

## The Educational Positioning of the Preschool-Class at the Border between Social Education and Academic Demands – An Issue of Continuity in Swedish Early Education?

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### Abstract

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This study's overarching aim is to produce knowledge about the educational position of the preschool-class in a changing educational landscape. This position is analyzed through teacher's own descriptions in the weekly reports they send home to the parents each week. The results illustrate how teachers in their weekly reports construct an educational position for the pre-school class that is influenced both by the social pedagogical position with an existence-oriented education and the academic school readiness position by preparing children for further schooling. This causes a variation in the preschool-class education and raises questions about continuity and equivalence in early education.

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**Keywords:** Preschool-class, social pedagogic tradition, academic tradition, school readiness, weekly reports

### 1. Introduction

The issue of children's transition from preschool to school and the cooperation between different school settings in order to provide children with a good start in early education has been a recurring issue on international political agendas (OECD, 2006; 2012). In Sweden, the preschool-class is constructed as a voluntary school year for six-year-old children. It is designed to act as a bridge between preschool and school. The purpose of the preschool class is to relate to the surrounding institutions – preschool and school – and the education in these institutions in order to 'smooth' children's transitions between them. An overarching goal is to create continuity in early education.

Ackesjö (2014) has discussed the preschool-class's position as a transition zone in this changing educational landscape. The way in which preschool and primary school tend to move closer to one another in terms of their missions and contents, and ultimately in terms of knowledge economy, is probably also affecting both the preschool-class and children as they transition between preschool, preschool-class and compulsory schooling.

Researchers have described the Social Pedagogy as the Nordic model for organising Early Education, with emphasis on children's participation, democracy and autonomy (Bennet, 2005). It has been concluded that it is an educational philosophy that stresses psychological and social development rather than formal instruction (Jensen, 2009). The discourse of social pedagogy has though been criticized for not emphasizing children's learning and subject knowledge. As an answer to this, the new curriculum aims at increasing the role of language, mathematics, natural science and technology to prepare children for school. It is discussed if there is an ongoing shift in Early Education in Sweden, from a position of social pedagogy to a position of academic school readiness (Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2015) Located in between preschool and school, the teachers in preschool-class have to orient themselves in relation to a social pedagogical role and a more academic role in preparing children for school. However, few studies have focused specifically on analysing and understanding the content and conduct of the teaching in the preschool-class. In order to analyse the educational position of the preschool-class, this study examines how teachers describe and present their teaching and activities in their weekly reports to parents.

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### 1.1 *The aim of the study*

This study's overarching aim is to produce knowledge about the educational position of the preschool-class. Educational positioning is viewed as a relational concept in time and space that may be used to analyse how preschool-class teachers relate to the educational traditions and activities of other school forms. The educational position of the preschool-class is analysed on the basis of *the way in which the teachers present the goals associated with their teaching, how this teaching is organised and motivated, and the values on which their activities are based.*

## 2. Review of relevant research

One consistent finding reported by a number of studies and evaluations is that there is a lack of clarity regarding the mission of the preschool-class. This produces a situation where preschool-class teachers are active in the construction of their educational field and of the mission of the preschool-class. The contents and implementation of the teaching are largely determined by the individual teachers on the basis of their own approaches to, and ideas about, the preschool-class as form of schooling. Researchers have utilised a range of different theoretical frameworks and concepts to analyse this situation. Ackesjö and Persson (2010) have argued that preschool-class teachers are located in what the authors describe as an area of tension between different traditions, in which they have to find a balance in both their mission and their teaching. The teaching in preschool-classes may be described on the basis of two approaches, the one an existence-oriented form of education, the other a future-oriented. The researchers have interpreted this in terms of the preschool-class being located on the border between a traditional preschool discourse, with watchwords such as child-orientation, closeness, flexibility and dialogue, and a school discourse that is characterised as being planned, predictable, distanced and subject-oriented. The essence of the educational work in the preschool-class lies in placing the children, their prior experiences and their needs at the centre of activities and of the teaching.

Other studies have described the position of the preschool-class as being ambivalent in relation to pre-school and school, which creates an interesting tension for teachers to deal with (Ackesjö & Persson, 2010). Thyrén (2013) describes how preschool-class teachers ambivalently discuss whether they should do any work at all with the learning of reading and writing, for example, since they feel that it takes too much time from other activities. Instead, the preschool-class teachers argue that they should focus on the children's play and social development. This finding is one that largely corresponds with the results of Ackesjö's (2010) study, in which preschool-class teachers also emphasised play, social development and work focused on producing a sense of security as being the most important in the early education in preschool-class. Researchers (Sandberg, 2012; Ackesjö, 2010; 2014) have also noted that teachers in the preschool-class appear to have difficulty in identifying their role and formulating their mission in relation to preschool and school, which creates an ambivalence in the teaching role that in turn affects the work of the preschool-class. This ambivalence in teachers' interpretations of their mission finds support in the Swedish Schools Inspectorate's (Skolinspektionen, 2015) inspection of the quality of the education in 20 preschool-classes in 20 schools. The results from this inspection show that there is a substantial variation in how the teaching in preschool-classes is conducted. Instead of working towards the goals for the compulsory school in the national curriculum, a number of the teachers described how they base their teaching on their own tried and tested experience. This also contributes to making it difficult to achieve equivalence in preschool-class teaching at the national level.

Ackesjö and Persson (2010) employ the concepts of existence-oriented and future-oriented activities to show how temporal dimension and ideas of qualification give rise to contradictory approaches to the educational position of the preschool-class. They describe how preschool-class teachers express two parallel discourses: one focused on child-centred, here-and-now-oriented activities, the other on school-preparatory, more future-oriented activities. The preschool-class teachers describe switching between these two different discourses, but also speak of how they often create a combination of the two, whereby they, while taking care of the children, also want to convey specific forms of knowledge to them. The teachers feel, however, that there is an antagonism in this meeting between the two discourses, and in the demands that are made on them from outside the preschool-class.

If formulations of the mission of the preschool-class are vague, and the views of preschool-class teachers are ambivalent, then the position of the preschool-class in relation to the other school forms will also remain unclear. The preschool-class may be regarded as what Ackesjö (2010) has termed a borderland practice, i.e. a field of activity that cannot be characterised as either school or preschool. Instead the preschool-class is constructed as an arena located at the border, or in between two school forms, each of which has clear traditions of its own.

There is research which shows that such a situation has consequences for the continuity of teaching, both in early education and over the course of the educational system. Ackesjö (2014) has noted that the children often have to start over and reproduce the activities of the previous school form following these transitions. This also means that the borders between the school forms become unclear and that it is difficult to create continuity in transitions between them. The results of Fast's (2007) thesis also show how the contents of school activities may be influenced by the different perceptions of different categories of teachers.

Other studies (Simeonsdotter Svensson, 2009; Karlsson, Melander, Pérez Prieto & Sahlström, 2006) have described the preschool-class as a "schoolified" school form and argue that the preschool-class may in many ways be viewed as constituting an extra school-year. The picture of the preschool-class as being characterised by "schoolification" is not unequivocal, however, and contextual case studies cannot simply be generalised into a general description of the teaching in the preschool-class. The inspection by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen, 2015) presents a different picture of the activities of the preschool-class, and one that contains powerful elements from the preschool tradition.

In summary, previous research and evaluations present a varied and at times contradictory picture of the preschool-class. The teachers working in the preschool-class appear to find their own way in their teaching, in the absence of any major support in policy documents or other frameworks. Researchers have noted that preschool-class teachers work on the borders, and in a field of tension, between educational traditions. The research described above consistently indicates that the unclear position occupied by the preschool-class in the educational landscape leaves a great deal of room for the teachers themselves to interpret the mission of the preschool-class.

### **3. Theoretical perspectives: the educational positioning of the preschool-class**

This study employs the concept of educational positioning as a relational concept in time and space in order to analyse how preschool-class teachers relate to the educational traditions and activities of other school forms. The educational position of the preschool-class is analysed on the basis of the ways in which the teachers present the goals associated with their teaching, the content of teaching, how the teaching is organised and motivated, and the values on which the work of the preschool-class is based. The following constitutes a general definition of the concept:

*An educational positioning describes how one school form relates to the educational traditions and activities of other school forms.*

In this study, the educational positioning concept is related to the framework of curriculum theory. In the broadest sense of the term, curriculum theories may be viewed as theories that focus on illuminating three central questions: how educational goals are formulated, how the knowledge to be learned is chosen, and how methods are developed to teach this knowledge (Lundgren, 1983). The various didactic/curriculum theoretical traditions have a long social and cultural history (Sundberg, 2007) and are understood within a broader context as a set of dominant ideas in society. Curriculum documents may then be viewed as a form of governance and as an expression of how knowledge is organised and how it is communicated and transformed (Lundgren, 1992). There are of course differences between different curricular traditions in these regards, and in how these traditions are expressed nationally, culturally and in educational discourses. It may also be assumed that different school forms do not share the same societal points of departure, depending on their history and function in society. The voluntary school forms, such as preschool and preschool-class, are for example characterised by a history and a degree of societal importance that distinguishes them from compulsory school when they are studied from the perspective of curriculum theory (Folke-Fichtelius, 2008; Vallberg-Roth, 2006).

The preschool-class has a relatively short history in an educational context and has the task of contributing to an increased integration between preschool, compulsory school and after-school childcare centres. The preschool-class is intended to create a new educational approach, in the form of a mixture of the teaching traditions of preschool and compulsory school respectively (Skolverket, 2014).

This means that preschool-class teachers have to relate (more or less consciously) to the different curricula, traditions and histories of the other school forms. As we have shown in the above section on previous research, there is a lack of fundamental knowledge about teaching in the preschool-class and about how preschool-class teachers perceive their mission.

These teachers have also described a lack of clarity in policy directions, which produces a situation where it is largely left to the teachers themselves to define the mission of the preschool-class and to formulate the teaching. In the context of this process, the teachers appear to a large extent both to relate to and to desire to preserve and safeguard the preschool tradition and its history (Garpelin et al., 2009; Ackesjö, 2010). For the purposes of this study, this means that we: a) proceed from the historically defined pre-school traditions in our analysis of the preschool-class's positioning in the educational landscape, and b) focus on the teachers as active producers of the mission and position of the preschool-class. Although curricula in the broad sense of the term cannot be reduced to a question of personal preferences, but must rather be understood as being embedded in cultural and societal conditions, we would argue that it is fruitful to analyse how actors (the teachers working in the preschool-class) present the goals of the preschool-class, the teaching that is conducted and the values that the work of the preschool-class is based on, on the basis of curriculum theory as an interpretive framework. This study analyses the teachers' presentations in relation to the educational traditions of preschool; we refer to this as educational positioning.

### **3.1 Positional shifts in a global perspective**

International comparisons of the governance and organisation of pre-school often employ two different positions (and traditions); an academic school-preparatory position and a social pedagogical position (Bennet, 2005; OECD 2006; 2012). These are linked to different views and approaches to children's learning and development. The academic school-preparatory position provides knowledge-oriented activities focused on knowledge goals that the children are intended to achieve. The social pedagogy position focus on interaction, social learning, peer cooperation and have a holistic view of the child's development. The goals of activities are here primarily oriented towards the quality of these activities and not towards the developing knowledge of the individual child. This type of educational position emphasises the view that children should not only be prepared for school, but also for life after their school years (OECD, 2006; 2012).

The development of the Swedish preschool since the 1990s has been characterised by a movement from social pedagogy to a more academic and school-readiness position, but with the retention of certain of the core values of social pedagogy. Persson (2010) has analysed this positional movement on the basis of policy documents, and has related it to a globalised knowledge economy, which emphasises that education for the youngest children, should be viewed as an investment to prepare them for school and an increasingly competitive educational situation. The idea of the "knowledge-efficient school system" (Aspelin & Persson, 2010) is that investments in education should qualify students for further education and the labour market in a more efficient way. For the youngest children in the education system, this means a stronger emphasis on learning and knowledge development and less of an emphasis on care provision and play. It is this dynamic and the switching between different educational positions that constitutes this article's focus of interest.

## **4. Methods - sample and conduct of the study**

On the basis of a curriculum theoretical perspective – which views teachers as being active in the construction of the preschool-class "curriculum"– the position of the preschool-class is analysed through an examination of the teachers own descriptions. In order to analyse the educational position of the preschool-class, the study examines the weekly reports that the teachers send home to the parents each week. It contains descriptions of how their teaching is organized and the activities in the classroom. It includes the goals of their activities and which values the activities of the preschool-class are based on.

An invitation to participate in the study was sent by e-mail to a network of preschool-class teachers with which contact had already been established. The teachers were asked whether it would be possible to include the researchers in the e-mailing lists that they used to mail their weekly reports to parents. The teachers from eight preschool-classes agreed to send all weekly reports and other information (letters from the school head and information from the library and after-school childcare centres etc.) were then sent to us over the course of one year.

The empirical material that has been analysed in the study comprises 249 weekly letters from eight geographically spread preschool-classes and was collected during the school year of 2013-2014. The study has proceeded on the basis of the ethical guidelines published by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2008). When the invitation to participate in the study was sent, it was made clear that the weekly reports would be used for research purposes, that they would be analysed and that the results would be published. The teachers were informed that they could withdraw from the study during the course of the project. A number of the teachers informed their pupils' parents that the weekly reports were to be used for research. The article does not include the names of any schools, preschool-classes, children or teachers.

#### **4.1 The weekly reports**

The teachers in the eight studied preschool-classes sent between 22 and 38 weekly reports each over the course of the school year. This variation is due to the fact that the teachers had sometimes forgotten to send us the week's report, and sometimes the reports from two shorter weeks had been combined in a single report. During certain school-holiday weeks, no weekly reports had been sent out.

The reports usually comprise a text of between a half and a full page of A4. Some of the teachers wrote very detailed and informative accounts of the preschool-class's activities. Others wrote brief schedule-like reports which contained only cursory information about the class's activities. The majority of the teachers described the contents of the coming week's activities in their weekly reports, while some chose to present a relatively detailed description of the past week. Some teachers attached one or more photos to the reports in order to illustrate what the children had been engaged with during the week. In some cases, information on the after-school childcare centre activities that the six-year-olds had participated in was also included with the reports.

#### **4.2 The positional markers employed in the analysis**

The analysis was conducted in what Säfström (1999) has labelled an interpretive reading, which has involved interpreting the weekly reports in two different ways, in two phases. Firstly, the meaning content of the weekly reports was categorised on the basis of a meaning-interpretive approach, i.e. the contents of the weekly reports have been categorised on the basis of which goals were emphasised in the preschool-class, how the teaching was organised and which values the class's activities were based on. Secondly, the presentations have been related to two educational traditions: the social pedagogy and the academic school readiness.

The study thus takes the form of a kind of document analysis, in which the weekly reports are viewed as examples of cultural practice (Popkewitz, 2004) which reflect what the teachers do, how the teachers understand their work and what they want to convey to the parents. Teachers writing and parents reading of the weekly reports constitute part of a social and cultural practice that constructs the educational position of the preschool-class. The weekly reports may thus be viewed as language acts. All teachers write their reports in different ways and this has been of significance in our analytical work. The weekly reports are largely a matter of compromises – how much one chooses to write, and in how much detail, what one chooses to write, and what type of language one chooses to use.

In the context of the analysis process we have focused particular attention on how the teachers present goals, organisation, motivations for the activities and teaching and the values that are embedded in the teaching. This is what constructs the preschool-class's educational position. These are described in the following points:

- The ways in which the teachers presents the goals of the teaching (for exp. goals associated with the activities of the preschool-class and goals to be achieved by the children/pupils, referring to the national curriculum).
- The ways in which the teachers present the organisation of the teaching (for exp. on basis of the children's experiences or a specific educational content respectively).
- The motivations given by the teachers for their teaching (for exp. as a preparation for school or from a here-and-now perspective respectively).
- The ways in which the teachers present the value base of the preschool-class (for exp. as lived experience or as an object for teaching respectively).

The above points are employed in the analysis of the educational position of the preschool-class. We are aware that the teachers' presentations of their preschool-class activities involve them emphasising what they want to present and that the performative elements need not necessarily describe what they actually do in their concrete practice. Nor does the study have the objective of describing how the teachers conduct their teaching.

The weekly reports may, however, be viewed as examples of performativity, since the weekly reports to parents constitute an expression of how the preschool-class teachers present the preschool-class in a public contexts. The weekly reports are viewed as presenting the picture of preschool-class activities that the teachers wish to emphasise to an external audience – and the teachers are thus formulating a public discourse on the position of the preschool-class. The weekly reports are thus examples of the performative preschool-class—which “constantly open to insight, control and competition takes form in local contexts in which teachers act to deal with the challenges with which they are faced” (Löfdahl & Folke-Fichtelius, 2014, p. 5, our translation).

## 5. Results

The 249 weekly reports from the eight preschool-classes<sup>3</sup> present and describe the activities and teaching of the preschool-classes in a large number of different ways. The educational position of the preschool-class is analysed on the basis of the way in which the teachers present the goals associated with their teaching, how this teaching is organised and motivated, and the values on which their activities are based. Within each theme, we discuss how the teachers relate to social pedagogy and the academic position respectively.

### 5.1 *The contents and goals of the teaching and how these are motivated*

This section presents how the teachers describe the *contents* of their preschool-class teaching, and the *motivations* they provide for this content. One consistent element within this theme is a description of the preschool-class that assigns it a school-preparatory position.

#### 5.1.1 *The academic contents of the teaching*

The descriptions of the contents of the teaching direct their focus at the children's abilities in relation to various school-related subjects in the academic position. Descriptions of teaching in, first and foremost, Swedish and maths, which appear to be the subjects that constitute the focus of the preschool-class, are a recurrent element in all of the weekly reports:

*Concepts such as metres, centimetres, tape measures, rulers and folding rulers have been used regularly during the week. We are continuing to work with our letter recognition, and some of the children have been able to write goals to aim for. In these cases, they have also been given individual practice materials.* (Preschool-class D, 130907)

*We are working with practical maths* (Preschool-class G, weeks 43, 45, 46)

*We are working with patterns in maths and with what letters different things start with, and with mathematical shapes* (Preschool-class B, weeks 11, 13, 16, 17)

*In the language assembly we are working with words and sentences. We listen to whether the words are long or short. We count words in sentences.* (Preschool-class H, week 39)

*Then we played at being trees and looked for Ts. In the end there were Ts everywhere. We worked with the T worksheet. After break-time half the group made paper cars and the others did a maths sheet.* (Preschool-class E, 131128)

The above excerpts constitute examples of commonly occurring formulations of teaching content, in which the teachers present the subjects and subject areas that are in focus. Maths and Swedish appear most frequently, but are presented in different ways in the reports to parents. The above excerpts show an academic and school-preparatory positioning of the preschool-class teaching, describing certain specified forms of knowledge that the children are to acquire within the different subjects. At the same time, however, the teaching is not motivated with information on why the children should participate in the various activities, or what they are expected to learn.

It is interesting that the weekly report from Preschool-class D describes how (some of) the children are themselves given responsibility for formulating the goals of their learning. On the basis of the goals that are formulated, the children then work with individually tailored material. The term “goals to aim for” has been drawn from the preschool curriculum, which states goals that preschool activities should strive towards. The teacher has however transformed this into individual goals for the children to aim for in the preschool-class education.

<sup>3</sup> In the results section, the eight preschool-classes are referred to as Preschool-class A, B, C, D, E, F, G and H.

### 5.1.2 The academic position - motivations and goals associated with the teaching

In those cases where the teachers provide motivations for their teaching activities, they refer for support to the formulations employed in the national curriculum for compulsory school (Lgr11, Skolverket, 2011). These weekly reports motivate the organisation of the preschool-class teaching in terms of it being a future-oriented and preparatory activity that has a more long-term objective. The formulations in these weekly reports describe how the activities of the preschool-class are regulated in policy texts, primarily in terms of how the teaching of the preschool-class prepares children for future requirements made by schools:

*We are going to work with maths during the coming spring term. The goals of this maths are that the children are to discover that maths is to be found everywhere, both outdoors and inside at our assemblies. We proceed from Lgr11, mathematics goals for school year 3. (Preschool-class A, week 2) On the days that we spend outside, we will be playing and discovering nature, whatever the weather. We walk in high grass, climb over walls and are very adventurous. We find support in the national curriculum. The national curriculum states that pupils are to be given the opportunity to ask questions about nature on the basis of their own experiences. With knowledge about nature, the children are given tools to contribute to a good environment in our natural surroundings. The pupils are will be able to recognise common plants and animals in our natural surroundings. (Preschool-class B, week 34)*

By referring to the school curriculum, the preschool-class teachers show that they are engaging in systematic teaching positioned in the academic tradition and supported by the school system's policy documents. In the excerpt from Preschool-class A above, the teacher is clear about proceeding from the goals that children should be achieving in school year 3. The excerpt from Preschool-class B illustrates how teachers find support for their teaching in the national curriculum for compulsory school. This serves to emphasise how the teaching of the preschool-class is positioned within the academic tradition, which can also be seen in the following description:

*All of the children are very good at the order of the letters of the alphabet. The children have shown this in their work to produce their own alphabets with letters taken from advertising pamphlets. We practice the alphabet song every day at our morning assembly. Knowing the alphabet is a precondition for in time being able to read short words. Most of the children have read out during their homework. The homework went very well and it was clear that you have been practising with them at home. Good training in preparation for year 1, with reading homework every day. (Preschool-class A, week 10)*

In the weekly reports cited above, the teaching is motivated in terms of supporting a progression in the children's reading, from being able to identify letters to being able to read short words. Here there is also a social disciplinary motivation, with homework in the preschool-class. The homework is preparing the children for the reading homework that they will be given in year 1 at school. The idea of a progression is indicated by the contents of a number of the weekly reports examined, with the reports describing that the children are to be prepared in order to be able, in time, to cope with future knowledge requirements that have been formulated for Swedish and maths in year 3:

*We will be conducting assessments in the preschool-class. We make these assessments in order to keep abreast of the children's knowledge in Swedish and maths and to be able to individualise the exercises that the children will continue with. (Preschool-class A, week 38).*

It is clear from these weekly reports that the children, by means of the preschool-class teaching, are expected to become qualified for their continued education. Thus the descriptions illustrate what Ackesjö and Persson (2010) have labelled future-oriented activities, i.e. teaching activities that acquire their meaning later on in the educational system rather than only here and now. We can see, for example, how some of the teachers describe individualising the teaching as a result of assessments and chartings of the children's level of knowledge. Such assessments thus become a means for the teachers both to organise their teaching and to make choices about central forms of knowledge. In order to be able to plan the teaching on the basis of the children's needs, the children's knowledge is assessed very early towards the beginning of the autumn term. We would argue that this is indicative of an academic positioning of the preschool-class, with an emphasis on future-oriented and school-preparatory activities.

### 5.2 The organisation of the teaching

This section describes how the teachers relate to on the one hand the academic position, by proceeding from a *given teaching matter*, often drawn from teaching materials, and on the other to the social educational position, by proceeding from the *children's experiences and interests*. The section thus illustrates the process of shifting between these two traditions, which is described below.

### 5.2.1 The academic position - a given teaching matter

Several of the weekly reports contain descriptions of activities that recur week after week, often in unchanged form. The descriptions of how the teaching is organised often, but not always, signal that the teachers have made use of some specific method or material which thus constitutes a framework for the activity that is conducted:

*This week we have been working with words and sentences, capital letters and full-stops in accordance with the "Bornholm's Model" teaching material.* (Preschool-class C, week 41)

*The children in the preschool-class and in year 1 will be having "NTA - Natural science and Technology for All" together. The children will be divided into two mixed-group half-classes on Thursdays.* (Preschool-class H, throughout the spring term)

*Work in the maths book "Prima"* (Preschool-class A, throughout the autumn term)

*We have been working in the book "Maja's alphabet", with the letter F and singing Maja's letter song Forget-me-not. After lunch, we are watching "Five ants is more than four elephants"<sup>4</sup> –the episode about the letter F.* (Preschool-class H, week 41)

*Today we have done a lot of work with SET<sup>5</sup>.* (Preschool-class, F week 10)

*We are working with word's first sound on the Ipad throughout the week.* (Preschool-class C, week 9)

Within this theme, we find illustrations of a recurrent method- and material-based teaching focused on a specific teaching matter, often, however, without the teachers linking this to what the children are going to learn and why. Thus in those descriptions where the focus is directed at the teaching matter, both the goals of the teaching, and its associated motivations, appears to be either implicit or absent. It is possible that the material and/or the method is regarded as being self-justifying, since the descriptions presented above indicate that they constitute the basis for both the organisation of the teaching and for selecting which forms of knowledge are important in the preschool-class. The activities are described to the parents in the form of concise, clear and simple information.

As we can see from the above examples, the material or method is central to how the teaching is organised and presented. The preschool-classes that describe this kind of method- and material-governed form of teaching rarely or never proceed on the basis of the children's prior knowledge, experiences, abilities or interests in the teaching that they conduct. In these descriptions, the teachers are presenting an academic positioning of the work of the preschool-class. According to this position, the subject matter is what is central.

### 5.2.2 The social pedagogical position - the children's initiative and interests

However, the organisation and content of the teaching is also described in other ways. In some of the weekly reports, the *social pedagogical position* can be detected, with the teaching being organised on the basis of the children's initiative and interests. In these reports, it is indicated that the children can influence the organisation and content of the teaching in a way that changes its direction. The three excerpts presented below exemplify teachers describing how knowledge content is introduced by the children and then developed further by the teachers, or vice versa – with knowledge content being introduced by the teachers and further developed by the children. The work in these areas appears to continue for long periods of time:

#### Example: earthworms

*In the school garden, we sat and philosophised about rain. What is rain? We buried our environment experiment, which will remain in the ground until the spring. When we were digging, the children discovered earthworms, and a wonderful conversation developed. What do we know about earthworms?* (Preschool-class C, week 42)

*We have been working with earthworms throughout the week, formulating hypotheses and looking for information.* (Preschool-class C, week 43)

*We have been looking at our sealed ecosystem and the children have been formulating their own hypotheses about what will happen.* (Preschool-class C, week 46)

<sup>4</sup> A Swedish children's TV-show, originally shown in the 1970s, based on a concept similar to that of the American Sesame Street.

<sup>5</sup> SET = A material that supports the Social Emotional Training

**Example: reading buzz<sup>6</sup>:**

*On Thursday Billy the bat visited us. She came from the library and gave us a book on bats. Our theme for the next seven weeks will therefore be bats. (Preschool-class B, week 3)*

*We have continued with our theme this week and got caught up in Batman and Batwoman. This resulted in the children making their own face masks. (Preschool-class B, week 5)*

*We have been talking about how bats sleep for several months at a time. This got us started on sewing our own bats, because the real ones are asleep at the moment. (Preschool-class B, week 6)*

**Example: animals**

*So wonderful to see the curiosity, interest and zest for discovery with which your children are approaching the task of learning more about animals! Several of the children had expressed a desire to learn more about animals. Owls, eagles, tigers, horses and monkeys were the animals we agreed on. They draw, build, create and play at being different animals. Last week we borrowed a large number of animal books, both factual books and storybooks. The children have chosen an animal of their own, drawn it and found out what it likes to eat. Some started to build animals with Lego, and in this way, an exhibition started to develop. We have played games about animals. We have also been singing about animals. The children are reading, drawing and writing for the exhibition. At our maths assembly we talked about how many legs different animals have. Thereafter we took two animals (e.g. ostrich and spider) and counted how many legs they have combined. It was tricky but it went well after a bit of thinking. (Preschool-class A, week 19, the work continued for a number of weeks)*

It is interesting to note that the children become visible in these descriptions of the social pedagogy-oriented teaching. Here the descriptions of the teaching are longer and more detailed than those found in relation to the teaching-material governed teaching – there appears to be more to say about what happens when the children get to play an active part in the teaching. In the example on “earthworms”, the teachers appear to have sketched out some form of content (decomposers), that the children are then allowed to expand upon through their questions, hypotheses and own ideas. In the example on the “reading buzz”, there are indications that the predetermined theme on bats takes new directions when the children start to draw parallels to Batman and Batwoman, and face masks are produced. In the example on “animals”, the entire structure of the teaching appears to be based on the desires expressed by the children, which can also be seen in the way the children get to choose the working methods used in relation to the theme. The experiential world of the children becomes central in these descriptions of the teaching.

Thus the descriptions above reveal what Ackesjö and Persson (2010) have labelled *existence-oriented activities*, i.e. activities that are based upon or allowed to be changed by the children’s questions here and now. Questions, ideas and areas of knowledge that are expressed by the children are noted by the teachers and expanded upon in the teaching. Here we can also see how the teaching in the preschool-class is organised into larger, overarching knowledge modules in accordance with the social pedagogy tradition of theme-focused working methods (Madsen, 1998). The children are given the opportunity to influence both the organisation of the teaching and its knowledge content, allowing it to take new forms and directions; from knowledge about the natural world and animals to Lego exhibitions, reading and maths tasks.

These weekly reports describe teaching work with a longer term focus, where the subject matter is more integrated, and which is allowed to run over a longer period of time. They also appear to include examples of how central values such as responsibility, participation and integration become a form of lived democracy and a way of allowing the children to exert influence in relation to the organisation and content of the teaching. This suggests that the teaching also has social goals and that work focused on fundamental values is prominent in the teachers’ presentations. This theme is examined in more detail in the next section.

**5.3 The value base of the preschool-class**

This section describes how fundamental values are viewed as *lived experience* in accordance with the social pedagogical position, and how the value base of the preschool-class becomes an *object of teaching* (knowledge on fundamental values) in accordance with the academic position of school readiness. Here too, we detect examples of switching between the two positions.

<sup>6</sup> The reading buzz is an activity that is conducted in preschool-classes in a large number of municipalities in collaboration with the school libraries. The objective of the project is to increase the children’s interest in reading.

### **5.3.1 The social pedagogy position - the value base as lived experience**

One common element that was identified in the majority of weekly reports, although not in all, consists in the social mission of the preschool-class. The reports contained recurrent descriptions of how a sense of security and social relations are important values to work with in the preschool-class, particularly at the beginning of the autumn term:

*We are working so that the children will feel secure and enjoy being in school. There are lots of new routines and rules for them and at the same time they need to feel that it is fun and that they get to feel a sense of curiosity every day when they come to school.* (Preschool-class C, week 34)

The above description (which, in varying formulations, is a common element found in several weekly reports) presents a value base that proceeds from the child feeling secure and having fun in the preschool-class. This includes the aspect of care provision that is related to a *social pedagogy position* of the preschool-class teaching. The work with the value base signals a child-centred approach focused on producing a sense of security. The interest is directed at “bringing the group together” and this work can be organised by means of (free) play and other practical activities – as a form of *existence-oriented work*. The teachers appear to be endeavouring to ensure that the children will feel that it is fun to be at school and that they feel secure there. Several of the weekly reports describe the work with the value base as being organised in the form of getting-to-know-one-another activities, in which the focus is on bringing the group together by means of play and other forms of value-base activities:

*At the moment and going forwards until the mid-term autumn break, our focus will be on bringing the group together and getting all the children to feel secure here, both in the preschool-class and at the after-school childcare centre. We are doing this by means of free play, painting, reading books, directed play, outdoor days, sports days, assemblies etc.* (Preschool-class B, week 35)

Important values that are presented include interaction, relationships and participation. The teachers emphasise play as an important part in the children creating a sense of security following the transition from preschool to the preschool-class:

*The children have been able to play a great deal with each other. We have talked about creating a good atmosphere, respect, rules, and that we should listen to each other. We have daily conversations about how to be a good friend.* (Preschool-class C, week 35)

The importance of creating a sense of belonging to the group at an early stage of the preschool-class is something that other studies have also noted, since many of the children in the preschool-class may be new to one another (see Ackesjö, 2010, 2014; Ackesjö & Persson, 2014). The social pedagogical position, with its focus on care provision and the value base as lived experience, appears to be firmly rooted in the preschool-classes, as can be seen by the way in which the teachers organise a range of different activities that are together intended to provide the children with positive social experiences.

### **5.3.2 The academic position - value base as an object of teaching**

In addition, the weekly reports also show that work with the value base may be organised in other ways. In some of the reports, teachers described how friendship and social relationships becomes subject for homework and subject teaching (life skills). Social relationships and feeling secure become a form of knowledge that the children can learn more about by means of teaching and homework:

*The children have a lot of suggestions about how to be a good friend; you should be kind, play with everyone, share things etc. We agreed the friendship rules that will apply in the preschool-class. The children have been given their first piece of homework on friendship. Life skills are being introduced as a subject.* (Preschool-class A, week 39)

*Next week we will be starting to work with something that we call My Book. Each child will be given a folder, in which we will put the work or “homework” that they have done. It will largely be focused on how all people are different but also the same. We will be sending work home on Fridays, and the work should be back in school on Wednesday at the latest.* (Preschool-class G, week 6)

*We will be talking with the children about how to be good to others on the basis of a material that is called “Like peas in a pod”.* (Preschool-class G, weeks 15-21)

*Next week's homework is about being a good friend (Preschool-class C, week 6)*

In the above descriptions, the children's social relationships along with friendship, norms, a sense of responsibility, and participation, become a goal-governed field of knowledge that is more in line with an *academic positioning* of the preschool-class. The subject presented as "life skills" constitutes a particularly illustrative example of the way in which social relationships become a subject area that homework can be given in. It is not sufficient that children are involved in different types of relationships by means of existence-oriented activities. The relationships are furthermore given a *future-oriented* significance as a specific form of school-knowledge, which is then organised in the form of a teaching subject in its own right in the preschool-class. However, none of the teachers expressed a clear academic positioning of the value base. Several of the weekly reports locate the preschool-class between a social educational and an academic position by emphasising the value base as a teaching area while at the same time showing that the lived experience of social relations is of fundamental significance:

*We are continuing with the theme of value-base issues and the friendship week. We want to develop the children's self-confidence and self-esteem. Why am I a good friend? What do I think it is fun to do together with my friends? We will be having a class council and will make a joint decision about our friendship party. We want the children to gain practice in pupil influence and in being able to influence democratic decisions. (Preschool-class C, week 43)*

The weekly reports describe how value-base issues and children's social relationships may constitute important forms of knowledge and important values in the context of preschool-class activities, and can at the same time be the object of how the teaching in preschool-classes is organised. In the weekly reports, we can see how the teachers strike a balance between the two educational positions in their presentations of the preschool-class's work with the value base. Viewed from a social educational perspective, we constantly find ourselves engaged in different forms of relationships – in the form of lived experience. Viewed from an academic, school-preparatory position, value-base issues can also become an object for subject teaching and homework.

## **6. Discussion**

From research, we actually know very little about what happens in the context of the preschool-class's preparatory and qualification activities, what the teaching looks like and what forms of content the focus is directed at. Few studies have analysed these activities in terms of their form and content. The overarching objective of this study has therefore been to produce knowledge on the educational position of the preschool-class. The preschool-class's educational position has been analysed on the basis of the content of the teaching, how the teachers present the goals associated with this teaching, the organisation of and motivations for the teaching, and the values on which the activities of the preschool-class are based, in the weekly reports that they send to parents. In this final section, we will discuss the results.

### **6.1 A shifting between positions**

The results show that the content, goals and organisation of the teaching, as well as the motivations presented by the teachers vary between the preschool-classes whose weekly reports we have analysed. The results are summarised in the table below:

Position	Content, goals and motivations for the teaching	Organisation of the teaching	Value base
<b>Social educational position</b> <i>Existence-oriented</i>	The content is related to social skills. Teaching is motivated by the children's curiosity and interest and contributes to the development of social skills.	The teaching is organised as an answer to the situation here-and-now. Children and teachers are sharing control.	Work with the value base draws on and is linked to the children's lived experience, with positive feelings and a sense of security being assigned a central role.
<b>Academic position</b> <i>Future oriented</i>	The content is related to various school-oriented subjects. The teaching is motivated and draws support from the national curriculum for compulsory school, Lgr11. School-preparatory work in an endeavour to achieve progression and prepare the children for the start of compulsory school.	The teaching is organised on the basis of a given teaching matter. It is often governed by a given method and/or material. Teachers are in control.	Work with the value base draws on and is linked to processes oriented towards the national curriculum for compulsory school, and is the object of teaching and homework.

The table shows that teachers in their weekly reports to the parents construct an educational position for the pre-school class that is influenced both by the social pedagogical and the academic school readiness traditions. Some teachers tend to construct an academic position, while others present a more visible social pedagogical position for the preschool-class. The results also show that one teacher may be presenting more than one position. It is therefore not possible to assign all eight preschool-classes to a given position. However, this may also make it difficult to achieve equivalence and continuity in preschool-class teaching.

The weekly reports from Preschool-class A provide one example of the variation. On the one hand, this teacher uses assessments in order to tailor the teaching to the individual children while, on the other hand, this teacher also gives the children the chance to influence and guide the teaching here-and-now as in the example of the animals theme. The teacher in Preschool-class A balance between a social pedagogical position, in which the children's well-being, participation and influence are given the central role, and an academic position, in which subject teaching, assessment and the children's performance constitutes the position.

Our results illustrate that preschool-class teachers construct both a social pedagogical position with an existence-oriented view on teaching *and* an academic position for preparing children for their subsequent school career. Shifting between these positions may be demanding not only for the teachers, but also for the children who are being taught. One might suspect that the children need to learn how to interpret what is required in which of these positions is relevant to different teaching situations. When the teachers describe teaching that proceeds from a *social pedagogical position*, they present a listening and flexible teacher and active children engaged in existence-oriented activities. This requires an approach that transfers some of the control to the children, as in the example of the work with the animals theme. The children are viewed as competent, curious and capable of making decisions, which requires mutual respect among all of the involved parties.

Within these existence-oriented activities children are given the opportunity to question, collaborate and challenge at the same time as the teachers have to observe and respond to the children's opinions, questions and suggestions. Teaching that proceeds from a social pedagogical position (such as the theme work on animals in Preschool-class A or on earthworms in Preschool-class C) are not restricted to less subject-specific sub-areas of the class's activities.

Instead, democracy issues, care provision, teaching, play, relationships and the children's curiosity and interest in learning are all linked together into a large area of work (cf. Madsen, 1998; Karila, 2012), which is specifically characteristic of the social pedagogical position.

The *future-oriented, academic position* for the preschool-class requires a different form of professionalism and flexibility on the part of the teachers. The teachers present a goal- and material-governed, forward-looking form of subject-focused teaching. Here it is the teachers and not the children who are in control of the teaching; it is the teachers who determine the choice of teaching matter and teaching forms, and the attention of the children is directed at the contents of the teaching. This requires other theories of subject-didactics regarding how learning occurs within a given subject area, and how teaching should be conducted in order to achieve its goals in a longer term perspective. The academic position thus involves both a temporal dimension and an idea of qualification – the children are to become qualified for their subsequent school career. The teaching that proceeds from an idea of qualification and an academic position is restricted to smaller areas of work.

### **6.2 A clearer academic position for the preschool-class**

At a general level, the weekly reports indicate a more powerful orientation towards an academic position for the preschool-class, with a school-oriented focus and subject-related knowledge. All of the weekly reports contain traces of descriptions of teaching in Swedish language and maths, and also in nature-oriented subjects. The ways in which the teachers describe this teaching involve motivating it by drawing support from the national curriculum, which produces a future-oriented focus on qualification.

We can see how concepts and terms drawn from the teaching in compulsory school are used in a number of the weekly reports, concepts such as *assessments, homework, individualised teaching and goals*. The use of these and similar concepts provides additional support for the thesis of a positional shift towards a more academic and school-preparatory positioning of the preschool-class (cf. Persson, 2010). When the teachers motivate the teaching content of the preschool-class by drawing parallels to the knowledge requirements that the children should be achieving in year three, they produce legitimacy. According to Persson (2010), this tendency can be related to a globalised knowledge economy that emphasises education as an investment. Our results show how teaching in the preschool-class may be regarded as preparatory with focus on qualification in relation to subsequent education, and that this teaching should be laying the foundations for knowledge that will be important in the future. As a result, we might argue that the teaching in the preschool-class, with its emphasis on future requirements, subject knowledge and on material-/method-governed teaching constitutes an adaptation to the knowledge-efficiency discourse regarding the function and contents of education. By contrast, we see a significantly weaker emphasis on care provision and play in the weekly reports, since these are described only very rarely.

In this respect, the results of our study in part contradict the research of e.g. Garpelin et al., (2009) and Ackesjö (2010), whose studies have argued that the preschool tradition, involving e.g. free play, is firmly rooted in the activities of the preschool-class. Our study also presents a partially different picture of the teaching in preschool-classes from that described by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2015) in its inspection of the preschool-class. The Schools Inspectorate's report showed that so-called "free play" activities were given a great deal of room in the inspected preschool-classes, which would of course indicate a clear social educational positioning. This is a tendency that we cannot see in our own study. In contrast, we see strong links to an academic tradition and positioning in the activities described by the teachers in the weekly reports, together with learning focused on future-requirements and links to current policy documents. This may of course be due to the method we have chosen to use. It is possible that there are differences in how the teachers describe their activities, between what they choose to describe (e.g. learning and teaching) and what they choose not to write about (e.g. play and care provision). The weekly reports are performative and constitute examples of what the teachers want to present to the parents. It may be assumed that there is some level of adaptation to what teachers believe the expectations of the parents to be in relation to the teaching in the preschool-class.

In addition, it is also possible that care provision and play are taken for granted by the preschool-class teachers, and that they therefore do not describe them in the presentations that they send to parents. Despite these reservations, however, we would argue that the what the teachers wish to convey in the weekly reports, and in the parents' reading of these reports, constitutes part of the social and cultural practice that produces the educational position of the preschool-class.

There is thus no reason to distrust the teachers' descriptions of their teaching activities. Instead the weekly reports are about what the teachers choose to emphasise, how they formulate this, and what they choose not to describe.

The shift towards an academic position that comes to expression in the weekly reports can also be seen in the other Scandinavian countries, which are looking for success factors and which are re-writing curricula in order to focus on school-preparation, knowledge and learning among the youngest children. The preschool-class is currently going through a watershed period, which is characterised by an uncertainty regarding its position in the education system. The policy intentions associated with the Swedish preschool-class are changing. According to a recent government decision (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2015), the Swedish National Agency for Education has been instructed over the course of 2015 to formulate a new section on the preschool-class in the current national curriculum, which should clarify the objectives and content of education in the preschool-class. Prior to this, an ongoing national inquiry into compulsory schooling was given a supplementary directive (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2014) that involves proposing how and when the preschool-class could be made obligatory. It is thus safe to assume that the educational landscape will be changing and that these changes will create new conditions for children, teachers and for the teaching in the preschool-class. During periods of structural change and shifts in policy, the position of the preschool-class in the education system also changes, and it is thus reasonable to expect shifts in the teaching and organisation of the preschool-class. It would not seem entirely unreasonable to predict that the academic position will come to be play an even more important role in the preschool-class in the future.

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