

# Preschool Quality and Young Children's Learning in Sweden

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With a background in key factors supplied by European stakeholders within early childhood education and care (ECEC), Swedish policy is described. Sweden has a longstanding policy of equity and equality in which ECEC is the hub of the family, society and the life of the children themselves. While Swedish ECEC is ranked as one of the 'best' in the world, an empirical study shows a significant variation in preschool quality as regards the environment created for young children's (1 to 3 years) learning. The qualities of a country's ECEC is much more diverse and complex than it would appear from the national comparisons carried out by various agencies

Key words : pedagogical quality, preschool, children's learning, policy

## Policy Background

*Early Matters*, a European symposium on improving early childhood education and care (ECEC), was held in Brussels, 14 October 2008. The symposium brought together European and national policy-makers, representatives of European stakeholder organisations, practitioners, other actors, international organisations and members of the research community. The symposium resulted in 19 key conclusions, of which a few will be pointed out in this article: quality ECEC is at the heart of the Lisbon Strategy, benefits from high-quality ECEC are wide-ranging and multilevel, ECEC generates the highest medium and long-term returns for public budget, quality ECEC provides a solid foundation for more effective future learning, ECEC

quality is crucial, and improving ECEC provision requires political commitment.

In this article we want to scrutinise how these statements are related to the policy and quality of preschool education in Sweden, by also relating the discussion to the results of a research project labelled, *children's early learning* (Sheridan, Pramling Samuelsson, & Johansson, 2009b).

Today not only Europe but also many countries around the world are struggling to find ways to care for and educate the next generation. Old traditions with grandparents or mothers taking care of the children are not a reality in modern societies. In most industrialised countries, both parents work outside the home, and the care and education of young children have become a question of gender equality and equity (Tallberg-Broman, Rubinstein-Reich, & Hägerström, 2002). In EU policy it is also realised that ECEC can no longer be related only to questions about women and the labour market (European Commission, 2009, June).

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Sweden is considered to be one of the most gender equal societies in the world (Björnberg, 2002). Sweden is also seen as one of the countries with the highest quality of ECEC provision (OECD, 2001). In the OECD report it is stated that "Sweden is the only country participating in the review that has fully integrated all early childhood services and the compulsory schools into the education system under the Ministry of Education" (p. 78). The report from OECD also states:

Consolidating administration under education auspice provides an opportunity to strengthen the articulation between ECEC and school and to develop a coherent policy framework for regulation, funding, training, and service delivery across the different phases of the education system....In Sweden, integrating responsibility for preschools, family day care, open preschool, and leisure-time activities has led to an increasing public understanding that early childhood services combine care and learning and represent a first and important phase of lifelong learning. (p. 79)

UNICEF (2008) recently published a report showing the standard of ECEC in 25 OECD countries. The benchmarking system is based on: parental leave, a national plan for disadvantaged children, subsidised and regulated for 25% of children under 3, subsidised and accredited ECEC for 80% of 4 year-olds, 80% of the staff trained (50% with a tertiary education with relevant qualification), minimum staff-to-children ratio of 1:15, 1.0% of GDP spent on ECEC, child poverty rate less than 10%, near-universal outreach of essential child health services. Sweden is the only country that has achieved the highest score of 10 benchmarks. The Republic of Korea, with 4 benchmarks, holds 18<sup>th</sup> place

How has high quality ECEC become a reality in Sweden? Kristjansson (2006) writes about the making of Nordic childhoods, which he claims are child-centred. He points out that the Nordic welfare state or model of family policy can be traced back to Alva and Gunnar Myrdal (1934) and social democratic efforts

to develop the society based on justice and everybody's wellbeing. Behind it all is the women's movement. When women were needed on the labour market, they fought for a qualitatively good place for their children's wellbeing and learning. In the 1960s parents demonstrated on the streets under the slogan "day-care for all – the call will sound!" This means that the whole preschool project is about equality and equity! But as Kristjansson (2006, p. 38) says "We must keep in mind, however, that Nordic childhoods, both in the present and in the future, exist as a mental category rather than a concrete object". This means that the quality of ECEC can never be taken for granted, but needs to be concurred continuously, just like democracy has to!

Sweden ranks high in international comparisons thanks to policies concerning early child allowance, health services for young children, maternity leave for 480 days/child (distributed between mother and father), a largely subsidised preschool (whole-day from 1 till 5 years of age) and free for children from 3 years of age half day, full cover of preschool for all children, a national curriculum and well-educated teachers, half of whom have university degrees and have training as nursery nurses. In Sweden children also have their own commissioner – a children's commissioner with statutory rights and duties to promote and protect the rights and interests of children. Family policy has had long-term goals, set up and developed jointly by the government and the teachers union (Berntsson, 2007).

With this very advanced policy as a background to Swedish early childhood education and care, we will now raise the question of what practice looks like from an empirical perspective.

### *Children's Early Learning: A Research Project*

The aim of the study, children's early learning, is to gain knowledge of the characteristics of preschool as a learning environment by studying variations in preschool environments in relation to children's knowledge formation within different areas such as

language and communication and early mathematics. But let us first look into the empirical study of preschool quality.

*Evaluations of quality.* Altogether 38 preschools participated in the study. The quality of these preschools was evaluated with a revised and adopted version of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) (Harms & Clifford, 1980). The original ECERS (Harms & Clifford, 1980) was translated into Swedish and adapted to Swedish conditions in 1989 by Kärrby and revised in 2005 by Sheridan. The revised ECERS consists of 30 items, which define different levels of quality in typical situations of ECEC. These items are grouped together into seven subscales; personal care routines of children, furnishings and display for children, language reasoning experiences, fine and gross motor activities, creative activities, social development, and adult needs. Detailed descriptions are provided for each item, with item scores ranging from 1 (inadequate) through to 7 (excellent).

The evaluations of quality with the ECERS have been statistically analysed with SPSS. The preschools

were evaluated both externally and internally, and the two evaluations compared. The results highlight a significant variation in preschool quality as well as differences between the two evaluations of quality. The external evaluation has a mean value of 4.44 with a range of 2.90–6.24 (1.00–7.00 = min–max). The mean value for the 120 teachers' internal evaluations is 5.19, ranging from 3.41–7.00. Generally teachers rated their work higher than the researchers did. But let us look closer at some of the items assessed.

As can be seen in Table 1, the subscales, externally evaluated, having the lowest total mean values are *Language experiences* (4.09) and *Motor activities* (4.32). The subscales that the teachers evaluated as being of lower quality are *Furnishings and display*, with a total mean value of (4.96) and *Social development* (4.98). Both the teachers and the researchers evaluated *Personal care with a higher quality*, having a total mean value of (4.72 and 5.80 respectively).

There is also a significant difference among the teacher's self-evaluations. Teachers in 32 preschools externally evaluated as being of low or good quality tend to evaluate their own preschool quality higher than the external evaluators, while the teachers in 5

Table 1.

*External and internal evaluations, lowest and highest values, means and standard deviation for the ECERS and the seven subscales*

	N	Low values		High values		Total values		S.D.	
		Ext.	Int.	Ext.	Int.	Ext.	Int.	Ext.	Int.
ECERS	38/120	2.90	3.41	6.24	7.00	4.44**	5.19**	.76	.67
Personal care	38/120	2.50	4.00	7.00	7.00	4.72**	5.80**	.97	.79
Furnishings and display	38/120	2.25	2.50	6.75	7.00	4.57*	4.96*	1.05	.84
Language experiences	38/120	2.00	3.25	6.50	7.00	4.09**	5.32**	.96	.72
Fine and gross motor activities	38/120	2.00	1.00	6.50	7.00	4.32**	5.27**	1.01	1.01
Creative activities	38/120	3.00	2.67	6.17	7.00	4.33**	5.13**	.82	.86
Social development	38/120	2.67	3.00	6.00	7.00	4.36**	4.98**	.79	.82
Adult needs	38/120	3.00	2.67	6.00	7.00	4.86	4.97	.76	1.05

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

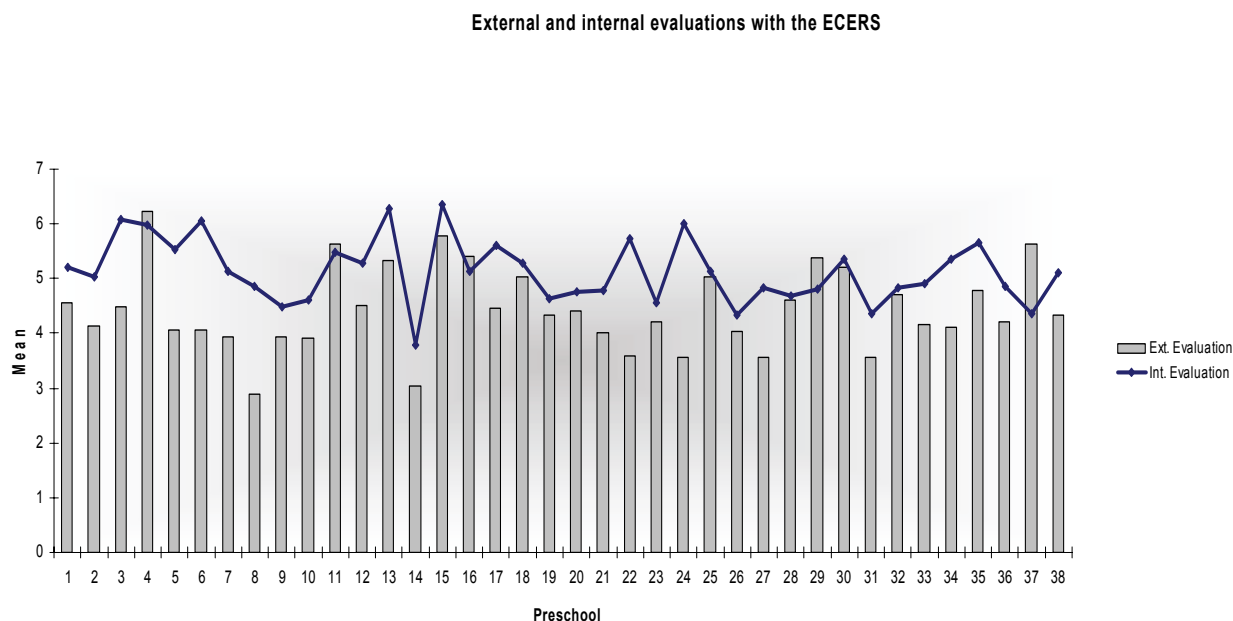


Figure 1. Comparison between external and internal evaluations of preschool quality

preschools externally evaluated as being of high quality seem to underestimate their own preschool quality. This can be interpreted as meaning that teachers in preschools evaluated as being of low quality, contrary to the researchers tend to value their own work in line with the intentions in the preschool curriculum. It seems to be the other way round for the teachers in preschools externally evaluated as being of high quality. Even if they are aware of their own professionalism, they are also critical and appear to seek new challenges in order to improve the preschool quality. In figure 1 the external evaluations are shown as bars and the internal evaluations as a line above the bars.

The external evaluation highlights how children’s conditions for learning vary depending on the quality of preschool. Low quality preschools can be characterised by pedagogical unawareness, limitations in space and material resources and restricted accessibility for the children. There seem to be few opportunities for learning in different areas. The teachers in preschools where quality is rated low are

characterised by a focus on rules and material resources. There is little communication and interaction between the teacher and the child, and there seem to be few encounters of reciprocity. Instead, the teachers and the children appear to act in parallel to one another and/or act in separate “here and now” perspectives.

In preschools externally evaluated as being of high quality, the learning environment seems to be rich in challenges and learning opportunities. The children were observed to participate in ongoing activities, and the teachers’ focuses were on children’s interest, experience and knowledge formation in relation to the overall goals for preschool. The teachers interacted with the children from a joint perspective of “here and now”. They communicated and seemed to focus on similar learning objects. The teachers interacted with the children, affording them the best possible use of all resources, including themselves, to promote their learning, participation, and influence.

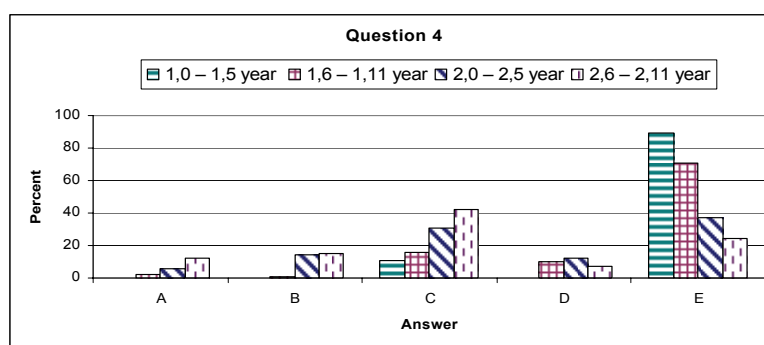
## Children's Learning about Basic Mathematical Concepts

A total of 225 children between 1 and 3 years of age participated in activities connected with basic mathematical concepts. In this study the children were given the opportunity to work with and to learn about notions such as: large and small, first and last, counting, pairing, sorting objects, and representing objects on paper (2 ducks). The study was carried out by a researcher coming into the preschool, arranging a playful interaction situation with artefacts such as small animals. Together the child and the researcher played and talked around the notions she wanted to try out. Each dialogue with every individual child was video-recorded for approximately 15 minutes. This should not be seen as a testing situation. The researcher interacted with the child and communicated about the tasks as long as she felt the child was developing an understanding. This means that the child could have developed the understanding at the very moment of interaction. An important objective of the project was to determine how far each child could come in his/her communication with the researcher. The children reacted in different ways: by showing an interest, by being impatient and eager, or reluctant and uninterested. A lack of interest and reluctance could

both be due to the fact that the situation was unfamiliar or that the children did not understand what to do. However, the majority of the children were very interested and eager to interact with the materials and the researcher.

The video-recordings were then transcribed and analysed according to a phenomenographical research approach (Marton, 1981), which describes qualitatively different ways that the children made sense of each task. Let us here give one example of the analysis – counting objects.

The situation with children can be described as a structured play situation. The children were given 4 and/or 5 animals to count in order to discover children's understanding of counting sequences. When counting the animals the children revealed their understanding of sequence, which may be described in 4 different categories: A) Using correct counting sequence and pointing to each of the animals as they count. B) Using as many numbers as there are animals (e.g., 1, 2, 3, 6, 7 or 3, 5, 6, 7). This means that children have an idea of saying as many numbers as there are objects, but they can not follow the counting sequence, which means that the counting sequence is not stable yet. C) Using counting numbers but having neither a stable sequence nor any understanding of counting each object. Sometimes the children point to some objects, but not systematically.



Note. n per age group 1.0-1.5 yr = 19; 1.6- 1.11 yr = 116; 2.0-2.5 yr = 49; 2.6-2.11 yr = 41.

Figure 2. Counting objects. The bar graphs represent age distribution, shown as a percentage, in relation to each of the five categories described above.

D) Raising their hands or arm in the air without saying anything, or maybe relating this movement to “it, it, it”, or “that that that”. Finally in category E) Not relating themselves to the task in an observable way.

In the statistical analysis children are separated into 4 age groups. We can see in the figure that most of the children cannot solve this problem, but at the same time there are children who can. The most common way of solving the issue is to count randomly and sometimes point, but not at all systematically (Category C). Here we can also see a clear age trend, since the age of the children represented in the first three categories (A, B, C) rises, while it is the reverse in categories D and E. About 16% of children below three are able to use a correct number sequence related to 4 and/or 5 objects.

### Children’s Language and Communication

Altogether 215 children aged 1–3 years were involved in the study about language and communication. The child’s own teacher read a story from a book called *All can get a ride*. Almost none of the children had seen or read the book. Artefacts relating to the story in the book were available for the children to play with and to retell the story after it was read. The teachers were instructed to read and communicate with children in the same way as they usually did. The whole situation was video-recorded and took about 15 minutes with each child. The video observations were transcribed and analysed using a phenomenographic approach. This resulted in four different categories of children’s language and communication related to the story in the book and the play materials.

There is a variation in how children react to the text/figures of the book, which also other researchers have shown earlier (Langer, 2005). From an analysis of the book-reading situation as a whole, four patterns of qualitatively different categories emerged. These are: A) Being focused, B) Acting, C) Inference,

D) Integration. *Being focused* means that children participate in the “reading situation” by focussing their attention on the book, which is evident from their eyes, bodies and facial expressions. The children nod and express emotions. Category B, *acting* indicates that the children participate by gestures and verbal expressions while the teacher reads the book. The children often point to things in the book, label and notice details. They use language expressions and/or repeat some sentences from the book. *Inference* means that the children expand the story while talking about it and/or playing with the toys related to the story. The children make associations to the story in communication and in play, which means that they go outside the perspective of “here and now” and add something new to the story by remembering or imagining something which was not in the book. They make their own interpretations. Finally, category D, *Integration*, means that the children are engaged and participate with great interest, talk about and unite the story to wholeness. When the children retell the story by playing with the artefacts, they do not only make references to what happened in the story, that is, they play the story but also expand the story and make their own interpretations.

The categories are hierarchical from A (lowest) to D (most advanced) and illustrate qualitative “leaps” in children’s ways of relating themselves to the book-reading situation. Aspects from category A are imbedded in category B and so on, which means that all the earlier categories are integrated. In category D. The teacher’s actions are of course important, but are not dealt with here.

Let us now look at the relationship between the age of children and the categories. In a statistical analysis of the book-reading observations, we can see how the categories are closely related to the ages of the children. At group level this is supported by language development (Strömqvist, 2003). Another factor is, of course, that the children gain more experience of communication and book reading with age.

Table 2.

*Children in the different age-groups dispersed in the categories A - D*

Age-group	A	B	C	D	no children
1.0 - 1.5	3	5	1		9
1.6 - 1.11	18	48	35	1	102
2.0 - 2.5	11	24	31	16	82
2.6 - 2.11	1	5	7	6	19
Over 3			1	2	3
Total	33	82	75	25	215
Per cent	15.3 %	38.1%	34.9 %	11.6 %	100 %

Here the children have been divided into 5 age categories for statistical analysis. The fifth category holds the few children who had already turned three. It is fascinating how early children adapt to the discourse of reading and take an active part in the reading and retelling of books. Other researchers have reported similar findings concerning young children's spontaneous approaches to literacy in toddler groups (Björklund, 2007). Here we can see how about 46% of children below the age of three are included in the more advanced categories where children tell the story as a whole or make inference by relating different parts of the story to each other or adding new aspects.

In summary, we wish to emphasise that the quality of preschools studied varied greatly from one institution to another, thereby influencing the 225 children's learning in different areas. One main difference between preschools of low and high quality is the teacher's understanding of children learning by doing and participating in different activities in contrast to directing the child's attention towards a specific learning object in relation to the child's participation and doing. The results confirm the importance of the teacher's competence and shows that teacher's knowledge is a generality. This means that the teacher's knowledge or lack of knowledge embraces different contents, areas and

situations. Consequently, low quality in preschool has a negative effect on nearly all situations and ongoing activities, while high quality has a positive effect. The results also highlight that a significant change in learning occurs between the age of 1 and 3 years, which affects the children's ability to approach and handle different tasks related to mathematics and communication.

### Discussion of Policy and Empirical Results

If we now go back to the policy meeting in Brussels, we can state that the core of the Lisbon strategy is the quality of ECEC. At a societal level, the meaning of ECEC quality is, according to Peter Moss (2004), inextricably linked with the concepts of child and childhood, and the aims and goals of preschool curricula. From that perspective, children's wellbeing depends not only on a country's national wealth, but also on its policy concerning child-related expenditures (Bradshaw, 2006). Comparatively, Sweden has come a long way in introducing reforms supporting families and young children's lives. For example, Sweden holds a leading position in the world when it comes to child-related policy inputs such as the provision of a child benefit allowance, maternity leave to be shared by both parents, access to

preschool for all children whose parents require it, etc. (Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2004; UNICEF, 2008). In Sweden, preschool is open to all children aged 1-5 years. Preschool is part of the educational system and has a national curriculum that is linked to the curricula for other school forms within the system of education (Swedish National Agency of Education, 2006). The preschool curriculum both embraces fundamental values and a variety of learning goals to strive for. The question is, has Sweden, at a societal level, reached its goals concerning family reforms and preschool quality?

From an international perspective, the Swedish preschool quality is highly valued (OECD, 2001). Its high quality is also confirmed by two cross-cultural studies with regard to differences in preschool quality. One is a cross-cultural study between Swedish and German preschools conducted in 1997 and followed up in 1999 (Sheridan & Schüster, 2001). The other study is a cross-cultural study of preschool quality in South Korea and Sweden (Sheridan, Giota, Han, & Kwon, 2009a). The results show that there are some differences in preschool quality that might be interpreted as being related to each country's national welfare system. Observed differences were that the staff-child ratio was higher in Sweden than in Germany and South Korea. This gave the Swedish teachers greater opportunities to interact and communicate with the children, which resulted in a higher preschool quality. The Swedish group organisation of toddlers (1-3 years of age) and siblings (1-5 years of age) also made it possible to organise the children into smaller groups according to each child's experiences, skills and competences, resulting in an expanded variety of learning opportunities. There was a balance between teacher- and child-initiated activities. In the German preschools, the schedule was often child-initiated, while the South Korean preschools had a more rigid teacher-planned schedule. The focus of the South Korean preschools was mainly on the development of children's academic skills in areas such as

understanding language, concepts and mathematics. The results particularly highlight the structural aspects of preschool quality, the resource of space and materials, as being important for the overall preschool quality, since the quality of the physical space and materials in each country seemed to create different opportunities for children to play, relax, and learn in a variety of ways (Sheridan et al., 2009a).

However, from a national perspective another picture of Swedish preschool quality emerges. The results of the study children's early learning show that the variation in the Swedish preschool quality is significant and seems to influence children's opportunities for learning in areas such as language and communication and early mathematics (Sheridan et al., 2009b). The results show that there is a tendency (although not statistically proven, due to the small size of each group) for some of the children participating in the preschools of the highest quality to be categorised in the more advanced categories in both language and communication and early mathematics already at 3 years of age. That is, they perform "better" at solving certain early mathematical tasks and they can interact in the reading procedure and/or retell a story read to them before they turn three years of age. In practice, there is a great difference if a child is in a preschool where for example the subscale Language experiences is rated 2.00 (mean) compared to 6.50 in the ECERS. It can be described as participating in two totally different worlds of communication and interaction, giving the children different opportunities for learning. From that perspective, it is hard to believe that the evaluated preschool quality should not matter. What we can state is that experiences make an impact, but how we cannot say. Many researchers (e.g., Gopnic, Meltzoff, & Kuhl, 1999; Zigler, Finn-Syevensen, & Hall, 2002) have pointed out that the first years' experience in life lay the foundation for later learning and wellbeing. We are not in a position to predict the future of the children who participated in the study of children's early learning. All we know is that their



experiences did not only differ in preschool, but also at home, and that the children in high quality preschools performed differently in areas such as mathematic and language, compared to the children in preschools evaluated as being of low quality.

Research confirms that it is the quality of ECEC that makes the difference in children's learning and development (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004). The EPPE project (Effective Provision in Preschool Education) in Britain shows a very clear relation between children's success in primary school and the quality of the preschool children had attended (Sylva et al., 2004). High preschool quality has been found to have a high predictive value for both literacy and numeracy (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2000). In addition to literacy and numeracy skills, research shows that high preschool quality also correlates with fewer instances of problem behaviour, lower levels of impulsiveness, higher social competence and peer interactions (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2005). On a national level, there is empirical evidence showing that high-quality preschool provision leads to reductions in crime, increases in income and economic status, and overall enhancements in quality of life and wellbeing (Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993).

It is evident that national policy and support are not only important for individual children's learning and wellbeing but also for society itself. It is stated that preschool has the highest long-term effects on the public budget. This was early shown by Schweinhart et al. (1993) in the High/Scope study, when summarising the benefits for USA of getting children from disadvantaged areas to become participating members of society. The Nobel laureate James Heckman (2000) also presents convincing figures indicating that spending money on children at risk already in their early years pays off. In a recent report from the European Commission (2009, June), it is also said: "Investment in early childhood appears to bring greater returns than investments in any other stage of

education, although the size of the effect may vary considerably between countries." (p. 28)

Having a high quality ECEC for all children requires political commitment. In Sweden there has been a family policy for several generations in which the state and the family share responsibility for children's upbringing and education from early years. As pointed out earlier, this has not happened by itself. Women have advocated strongly for their right to both equality and equity, while fathers have been encouraged to share the responsibility and take an active part in young children's lives from birth (Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2009).

Sweden may be one of the countries in the world that is spending most money on ECEC. In Sweden the GDP allocated to ECEC is 1.4%. Compare this with Britain, where less than 0.4% is used for the same purpose. Most Swedish preschools have similar conditions in terms of financial inputs, regulations from society, and the number of children, but nevertheless they differ in quality. A tendency has been seen for the range in preschool quality to become wider over the years (Sheridan et al., 2009a, 2009b). This means that there are more preschools of low and high quality and fewer in between. The results also show that it is mainly preschools that are already of high quality and with professional teachers that have improved the preschool quality even more. It is uncertain whether this is because the definition of high and low quality has been upgraded and sharpened, or that the activities in high quality preschools have improved while those in low quality preschools have deteriorated.

As has been pointed out, the quality of ECEC is crucial for children's learning and for society itself. But quality as such is also quite complicated. What is going on in preschool needs to be viewed from diverse perspectives in relation to several dimensions, the dimension of society (what does the society provide), the dimension of teachers (their education and freedom to act), the dimension of children (who the children are and their experiences from home and

preschool), and finally to the dimension of the learning context. The latter comprises the everyday life experiences for children in preschool: the content worked on, relationships between children and children and teachers, play, materials, how the environment is shaped, etc. (Sheridan, 2009).

The conclusion is that the quality of preschool is influenced by a whole conglomerate of factors. Among these, the teachers' education and competence are valued as most important for the preschool quality (Siraj-Blatchford, 2007; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2003; Sheridan, 2001; Sheridan et al., 2009b). Research has thrown light on the fact that differences in preschool quality are, to some extent, explained by differences in teacher competence, which makes teacher education an important issue for any society. In Sweden, the political commitment is high, but for children's future learning in preschool, the teacher education, teachers' competence and the overall preschool quality need to be improved even further.

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