme were able to monitor their own didactic assumptions (cf. Gudem & Hopmann, 1998). As emphasized by one of the teachers in the programme, the various levels of education have an impact on interpretations of gaps. Hence, teaching risks being dependent on the individual teacher's knowledge of the subject, personal values and interests.

Our aim was to understand preschool teachers' interpretations of the didactic *why* question when applying a didactic and pragmatically informed teaching approach with focus on values. The didactic *why* question plays a central role in teaching from a pragmatic perspective (Hedefalk, 2014), not least because the identified gaps, or "problematic situations", (Hedefalk, 2014) may be the starting point when choosing what teaching principles and what content to focus on. Though this article contributes numerous examples of how teaching with focus on values can be interpreted and organized there is one common trait that stands out: *multivocal values-oriented didactics* (see also Vallberg Roth, Holmberg, Löf & Stensson, 2019).

As shown in our analysis, multivocality appears to be significant to both the interpretation of value conflicts in preschool practice as well as to how preschool teachers choose to organize their teaching. Multivocal teaching can be interpreted as a critical attitude towards teachers' own work, which can be assumed to minimize the risk that the preschool's mandate to establish norms and values will become unilateral (univocal) and non-reflected, normative control of how children are and act.

The importance and usefulness of both the R&D programme and this study can be interpreted as very high as regards the potential of the project to contribute to professional judgement and terminology, critical reflection and the use of scope for action. Overall, knowledge about multivocal values-oriented didactics provides the potential to contribute over the short and long terms to the development of teaching to improve the chances in life of all children.

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