

Individual development plans from a critical didactic perspective: Focusing on Montessori- and Reggio Emilia-profiled preschools in Sweden

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Abstract

Individual development plans, which are sometimes designed as ‘agreements – contracts’, can be considered the most rigid type of regulation on the individual level in the history of preschool in Sweden. Today we speak about a deregulated school. This regulation seems to have changed its character, gradually drifting from school regulation to individual and self-regulation. The study aims to map and discuss the variation of content and positions for children in the documentation from all preschools in a municipality in the south of Sweden. Documentation and individual development plans (IDP) are studied from preschools with different pedagogical profiles. Materials from Montessori- and Reggio Emilia-inspired preschools are focused on. A critical didactic perspective refers to a discussion and critical scrutiny of the structure of contents, assessment and position of children in different types of documentation. The perspective leads to questions such as: how is content constructed, and what governs the choice of content in IDPs and documentation at the institutional and individual levels? How is content related to pedagogical profile? What identities and positions are formulated for children in relation to various contents and profiles? The empirical data in the study were gathered in 2008 and comprises text in the form of governing documents on different levels: as municipal guidelines, profile descriptions on the municipality’s websites and IDP forms. Tentative results show a variation with both similar and diverse constructions of contents and positions related to pedagogical profiles.

Keywords

children, critical didactics, individual development plans, Montessori, preschool, profile, Reggio Emilia

The departure point of this article is a study that maps and discusses variation in content and positions for children from all preschools in one Swedish municipality. Documentation and templates for individual development plans (IDPs) from preschools with various pedagogical profiles were examined, focusing on material from preschools with Montessori and Reggio Emilia profiles.

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'Pedagogical profile' designates the pedagogical orientations the preschools in the studied municipality chose for marketing their businesses. IDPs are plans established in Swedish preschools and schools to support the development and learning of individual children. Both concepts are defined in greater depth in the article.

The article applies a critical didactic perspective, emphasizing the construction of content and positions for children (i.e. the *who* and *what* questions of the didactic perspective) in various types of individual and institutional documentation. This perspective raises a range of questions: how is content constructed, and what governs the choice of content in IDPs and documentation at the institutional and individual levels? How is content related to pedagogical profile? What identities and positions are formulated for children in relation to various contents and profiles?

The article outlines the background to preschool curricula and pedagogical orientation in Sweden, and presents a theoretical basis for constructing IDPs. The method and materials used are then presented, followed by results concerning content construction and positions for children. The article concludes by discussing the questions raised in the Introduction.

Introduction: Preschool curricula in Sweden

In Sweden, 'preschool' refers to a pedagogical group activity for children aged one to five. It formally became part of the education system in 1998, and now constitutes the first step in Swedish children's education. In Sweden, curricula are the steering documents of a decentralized education system; the content and working forms are selected at the local level and municipalities are responsible for their implementation.

The national preschool curriculum is consistent in structure with other school curricula. With the introduction of a preschool curriculum, the education system as a whole now encompasses three curricula, one for preschool (Lpfö 98), a second for compulsory schooling, also covering preschool classes (for six-year-olds) and leisure centres (Lpo 94), and a third for upper secondary schooling (Lpf 94). The three curricula should link to each other, applying a common view of knowledge, development, and learning.

The national goals are formulated in very general terms: the preschool curriculum content is not organized into school subjects and there are no national preschool syllabi. The goals of the national *Curriculum for the Preschool* (Lpfö 98) are structured under the following headings: *Norms and values* (five items), *Development and learning* (16 items), *Children's influence* (three items), and cooperation guidelines, that is, between *Preschool and home* and *Cooperation between the preschool class, school and leisure-time centre*. The *Development and learning* section is comprehensive, and about half of its 16 goals concern children's linguistic development.

Sweden's *Curriculum for the Preschool* does not present goals as standards to be attained, but as goals for which to strive. According to the curriculum's stated aims (Lpfö 98), it is not the individual child's achievements that are to be evaluated and assessed; instead, goals should be formulated for group activities rather than for the individual child's achievements. As early as 2004, a Swedish National Agency for Education report noted that children's preschool achievements are increasingly being documented and assessed, running counter to the basic aims of the curriculum.

The use of individual development plans (IDPs) in preschools has increased dramatically since the previous evaluation, even though there are no government requirements to establish IDPs in preschools. Nearly half the Swedish municipalities and two-thirds of those in urban areas have adopted central resolutions to implement IDPs in all preschools. One-third of municipalities have also developed standardized templates with respect to the contents of the IDPs. The results indicate that these templates often address many aspects of childhood development, with childhood social and linguistic development being the most common. The case studies show that many of those interviewed are dubious or sceptical about IDPs in the

preschool. These doubts pertain to problems regarding confidentiality and the creation of unnecessary 'paperwork'. The main concern is that using IDPs without assessing each individual child's development can be a difficult balancing act. Earlier research has confirmed that such problems with IDPs in preschools do exist, and that the evaluations in the plans tend in some cases to resemble grading. This is in conflict with the curricula, which stipulate that the individual children's performances are not to be evaluated and assessed. (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2008: 83)

Individual development plans

On 1 January 2006, an addendum to the Compulsory School Act made IDPs mandatory in Swedish compulsory schooling. This means that teachers in the compulsory school system are now responsible for establishing IDPs for all students from years one to nine in connection with 'individual development talks'. Teachers are expected to compile IDPs in consultation with the parent and student. This legislation was introduced, first, to enable more students to achieve the national goals set in the curricula and syllabi and, second, to enable students and parents to have more influence on the content of student work at school.

Preschools and preschool classes are not regulated by amendments to the Swedish Compulsory School Ordinance; however, the Swedish National Agency for Education (2006) states explicitly that IDPs must not be set in the face of parental opposition.

Our study focuses on IDP material from preschools. Although preschools are not regulated by the Compulsory School Act, IDPs have been set in Swedish preschools through municipal and local initiatives since the late 1990s (Vallberg Roth, 2006). Five years ago, only 10 percent of Swedish municipalities had introduced IDPs in preschool; now, 48 percent of municipalities use them. However, according to the Swedish National Agency for Education (2006: 2), preschools may not 'establish individual development plans against parents' wishes'.

It should be stressed that there is a difference between IDPs and individual educational plans (IEPs). IDPs are plans for all children while IEPs are plans for children with special needs and have a basis in special education. While IDPs are compiled twice yearly, once in the autumn and once in the spring term, IEPs can be compiled many times a year as needed.

Examples of IDPs described in earlier research resemble what might better be termed 'individually oriented normal plans' or 'agreements' (Vallberg Roth and Månsson, 2008a, 2008b). 'Normal plan' reflects the standard of normality against which children are measured, characterized partly by developmental psychological stage theory, with its universal claims, and partly by the expression of a monolingual norm. 'Normal plan' also encompasses templates with a relatively locked-in structure based on established 'normal' knowledge stages/secondary goals in relation to defined subjects and goals in curricula and course plans. The expression 'individually oriented', as opposed to 'individual', indicates that the plans are somewhat individually oriented, insofar as a plan (or template or form) is developed (or completed) for each child. There appears to be some leeway here for the individual to climb the needs ladder, formulate personal goals, and decide how, and how quickly, secondary goals and activities are to be accomplished. However, the plans cannot be considered individual in the sense that they are personally designed or inter-culturally adapted. As a result, the term 'individually oriented normal plans' is considered a more precise designation of the phenomenon in practice, than 'individual development plans' (Vallberg Roth and Månsson, 2006).

In Sweden, IDPs are public documents (SOU, 2003) established by an authority, in this case the public preschool; an exception is made for private preschools, which are not authorities. Public documents can contain both public and confidential information. Anyone can request access to public information in public documents, at any time and without stating why. Even if IDPs contain

sensitive judgments and formulations, they can be read by journalists, insurance companies, and any outside party.

Critical didactic perspective

We have proceeded based on a didactic perspective emphasizing the questions *who* and *what*. The didactic perspective can be further expanded by adding a critical dimension encompassing an intersectional approach, that is, a covariation and point of intersection between various power dimensions in society (see e.g. Lykke, 2005). The place and profile dimensions are included in the present article. 'Place' signifies a certain geographical/cultural portion of a community. Places include power relations that construct the norms through which boundaries are defined; these boundaries are social, spatial, and action-related (Cele, 2006; McDowell, 1999; Sandell, 2007; Vallberg Roth and Månsson, 2008b). How a municipality describes its population's composition and educational level is associated with place. We are interested in how content constructions are related to place.

Pedagogical profile (and self-profiling) can involve the acquisition (for oneself) of a distinctive set of properties. A pedagogical profile can also be viewed as a power and control dimension, in the sense that the concepts of profile and self-profiling represent a distinct trend emerging under the influence of a worldwide, market-based, neo-liberal ideology concerning the ability to compete in a free education market. These concepts may also be said to refer to the implementation of the new public management reforms of the 1980s and 1990s (see e.g. Hood, 1991; Power, 1997). The competition that has followed in the wake of this freedom of choice has elicited profiling requirements, including for municipal schools (Eilard, 2009; Persson, 2009; Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). The degree of pedagogical profiling can also be considered in relation to municipal political control. A pedagogical profile and orientation can be viewed as an institutional-level content declaration, that is, addressing the *what* question of the didactic perspective, conferring choice and elevating a given content in preference to something else. A pedagogical profile can furthermore be viewed as a choice related to other didactic questions, such as *how*, *who* and *why*. This article concentrates on pedagogical profile and orientation with a focus on questions of *who* and *what*. The profiling can then be viewed as controlling content in a way that, by extension, offers and imposes changing positions for different actors (e.g. children, teachers and parents) in various profiled enterprises (see the section regarding subject positioning, 'Construction of children's contents and positions'). Place and profile are not equivalent dimensions, but can both be related to the didactic questions.

This critical approach also creates a need to touch on subject positioning. Subject positioning can involve a process in which the individual actively participates in forming his or her self-image, that is, subject image. Such positioning also occurs through the changing constructions and categorizations of various actors (e.g. teachers, parents, and researchers). In other words, the child as subject is a contingent subject that can change in relation to various discourses. Taylor (1994) believes that individual identity cannot be understood without taking account of individual self-understanding, which includes the individual's experience and interpretation of him- or herself in various social and cultural contexts. A child who is part of a cultural practice such as schooling learns a language and participates in various practices with embedded values. The school thus becomes a factor in forming the child's identity. This identity cannot be understood as formed simply by individual choice, but as formed through inter-subjective actions.

Pedagogical orientations

Both the Montessori and Reggio Emilia methods trace their roots to Italy, though one of them has a longer history: Montessori began in San Lorenzo approximately 100 years ago, while the Reggio Emilia method began some 50 years ago.

Montessori: Abnormal, normal and 'hypernormal' children

The basis of Montessori can be summarized in the phrase: 'Follow the child!' Maria Montessori, who formulated her pedagogical method in the early 1900s, wanted the world to grasp the enormous potential of children. She demonstrated the importance of laying a solid foundation for the child's self-esteem and sense of personal worth, including in the very first years of life. The cornerstones of Montessori pedagogy are expressed in the keywords found on the Montessori Society website (<http://www.tellusmontessori.se/page6/page14/page14.html>): work, sensitive periods, material and observation.

Many ideas that Montessori introduced at the start of the last century have been integrated into curricula and adopted by regular schools and preschools. These ideas include such matters as individualized instruction, a less controlling teacher role, self-instructional materials, freedom of movement in the classroom, and mixed age groups. Undeniably, Montessori seems to be relevant (Quarfood, 2005).

Brigitte Malm (2006) discusses critiques of the Montessori method, and states that relatively little has been written that both critically and constructively sheds light on Montessori pedagogy. She notes one exception, the book *Maria Montessori: A Biography* by Kramer (1976). Kramer believes there to be an inherent paradox in Montessori's system. Montessori often seemed to stress the negative aspects of the effects of adults on children. However, there is a contradiction between the emphasis on 'following the child', giving the child freedom to choose based on his or her interests, and the view that the material guides the process; moreover, the child's choices of activities are limited based on the adults' view of what is best for the child's development and sensitive periods. Kramer claims this paradox is inherent in the Montessori system, there being an inconsistency between 'the insistence on the principle of "following the child" and the practice of limiting the choice of activities available to him according to the adult's view of what will best serve his developmental needs' (Kramer, 1976: 366).

Kramer (1976) and Quarfood (2005) further believe that, despite any criticisms, no one can deny that Montessori's attempts to meld freedom and structure have permanently influenced education:

Montessori's critics continued to maintain that her system underestimated the value of play and gave insufficient reign to the free imagination of the child, that her didactic apparatus was costly and restrictive, and that the observations on which she based her conclusions were not really scientific . . . But no one could deny that her attempts to reconcile freedom with order had changed the school for all time. (Kramer, 1976: 362)

Montessori believed that, with proper pedagogy, children could become perfect human beings. At the same time, she honoured their right to freedom and need for sensory training. In the early 1900s, many in Europe sought to create 'the perfect human being', and notions of what was biologically 'normal' and 'abnormal' were important in this. In Quarfood's interpretation (2005) of Montessori's ideas, normality was not enough; the key was to become *hypernormal*. Children needed to be refined and cultivated to develop optimally. Montessori therefore viewed perfection as enhanced normality, rather than as some deviation from the average, the everyday. Maria Montessori further asserted that children would rather train their skills than devote time to play with conventional toys:

It is interesting that the first thing she appears to have fastened onto with regard to the normalised Montessori children is their 'precocity', that they appear to be 'in love with knowledge and not with toys'. (Quarfood, 2005: 240)

Montessori was later wont to note the contrast between frivolous play and serious work, and prioritised didactic materials over conventional toys. (Quarfood, 2005: 132)

In Sweden, the number of preschools has increased since the 1990s. Due to the general focus on freedom of choice, both private and municipal schools have become more clearly profiled in competing for children and students. According to Skjöld Wetterström and Bröderman Smeds (2008), the opportunity to establish private schools has led to an upswing in Montessori philosophy in Sweden, and more such schools are opening today. There is a clear concentration of authorized Montessori schools in southern Sweden and in metropolitan regions such as Gothenburg and Stockholm. For many ambitious parents, structured learning combined with great freedom is attractive (Westergård, 2006).

Reggio Emilia

The emergent pedagogical orientation of Swedish preschool education is built on the pedagogical philosophy that constitutes one of the bases of municipal preschools in Reggio Emilia (Dahlberg et al., 2003). Discovering and studying changeability and difference play a key role in this approach; for example, light/dark and life/death are content areas chosen in thematic transdisciplinary 'projects' pursued in Reggio Emilia.

In Reggio Emilia, children are said to have citizenship (Lind, 2001), in that they have the right to a place in, and participation in, public life. This view of children as having the capacity for activity, research, and participation serves as the basis for choosing projects involving challenges, children's own questions, and personal initiative. This view of children is often expressed in terms such as 'the rich child' (Wallin, 2003), 'the competent child' (Rinaldi, 2006), and 'the child with a hundred languages' (Malaguzzi, 1996).

In Reggio Emilia, the idea is emphasized that documenting children's work processes entails visibilizing their work (Rinaldi, 2006). The documentation of children's work in preschool assumes various forms of expression, consisting, for example, of a child's compiled drawings, paintings, and other creative work. Documentation in the form of conversations and interviews with children, videotaping, and digital imaging is also used. Such documentation is presented in various ways in the form, for example, of displays of children's work along with their comments. This enables various types of discussions about the project questions and the children's questions or hypotheses. These discussions also create an opportunity for reflection on how the pedagogical process should proceed; such reflection can take place within a group of teachers, among teachers and children, or even with parental involvement as well. Rinaldi identifies differences between *assessments*, which are more retrospective, and pedagogical *documentation*, which is more forward looking. Some, however, would like to see the performance of children at Reggio Emilia preschools studied in relation to external criteria (Edwards, 2002).

In terms of theory, Reggio Emilia pedagogues refuse to associate themselves with any particular theory, but regard themselves as inspired by philosophy, natural sciences, psychology, art history, and pedagogy. One theoretician who has cooperated on research projects with pedagogues and researchers in Reggio Emilia is Howard Gardner (2001).

Ethical perspectives on documentation in preschool

In their article entitled 'On being documented: Ethical perspectives on documentation work in the preschool', Lindgren and Sparrman (2003) point out that documentation has been prioritized as a working method in Swedish preschools. They believe there is a lack of ethics discussion of what

such documentation means for the children being documented, arguing that documented children should be afforded the same protection that researchers offer children being researched. The article describes documentation in terms of videotaping, photographing, and note taking. The authors note how both children and adults participate in analysing and talking about the documentation. The prescribed position on documentation as a working method in preschool is described as follows: 'the instructors used to teach the children, now the children and instructors research together' (Lindgren and Sparrman, 2003: 60). Lindgren and Sparrman ask whether children's participation in documentation projects should not be governed by rules requiring that children and their guardians give informed consent to participating (i.e. they are given information and can choose to participate or withdraw at any time), that they be offered anonymity, and that documentation the material be defined and reported from the start. The two authors take no position as to whether documentation should be used in preschool education; rather, their study critically examines how documentation is used, while invoking the child's perspective, in relation to the intentions of the curriculum.

Summary of introductory section

The introductory section addresses the Swedish preschool context, IDP concept, and theory with a critical didactic perspective. The background information sections relate to the following questions: how is content constructed, and what governs the choice of content in IDPs and documentation at the institutional and individual levels? How is content related to pedagogical profile? What possible identities and positions are formulated for children in relation to various contents and profiles?

Method

The study was conducted in an urban municipality in Scania (Skåne), southern Sweden. The empirical material was collected in the autumn term of 2008 and comprises material from 23 preschools (11 municipal and 12 private) and texts in the form of steering documents at the municipal, institutional and individual levels.

Data sources

This article focuses on the material gathered at the institutional and individual levels: 1) profile descriptions of preschool activities posted on municipal websites; and 2) IDP templates.

Municipal websites. We studied 23 profile descriptions obtained from preschool websites, one description per preschool (with permission, all taken from the Web). The profiles varied, but this article focuses on preschools with Montessori and Reggio Emilia profiles, those with a Reggio Emilia profile being dominant (see text below concerning IDP templates). We chose to focus on these two profiles since they most clearly illustrate the range and variation of the didactic *who* and *what* questions in their profile descriptions. Examples cited here come from this selection of Montessori- or Reggio Emilia-oriented preschools. The profiles of the other sampled preschools widely divergent (see below).

Individual development plan templates. An IDP template is a document that consists, as defined here, of semi-standardized or fully standardized structures (examples of these two types are provided later). Semi-standardized documents consist of standardized headings presented with blank spaces to be filled in by the teacher and/or parents and the teacher. Fully standardized

documents are structured, including detailed descriptions of predetermined goals. In these documents, it is primarily the teacher who records the extent to which the child has achieved his or her goals. IDP templates are preferably designed by teachers and administrators.

We have gained access to IDP documents from all but one of the sampled preschools (one municipal school failed to submit the IDP documents, even after we sent a reminder), for a total of 22 IDP templates. Of these, 13 came from Montessori- and Reggio Emilia-inspired preschools, while the other nine came from preschools with other profiles (e.g. with a Christian profile, or a focus on culture, music, motor skills, outdoor adventure, exercise and healthy lifestyle). In this article, we focus on 13 of these templates, from seven independent and six municipal preschools, including two independent Montessori-profiled preschools (two IDP templates) and Reggio Emilia-profiled preschools. Some preschools used portfolio-like documentation, accounting for 11 IDP templates from five independent and six municipal preschools. We would like to point out that the material gathered includes variations of both Montessori- and Reggio Emilia-profiled documentation. The two IUP templates presented in the article were chosen because they present the clearest examples of the range and variation in the material. These templates are used for all children in each preschool.

Description of the municipality. The studied municipality comprises an urban and suburban area in Scania (Skåne). In 2004, most of the municipality's inhabitants were Swedish-born and resided in ethnically segregated areas that did not include inhabitants with immigrant backgrounds; by 2007, it was reported that approximately 10 percent of the inhabitants were foreign-born (Statistics Sweden, 2008). In total, just over 40 percent of the municipal population had a post-gymnasium education (Statistics Sweden, 2008). According to municipal population data, the municipality can be generally characterized as an ethnically Swedish, segregated middle-class community. The municipality contains roughly similar numbers of municipal (11) and independent (12) preschools. This proportion of independent preschools is higher than the national average. Our material does not specify the uptake area of each preschool or describe the children's backgrounds.

Analysis

Our analytical approach can be described as critical textual analysis incorporating an expanded hermeneutic approach (see e.g. Alvesson and Sköldbäck, 2008; Johnson, 2001). In this, we have been influenced by pragmatic discourse analysis (Quennerstedt, 2008), which views the institution as a participant in the meaning-creation process. The content presented in local steering documents and practice-oriented texts (i.e. rules, goals, and objectives to which participants in the enterprise must adhere) plays a part in meaning-creation processes. In relation to this, we studied texts and documentation at the institutional and individual levels as concrete expressions of human actions (i.e. language actions). From there, we analysed how children's actions and positions are enabled and restricted. Methodologically, the study can be described as abductive, in that the analysis and interpretation take place interactively between empirically loaded theory and theory-loaded empiricism. The data, which come from documents, comprise words and text characterized as *non-reactive*, that is, unaffected by researcher presence (Merriam, 1994). We approach the study object by critically problematizing it, that is, asking questions, and identifying formulations, questions, and problems. Both explicit written expressions and expressions that are unwritten and therefore constructed indirectly from various levels of documents (e.g. profile descriptions and IDP templates) are of interest. Critical textual analysis, specifically, *intertextual analysis* is performed, 'intertextual' referring to texts formulated from other texts and formulations.

Construction of children's contents and positions

In this section, we will first present an analysis of the *what* question and the construction of content. We will then address the *who* question with regard to the positions made available to children through documents at the institutional and individual levels.

Contents related to place and profile: Institutional level

Generally, we could see that profile descriptions discernable as Reggio Emilia-inspired and/or having portfolio-like documentation have the single greatest impact (11 preschools). It is also interesting that there are two Montessori preschools in the same municipality. We further found no pedagogical profile with any religious or linguistic/cultural orientation other than a Swedish-speaking Christian one. Reggio Emilia-inspired preschools, Montessori preschools, and preschools with a nature/cultural profile appear to reflect the municipality's character as a traditional Swedish/ethnically homogeneous middle-class community close to nature.

Content construction at the individual level: Individual development plans

In this section, we examine content construction in the IDPs. Content is constructed based on individual-level templates. These templates may be described as semi-standardized or, in some cases, strictly standardized. Portfolio-like documents are most common. Here are some examples of Montessori-profiled templates:

Example: Montessori (4–6 years) – strictly standardized IDP template

Mathematics/numeracy (approx. 60 learning objectives)

Language (approx. 50 learning objectives)

Culture: History, Geography, Natural Sciences, Music (approx. 50 learning objectives)

Practical content (approx. 200 learning objectives divided into basic, environmental, personal, and motor learning)

Sensory content (approx. 40 learning objectives)

Social development (30 learning objectives)

The structure of content areas is related to school subjects such as mathematics, literacy and history for some 160 learning objectives. However, the content areas themselves are related to practical, sensory and social contents. The main area is the practical content, with approximately 200 learning objectives. In total, there are approximately 430 learning objectives in the Montessori-inspired IDP form, which contains 25 pages of learning objectives. The Montessori teacher makes an evaluation and notes in the IDP template whether a child is still 'practising' or has already 'mastered' the various objectives.

For comparison, here is a Reggio Emilia-profiled, portfolio-like template:

Example: Reggio Emilia – semi-standardized, portfolio-like template

Norms and values

Cooperation/independence

Traditions

Environmental work, green flag, rubbish sorting, nature studies

Development and learning

This is how I learn – I can

Communication and language

Theme

Child's influence

I can participate in this and decide, and this is what I think

Democracy

Preschool/home

This is how it was when I began

Family parties

Cooperation between home and preschool, summer assignments, etc.

Cooperation between preschool and school

Physical training at the school, before preschool class

I would also like to include this:

Treasured moments

Generally speaking, the construction of content in the preceding examples can be interpreted as predicated on profile-based content. This leads to a variation in the content constructed as school subjects, quotidian and socially edifying content, curriculum-oriented traditional and thematic content, as well as self-based and interest-based content. These content constructions may overlap to varying degrees.

Montessori-related positions for children

The overall positions that can be identified at the institutional and individual levels with regard to Montessori preschools are those of the 'self-learning child', the 'working, responsible child', and the 'material-bound child'. Another position emerges, which can be described by the term 'hypernormal child' – a performing, knowledge-oriented and disciplined child four to six years

old. The hypernormal child is registered in relation to over 400 achievement objectives. These Montessori-related positions may be summarized as follows:

- the working, responsible child
- the material-bound and self-learning child
- the ‘hypernormal’ child – who practises/masters mathematics, languages, history, geography, natural sciences (zoology and botany) and music, plus practical, sensory and social content

Reggio Emilia-related positions for children

The Reggio Emilia-inspired plans offer relatively extensive variation various positions available to the individual child. One image that stands out is that of the ‘self-learning child’. A few of the plans leave it up to the child to formulate the learning objectives to be achieved: ‘What does the child want to learn?’ ‘... [*child’s name*] wants to work to learn [*learning objective*] in preschool’. Under the *Development and learning* heading, ‘This is how I learn – I can’, Reggio Emilia-related positions may be summarized as follows:

- the competent child
- the self-learning child
- the visibilized and documented child

Curriculum traditions in relation to profiles inspired by Montessori and Reggio Emilia

According to the 2008 preschool assessment by the National Agency for Education, different curriculum traditions affect preschool evaluation and documentation in various countries. Two different curriculum traditions can be discerned. The first tends to introduce school-like content and methods in preschool and is based on clear learning objectives and tests of predefined knowledge and skills. This tradition can be found in countries such as Australia, Canada, France, Ireland, and the USA. The content of the Montessori preschool described in this article belongs to this curriculum tradition.

The other curriculum tradition can be called the ‘EduCare’ model with a strong belief that preschool pedagogy can influence the early school years. This curriculum tradition has its foothold mainly in the Nordic countries and Central Europe (OECD, 2006; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2008). Reggio Emilia belongs to this tradition. According to Rinaldi (2006), the pedagogical documentation used in this tradition also entails evaluation and assessment, but based on different terms and conditions from those of other evaluation tools used today, which incorporate ‘rating scales’ that mainly exert a decontextualized, more anonymous control function. They are used as though they measure something objectively measurable, unlike Reggio Emilia’s pedagogical documentation, the primary purpose of which is to be a tool for dialog, transparency and meaning creation.

Ethical dimension

We have previously addressed the issue of whether or not documentation becomes public, depending on whether the profiled operation is municipal or private. Therefore, the position of children in municipal preschools can be considered more vulnerable than that of children in private preschools, since the IUP is a public document in municipal, but not private preschools.

Moreover, irrespective of the preschool's profile, guardians and children are free to accept or decline documentation, or to decline to participate in parts of the documentation practice. Even though they are allowed to choose, children and parents are still dependent on the teachers, in the sense that they spend much of their daily lives with them. We question the implications of this dependent relationship for the ability of children and parents to choose and influence documenting activities. Nor does the material from the profiled schools take into account a potential reluctance to be depicted in sometimes intrusive documents that touch on cultural, religious and individual matters. For example, the Montessori IUP template addresses personal information relating to the children's hygiene, which could be interpreted as an intrusion of privacy:

Personal exercises (approximately 40 learning objectives): hygiene (be neat, wash hands, sneeze in the inside of elbow, yawn with hand covering mouth). (from Practical content in Montessori template)

Reggio Emilia-profiled documentation practice is recommended in national governing documents that describe it mainly in terms of its democratic implications, making it difficult to criticize. The question is the degree to which documentation and evaluation practices are democratic, or whether they also help maintain a subordinate position and corrected self-image among children. How are children shaped by documentation practices to embody life patterns that convey messages about the importance of being seen and judged, of considering and being considered? Bauman (2007) points out that the search for value through documentation is consistent with our contemporary consumer lifestyle. In the consumer society, being invisible is synonymous with death: 'To be converted into desirable and desired goods is the material that dreams, and fairy tales, are made of in the consumer society' (Bauman, 2007: 20–21). There is a great need for further research into the ethical dimension of documentation practices.

Discussion

Generally, profile descriptions readable as Reggio Emilia-inspired and/or as using portfolio-like documentation have the single greatest impact. Templates for portfolios and documentation are often constructed based on curriculum-like headings and content, while pedagogical documentation per se is prescribed in the *Curriculum for the Preschool* (see Introduction, Lpfö 98). Governmental control can therefore be seen as prominent, while documentation, evaluation, and standardization simultaneously represent a transnational trend (Vallberg Roth, 2009). The combination of preschools with Reggio Emilia, Montessori, and nature/culture profiles appears to reflect the municipality's character as a traditional Swedish/ethnically segregated middle-class community close to nature.

Content concerning *language*, that is, Swedish, has a major impact on our material, regardless of profile. In addition, language is the content that is the most extensive in the national curriculum and the most obvious in the municipal education plan.

Regarding the Montessori preschool content, which is structured in somewhat school-like subjects, it could be said to comprise *individual level syllabi*, containing comprehensive, detailed, and predetermined objectives and associated assessment categories for each subject. The Montessori teacher assesses and notes in the IDP template whether the child is practising for or has mastered the learning objectives in the template. As mentioned above, Montessori preschools embody a contradiction between an emphasis on 'following the child', that is, allowing the child freedom of choice based on his or her interests, and permitting set material to guide the learning process, the child's choice of activities being limited according to adult views of what is best for the child's development and sensitive periods (Kramer, 1976). Furthermore, predetermined objectives and

associated assessment categories may be interpreted as incompatible with the *Curriculum for the Preschool*, which stipulates that the child's results are not to be evaluated (see Foreword, Lpfö 98).

Possible or weakened positions for children

Overall, children are placed in an arena of visibility in which they are subject to scrutiny as soon as possible. In this arena, it is clear that the position of the playful and critical/creative child with the right to politely refuse documentation and assessment is not what is primarily on offer (see Klafki, 1997; Lindgren and Sparrman, 2003). Moreover, the emphasis tends to be on the 'competent, active, and learning child' rather than on the 'dependent and needy child'. Children's needs for solicitude and care that do not include learning occupy a relatively weak position in the material (see Halldén, 2009; Månsson, 2003; Noddings, 1992). The situation may more aptly be characterized as a dichotomy between responsible, self-learning and competent children, on one hand, and relatively open positions, on the other. The emphasis in the material tends more toward the former stance than the latter. The salient positions in Montessori-inspired preschools are those of 'normal' and 'hypernormal' children, which can be related to Quarfood's study (2005). One image of the child absent from the IDPs but often mentioned in texts associated with Reggio Emilia is that of the child as 'co-constructor' (Dahlberg et al., 2003; Lenz Taguchi, 2000).

On one hand documentation and assessment practice can empower and reinforce, while, on the other hand weaken and restrict various actors, such as children, teachers and parents (cf. Steyerl, 2003). We ask ourselves whether these semi-standardized and strictly standardized documentation templates help develop critical and creative citizens. Furthermore, there is a risk that children's personal privacy will be violated, since IDPs are public documents.

Conclusion

The material primarily reflects a version of 'individual-oriented normal plans' (Vallberg Roth and Månsson, 2006). At the same time, we see that the freedom of choice associated with parental selection of a preschool profile is linked to defined positions for the children, depending on the profile of the preschool they attend. The apparent increase in diversity and freedom of choice paradoxically leads, guided by the profile, to standardization with variation. Standardization refers to the evaluation of children according to standardized documents, while variation refers to the differing emphases of the profiles. A regimented and standardized practice emerges that can provide highly varied learning conditions for children. The children in municipal preschools can also be regarded as in a more *vulnerable* position than those in private preschools, since documented evaluations of them are publicly accessible in the municipal preschool system, but not in private preschools. This trend can be related to the rights of children to equal educational opportunity. Questions about early documentation and evaluation need to be studied and discussed in relation to such equality considerations.

Overall, the recent increase in the documentation and evaluation of children in Swedish preschools, focusing on the 'competent, active, and learning child', indicates a general shift away from the EduCare model and toward the 'school-oriented' curriculum tradition, or possibly a blend of various curriculum traditions. This movement can be interpreted as embedded in a transnational trend toward global competition and consumer lifestyle.

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