Preschool Teachers’ Understandings of Some Aspects of Early Childhood Curricula in Norway and Sweden

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Abstract
Norway and Sweden recently adopted national preschool plans for children ages one to five years old. When comparing the two plans, the first noticeable difference is that the Norwegian approach gives teachers a detailed framework for their work with suggestions on content, methods to be used, and expected outcomes. In contrast, the Swedish plan is goal directed with a short introduction on the perspectives and values of children’s learning and development, and it contains almost nothing about the methods to be used. In this paper findings in an empirical study of eight Norwegian and eight Swedish preschool teachers’ understandings of the two national plans in relation to practice are presented, compared and discussed on the three aspects of strategy, substance and structure.

Introduction
An increasing number of countries have developed national curricula for early childhood education during recent decades. Norway and Sweden, along with countries such as New Zealand, France and Scotland, have also implemented national curricula for early childhood education (Ministry of Education, 1998; Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 1995, 2000; Ministère de l’Education Nationale direction des écoles, 1995; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1993; Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum, 1999). Both Norway and Sweden have long preschool traditions and a tradition of strong financial support for families with young children (see Alvestad & Pramling Samuelsson, 1999; OECD, 2001).

Educational reforms, curricula implementation and professionalism are complex, and have to be seen in different perspectives (see Strike, 1997; Torres, 1995). Studies and research on educational and pedagogical questions in the field of early childhood education need to include frames and system levels (as well as power, gender, class and ethnic perspectives) because they give important
presuppositions for work in the situated practice of day care, and for the
development of democratic basic values.

In this article the overall aim is to analyse and discuss Swedish and Norwegian
preschool teachers’ understandings of pedagogical planning and practice on the
aspects of strategy, substance and structure. Central issues are: What are
Swedish preschool teachers’ understandings of the national curricula’s value,
concept of learning and use related to their educational planning and practice?
And how are these compared with Norwegian findings? The results are based on
empirical data from in-depth interviews. The basis for the analysis is my thesis
The Complexity of Planning. Preschool teachers’ conceptions of pedagogical
planning and practice (Alvestad, 2001).

Early Childhood Curricula in Norway and Sweden

A national plan for day-care institutions in Norway was implemented for the first
time in January 1996. In Sweden a new national plan was implemented in August
1998. The implementation of national curricula is a very complex task, raising
varied and difficult questions on many levels (Alvestad, 1996, 2001; Goodlad,
1988; Goodson, 1998; Jackson, 1996). The fact that the two countries have
national early childhood education curricula does not mean that the plans are
being implemented consistently.

Reforms such as national curricula can lead to a top-down perspective. However, if
the teachers are active participants in a shared educational debate in discourses
about the field of early childhood education, it can lead to a horizontal perspective.
Educational work is concerned with people and ideas more than specific objects or
things. For reasons like this, flexibility becomes a central concept, and teacher
professionalism can be seen as one of the keys to the educational reforms
according to Strike (1997).

Approaches in the curricula: Frame versus Goal-oriented

When comparing the two plans, the first noticeable difference is that the
Norwegian approach gives teachers a detailed framework for their work with
suggestions on content, methods to be used, and expected outcomes. In contrast,
the Swedish plan is goal directed with a short introduction on the perspectives
and values of children’s learning and development, and it contains almost nothing
about the methods to be used. While the Swedish curriculum is 16 pages long,
goal oriented, and a part of the educational system, the Norwegian plan is 139
pages, a traditional, wide, frame oriented plan and still a part of the family policy
(Alvestad & Pramling Samuelsson, 1999; Ministry of Education, 1998; Ministry of
Children and Family Affairs, 1996). (Refer Appendix for summary of each
curricula’s structure.)

In Norway all day care institutions are according to the Act and the Framework
requires drawing up annual plans (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs,
1995). The annual plans should describe desired aims and the content of the
activity for a year. Long-term planning for three to five years is stressed as important. Further, it is up to the individual day care institution to decide to what extent additional written planning documents should be drawn up. The annual plan has two important functions according to the Framework plan. It is to be a basic document for the individual preschool teacher and other associates and for the entire staff as a team. It is the basis for collaboration with the parents, and is intended to facilitate the management of the institution and the evaluation of this activity. Further, it has the function to "provide concrete and professional information about the day care institution's educational work to owners of the institution, politicians, municipal employees, outside collaborative agencies and other interested parties" (p. 110). In the Swedish curricula there is no such request for annual plans. Another difference appears in the two countries' staffing. While the Norwegian day care institutions usually have one preschool teacher ("pedagogical leader") and one assistant (some educated as "child and youth worker"), the Swedish preschool staff most often have two preschool teachers and one child minder (some with a child minder certificate) (Alvestad & Pramling, Samuelsson, 1999; OECD, 2001).

Learning and content in the curricula

A national plan is in a strained relationship with the normative and descriptive, between stability and the creating of changes. At the same time as the authority implements a reform that claims changes, it also fulfils a function to keep things in order. The state mediates an ideology where the curriculum is an expression of the dominant ideologies in the field of education. This does not mean that curricula are distinct and unambiguous. Curricula are, on the contrary, often characterised by compromise, contrasts and vague formulations stemming from a blend of different interests. In educational work the decisions on content, methods and resources are to be interpreted from the national curricula into the local contexts. On this issue many and sometimes contradictory, conflicting demands are directed to the pedagogues and staff (see Lundgren, Svingby & Wallin, 1983).

When comparing the views on learning in the Swedish and Norwegian curricula, the Norwegian curriculum seems to put more emphasis on the care and upbringing of the child, discussing learning as formal or informal learning (related to adult- or child-directed learning activities), while the Swedish curriculum to a larger degree focuses on learning and knowledge formation. The Swedish curriculum can be described as more socio-cognitively oriented, while the Norwegian curriculum can be regarded as more socioculturally oriented (Alvestad & Pramling Samuelsson, 1999). One problem with a detailed and idealised content as in the Framework Plan is related to the matter of consciousness (Alvestad 2001; Hargreaves, 2000). This can lead to different consequences when it comes to preschool teachers' educational work in practice and for professional development.
Ideologies and values in the plans

National curricula are expressions of political and societal aims. The Norwegian curriculum stresses the national and local cultural traditions, and the transfer of those, all rooted in Christian values. This indicates that the plan belongs to a conservative cultural tradition within the social democratic welfare tradition. The Swedish curriculum stresses the development and learning of new knowledge rooted in a democratic base, within a more liberal cultural tradition within the welfare tradition (see Torres, 1995; Strike, 1997). In the Swedish national plan there seems to be more room for diversity. The Swedish plan gives more room for autonomy and professional development than the more detailed Norwegian plan. On the other hand the Swedish plan is to a larger degree in a position for a central control and evaluation system.

One could ask if the Norwegian Framework plan is reflecting a kind of paternalism in its perspective. Looking to the very detailed and extensive advice for content, goals and methods, is it possible to see it as giving a guardianship (see Canella, 1997)? At the same time as the plan is very general it is also detailed on methods and how educational work ought to be. An attitude like this is underlined by the fact that a special value assumption is imposed, and by this might be interpreted as being better than others. In a world dominated by multiculturalism a central question is whether the Framework gives enough room for such variation (see OECD, 2001)?

Method

All research has ontological and epistemological assumptions. To make these explicit is a prerequisite for one's own working process and in relation to questions of validity and reliability. The complexity and dialectic in comparative analysis points to a qualitative analysis as relevant. Within qualitative analyses phenomenography is developed, an approach that can be related to the phenomenological perspective, where also the hermeneutical perspective is central (Alvesson & Sköldberg 1994; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1994; Gadamer, 1972; Gilje & Grimen, 1994; Larsson, 1984, 1993; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Marton, 1981; Marton & Booth 1997).

In-depth interviews

To ascertain preschool teachers' understandings in-depth interviews were seen as relevant (Alvestad, 2001; Kvale, 1997). While both written records and interviews were relevant tools for data collection in the Norwegian study, an interview was seen as most relevant in the Swedish study. Due to the comparative perspective the Swedish interviews were carried out on the same basis as the Norwegian. The themes in the interview guide were: (1) The planning of your work with children's learning; (2) Planning and organization of your work, cooperation with staff and parents in planning; (3) The national curricula, other plans seen in relation to your own planning and work with children and staff; (4) Looking back on last
year's planning, what kind of thoughts do you have about that? (Alvestad, 1999). By presenting these common themes, a joint focus should be obtained in the conversations. On the other hand, this could be narrowing with regard to highlighting the preschool teachers' own perspectives on planning and practice.

Participants

The total number of participants comprised a group of eight preschool teachers in each country. In this study, the results are based on the Swedish data and further on compared to the Norwegian study (Alvestad, 2001). For practical reasons the participants were contacted and asked if they wanted to participate by early childhood consultants in two municipalities in the Western part of Sweden. This was done due to the fact that they knew the field, and could contact and ask the preschool teachers to participate. To ensure a variation in the population, a strategic sample was chosen. All participants had been trained as preschool teachers, and all were employed in day care institutions at the time the interviews were carried out (with a variety of day care: private/public, size, age groups).

Data analysis

To increase the study's validity and reliability, it is important to make the working process visible. By giving a description of the data collection and analysis, it should be possible to check the results. The interviews were transcribed and read repeatedly, as relevant themes for the study's focus problem, were marked in the text. Each interview was read separately, seen in relation to each other, and read separately again. The variation in the preschool teachers' conceptions of planning and practice, was categorized in the analyzing process. The process had a circular character, similar to the one described as the hermeneutical circle (Alvesson & Sköldberg 1994; Heidegger, 1992). It is my interpretation of the preschool teachers' understandings of planning and practice that comes as result; a construction through my interpretation of empirical, theoretical perspectives and the awareness of my pre-understandings (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1994; Gadamer, 1972; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). The complexity lies in the construction from the individual preschool teachers' construction of their own lived everyday practice, to analyse and categorise the pool of understandings. The result does not become relative as such, but our conversations might be different due to time and context. In this way the outcome is fixed in time and context, but exceeds this, because general theoretical perspectives are deduced from the variation in the collective pool of understandings on educational planning and practice. The analysing process is, as I interpret it, close to analytical abduction, distinguished by an inductive-deductive-inductive process, and seems to be close to the process that Dewey (1996/1933) calls reflection.

Aspects

The results are presented through three central aspects. The aspects are constructed from the approach to the problem, from different theoretical and
pedagogical perspectives, and aims also to give an adequate form to the presentation. They are analyzed both from the data material, they “exist” there, and are constructed from the questions under scrutiny. That means they are partly empirical, partly theoretical concepts. The three aspects make the empirical material clear, at the same time as they reflect broad and central areas in the field of educational planning (Alvestad 2001).

Results
How do Swedish and Norwegian preschool teachers understand pedagogical planning and practice? In general the findings in my study as well as others (i.e. Johansson, 2002, in Sweden) show that the staff in day care perceive that the early childhood curricula has increased the status of early years education (Alvestad, 1996, 2001, 2003). In this article I will discuss just some of the findings on the aspects: strategy, substance and structure.

Strategy
The results show two categories of understandings in both countries on this aspect: curricula confirm the day care as an educational institution and curricula confirm the preschool teacher occupation as an educational profession. In both countries the two categories: Curriculum as a peripheral document for educational direction and curriculum as a central document for educational direction, are shown in the results. There are considerable differences in these approaches to the plans in practice.

Freedom of methods
Although the two curricula are different, they are both seen as important. The Swedish curriculum is seen, more than the Norwegian, as a document of great importance, as something that gives direction to their work, support and security, at the same time as it gives teachers a freedom to create and develop their own practical work with the children. The freedom of methods adopted in the goal-oriented curriculum, is also seen as important by the Swedish preschool teachers. The curricula is in this way seen as a central contribution both in making the profession more clear, and in creating possibilities to develop the field of early childhood education in practice.

The Norwegian study indicates that the Framework plan is to be seen as an instrument for promoting direction in the educational work with children. A national plan such as the Framework plan is also a policy document not to be implemented directly, but rather as an instrument in developing educational practice. The national curricula seem in both countries to lead to a security in the educational knowledge and content, when they are used. It helps the staff to go beyond their own personal interests when planning locally. There are many questions when implementing a national curricula; one central question is if funding is sufficient (see OECD, 2001). There seems also to be some differences
between the two countries on consequences in practice, for instance what is focused on when it comes to the children, parents and staff.

Professionalism
The Swedish curriculum has, as the preschool teachers express it, a central value and meaning when it comes to the development of the preschool teacher occupation as a profession. The Norwegian Framework plan is detailed, when it comes to methods, subjects and content in relation to the educational work. This can lead to a problem of denying and undervaluing their own professional knowledge, and the opportunity to develop a creative professional performance for the staff. Strongly centralised and detailed guidelines for the educational work could lead to a de-professionalising. This could produce a feeling of guilt related to what the ideals tell you that you really should have done (see Alvestad, 2001; Hargreaves 2000).

From this perspective, the Swedish curriculum seems to give more room for professional development in the preschool teacher profession. The Swedish plan is goal directed and decentralised, and for this reason it is also more exposed to control and evaluation from central authority. A centralised, more detailed plan with an idealised content as in the Norwegian Framework is again more related to the trouble of conscience; that is, you can easily feel guilty when striving towards (too) high standards (ideals) (Alvestad, 2001; Hargreaves, 2000). As we can notice, the consequences of these two perspectives differs when it comes to the preschool teachers’ educational work on planning and practice, as well as for the possibility of professional development and autonomy.

The Norwegian curriculum is within a tradition we can call a central decentralisation, including centrally given detailed standards in the plan. It stresses local annual planning in day-care. It also underlines development of local evaluation standards (assessments), drawn from the framework, the parents and local standards that eventually are given from the municipality authorities (Alvestad, 2001). The national curricula are seen as valuable and said to be a document teachers all have read and know about. The Swedish preschool teachers point to the advantage that it is short. Although this is so, it is experienced as a plan with a considerable content, and they say it is experienced as a challenging and demanding plan. The Swedish curriculum sets forth learning (and development) as a stand-alone heading, which is seen as an important change from earlier practice. ’Day care as a learning organisation’ has become a central slogan for the preschool teachers when planning and working with the children. This they say leads to increased pride and status in their educational work and professional development.

Substance
The results seem to differ between the two countries on the content of the curricula. While the results in Norway showed two categories of understandings of central content in the national plans: Curriculum - social relations as central, and
Curricula - social relations and subjects as central, in Sweden there is only one category: Curricula - social relations and subjects as central. The categories will be discussed further in relation to differences in understandings of the concept of learning.

Learning and content
The results indicate that Swedish pedagogues in this study to a larger extent than the Norwegian participate and work more explicitly on children's learning processes. As I see it the Norwegian preschool teachers seem to follow a divided learning concept, and some of them warn against stressing learning too much in day care contexts. This seems to be related to the two learning concepts used in the Framework: formal and informal learning. In comparison the Swedish preschool teachers seem to focus on learning in a more explicit, and holistic way. The learning concept is not seen in relation to formal and informal learning, neither is it connected to either the subjects or social relations, it is seen in a more intertwined way. The Swedish curriculum seems to confirm the day care as the first and important step in a lifelong learning process as part of the educational system. However, the fact that the Swedish plan seems to hold a holistic concept of learning, and that it contributes to an integration and development between the subject related and the more social dimensions, does not necessarily mean that all the preschool teachers or day care centres have reached the same level of understanding on this matter.

Structure
The analysis on structure shows two categories in both countries: (1) Curriculum - a collective focus and (2) Curriculum - an individual focus. The categories' relation to collective versus individual perspectives is illustrated in the section below.

Local planning
The local annual plans in Norway now seem to have become a more explicit part of the development of the institutional policy. Annual plans seem, especially for the privately funded institutions, to have become a central part of the market apparatus in the commercialising of the day care. This can be seen as positive, but is not necessarily unproblematic, if it becomes more a part of the market apparatus than of an educational plan that is able to change with time, context and child groups. Norwegian day care institutions seem to a larger degree than the Swedish, to be seen as a market, a service institution related to supply and demand. Annual plans are mentioned by some of the preschool teachers as the “shiny folder” or that “brochure” (Alvestad, 2001). Note that in Norway almost 40 percent of the institutions are run privately, while in Sweden approximately 10 percent are privately funded day care institutions (see Alvestad & Pramling Samuelsson, 1999).
Evaluation/assessment

For many reasons a national curriculum does not necessarily get the desired outcome, especially if the control system is transferred directly from one educational system to another different system. If a control system, (for instance the ECERS developed in Sweden, Germany and other countries, see Sheridan, 2001) is transferred to another system (as the Norwegian), without any reflections upon the educational differences, tools like this could become even more central in practice than the intentions and content of the national curricula itself. A transfer and implementation of one control system to another, not related to the national or local curricula and traditions, holds a risk of universalism (see Gundem, 1990). The perspective of globalisation gives different professional organisations opportunities to produce national standards to use globally (see Torres, 1995).

The Norwegian Framework plan is also seen as a document for the preschool teachers when working on guiding/tutoring the assistants who may have no education for a profession. This work can also be seen as a kind of professional education, that I think others than the preschool teachers should be responsible for. Pedagogues need to spend most of their time on issues related to the children, not on educating adults in getting a basic educational competence.

In Sweden there is no such responsibility at all, due to the fact that there usually are two pedagogues working in each department (group of children), while, there is usually one in Norway. The fact that the Swedish preschool teachers do not have such a responsibility towards the education of assistants, seems to direct their attention more towards the educational work with the children.

While the Norwegian preschool teachers refer to how the parents should be involved in annual planning, which does not often occur, the Swedish preschool teachers put a stronger emphasis on the national plan’s role in formalizing cooperation with parents and their child, through “development conversations” (utväcklings samtal).

The fact that the Swedish curriculum is part of the educational system, and that the concept of learning is seen as so central, seems to be important for their work, professional development and the institutional status of the day care. This seems, according to the preschool teachers, to have led to a closer co-operation with teachers and schools in Sweden than it has in Norway. This does not mean that all preschools are involved in such co-operation.

Summary

In this study one of the main differences between the teachers’ understandings of Norwegian and Swedish early childhood curricula seems to be related to the concept of learning. The fact that it differs in the two curricula seems to influence educational practice. While the Norwegian analysis gives two categories, one stressing social relations, the other social relations as well as subjects, the Swedish analysis results in just one category, stressing both social relations and subjects as central. This indicates that if learning is seen as explicit and holistic or
as a divided concept - formal or informal leaning, some different consequences appear when it comes to the focus in content. Another notable difference is the freedom of methods that, according to the Swedish preschool teachers, the new curricula give them. This is important when it comes to creating opportunities for further development of the preschool teachers’ educational work in practice, and further on for the development of the preschool teacher occupation as profession.

References


61


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62
APPENDIX

The Norwegian Framework Plan
The Norwegian plan consists of 159 pages (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 1996). It is a Framework plan (rammeplan) providing a wide structure for all preschool institutions both public and privately funded. The Norwegian plan is a more traditional curriculum with goals, content, methods (organisation and working methods) and evaluation. It provides a wide frame or a maximum plan, within which staff can make choices. Norwegian preschools must, according to the Act, make an annual plan for the institution’s work.

The structure

- Part one. Objectives and basic principles underlying the work. The headings include, “Day Care Institution’s Role in the Society” and “Aims and Values of Day Care Institutions”.

- Part two. Content and areas of experience and learning. Comprises “The framework plan - totality and interpretations”, “Social interaction, play and day-to-day activities”, “Culture and Curriculum” and “Sami Language and Culture”.

- Part three. Using the plan, includes: “Planning, implementation and evaluation”; “Responsibility, Forms of Operation and Collaboration” and “Development of the Day Care Institution”.

Aims, issues and content

- Central values are (1) “respect for life, equality, tolerance and respect for people from other cultures, tolerance and respect for people with disabilities, equality of the sexes, altruism and solidarity, justice, truth and honesty, peace and understanding, responsibility for conservation of nature and culture and responsibility for others” (p. 13), and (2) a religious Christian base: “... the Day-Care institution shall build its activity on the ethical ground values that is rooted in Christianity, and that are presupposed to have a broad acceptance in the Norwegian people” (p. 22).

- All children should experience five subject-areas called the preschools’ time-limited or periodic content: (1) society, religion and ethics, (2) aesthetic subjects, (3) nature, technology and environment, (4) language, text and communication, and (5) physical activity and health. These areas are integrated and are to be present in day-to-day life, in play and social interaction. The plan sees content and working methods as integrated. The framework plan highlights the importance of play, creativity, joy and humour as factors permeating work in all learning areas.

- “Formal learning features an organised framework where the object of the activity is self-evident.” “Informal learning is more spontaneous, and is associated with more immediate and unplanned “here and now situations” (p.40).
The Swedish Curriculum

The Swedish plan is a curriculum (läreplan), and consists of 16 pages (Swedish Ministry of Education, 1998). It gives clearly defined goals for different areas in which each child is striving to develop knowledge and learn. The Swedish plan directs only the public preschools, but it also functions as a guide for the private sector. The plan is goal directed with a short introduction on the perspectives and values of children’s learning and development, and almost nothing about the methods to be used. It can be viewed as a minimum plan for what children are supposed to learn.

The structure

The structure of the Swedish curriculum for one to five-year-old children is similar to the structure of the curriculum for six to 16-year-old children. The Swedish plan consists of two main parts:

- **Part one.** Preschool’s ground values and mission
- **Part two.** Goals and directions concerning the educational work in preschool. There are five groups of goals and directions: (1) norms and values, (2) development and learning, (3) children’s influence, (4) preschool and home, and (5) co-operating with school.

Aims, issues and content

- The Swedish curriculum states that, “preschool is resting upon the base of democracy” and emphasises the development of children’s ability to understand and act on democratic principles through participation in different kinds of co-operative activities and by framing decisions.
- The Swedish curriculum is more cognitively oriented and explicitly states what children should learn in preschool. The concept of learning is said to be holistic and there is no distinction between informal and formal learning. The content is tied to clearly defined aims that introduce each of the first three chapters in the plan. The goals can be interpreted in terms of the preschool’s responsibility to give children the opportunity to develop skills and abilities.
- The curriculum provides an approach to perspectives in learning, values and goals; it does not discuss methodological questions. It focuses on documentation of the activity rather than on planning. Documentation is further seen as an instrument for evaluating quality issues. The staff are guided by directives associated with each goal and made aware of their responsibility as a team.

(For further elaboration, see Alvestad & Pramling Samuelsson, 1999.)