

Ten years after the pre-school reform

A national evaluation of the Swedish pre-school

This summary presents the second national evaluation of the Swedish pre-school after the reform of 1998, when the pre-school received its own curriculum and became the first step for children into the overall education system. The aim of the evaluation is to follow up the results from the first national evaluation that was presented in the year of 2004 in the report “Pre-school in transition” and examine how the pre-school has developed in different respects almost ten years after the reform.

The evaluation takes a wide-ranging approach and builds on two different sub-studies: a survey to management personnel in all the country’s municipalities/municipal areas and case studies based on a sample of municipalities and pre-schools. As a complement to this, results from other studies that the Swedish National Agency for Education have carried out during the years 2004–2008 are used, including statistics, in-depth analyses within certain areas and inspection reports. In the report the development of the Swedish pre-school is also related to international research.

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Contents

Foreword 5

1. Introduction 7

- 1.1 The pre-school curriculum reform 8
- 1.2 Pre-school in transition – the first national evaluation 10
- 1.3 The evaluation's purpose and issues 12
- 1.4 The evaluation approach 13
- 1.5 The evaluation's structure and implementation 14

2. Results 17

- 2.1 The impact of the reform 18
- 2.2 Increased decentralisation
 - increased municipal supervision and control 21
- 2.3 An equivalent pre-school? 22
- 2.4 Increased assessment of the individual child's development 25
- 2.5 Narrowing the curriculum? 28

3. References 31

Foreword

The study presented in this report is the second national evaluation of the Swedish pre-school after the reform of 1998 when the pre-school received its own curriculum and became the first step for children into the overall education system. The aim of the evaluation is to follow up the results from the first national evaluation that was presented in the year of 2004 in the report “Pre-school in transition” and examine how the pre-school has developed in different aspects almost ten years after the reform.

The evaluation takes a wide-ranging approach and builds on two different sub-studies: a survey to management personnel in all the country’s municipalities/municipal areas and case studies based on a sample of municipalities and pre-schools. We have also, as a complement to this, used results from other studies that the Swedish National Agency for Education have carried out during the years 2004–2008, including statistics, in-depth analyses within certain areas and inspection reports.

This report summarises the most important results from the national evaluation and has been written by Gunnar Åsén and Lena M Olsson.

Stockholm in December 2008.

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Introduction

1. Introduction

1.1 The pre-school curriculum reform

During the last decade, the Swedish pre-school has undergone comprehensive changes. In 1998 the pre-school was transferred to the educational system after having been an important part of the welfare and family policy during the entire build-up phase.¹ The pre-school's first curriculum (Lpfö 98) was introduced in August of the same year. The pre-school's curriculum and the compulsory school's curriculum are closely linked and are based on a mutual view of knowledge, development and learning. An underlying motive for the transfer to the educational system and the curriculum's introduction was to strengthen the pre-school's pedagogical assignment at the same time that pre-school pedagogy would have an increased impact in school.²

The pre-school curriculum is an ordinance with binding regulations. It expresses the demands that the State imposes on pre-schooling, as well as the demands and expectations children and parents may impose on the pre-school. The curriculum sets out the fundamental values of the pre-school, its assignment as well as goals and values for pre-schooling. The assignment includes that the pre-school shall form the basis for lifelong learning and that the pre-school shall be enjoyable, secure and rich in learning for all children. In addition, pre-schools shall "offer children a good pedagogical operation where care, fosterage and learning create a whole". Consequently, the curriculum is based on the model that has internationally gotten the designation, "educare" and which involves care and pedagogy being united in pre-school activities. The model has been praised in OECD connections and the Swedish pre-school have, in several regards, been promoted as a role model. Those reasons that have been stated are respect for the child, that childhood has a value in itself and not only as preparation for adult life, that pre-school is well-developed and has stable financing from the government, that fees are low, and that the personnel are well-educated compared to the majority of other OECD countries. Sweden is also at the top in regard to teacher density and the size of children groups.³

¹ Pre-school was transferred in 1996 from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education and Science, and in 1998, the Swedish National Agency for Education took over authorial responsibility from the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare.

² Bill 1995/96:206 *Specific School issues, etc.*

³ OECD (2001) *Starting Strong, Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD; OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II. Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD.

In the preparation for the curriculum it was emphasised that the pre-school's family policy assignments shall remain the same. The Swedish pre-school's distinctive character shall be maintained and developed. At the same time, the pre-school's pedagogical content shall be reinforced.⁴ An interpretation of the motive for the reform is that it has the double purpose that shall be balanced and utilised in the pre-school's everyday practice – to strengthen the pre-school's role for children's learning, and at the same time preserve its character. Consequently, both continuity and change are built into the reform.

The curriculum sets out goals and guidelines for the following five areas: Norms and values, Development and learning, Influence of the child, Pre-school and the home, and also, Cooperation with the pre-school class, the school and the leisure-time centre. The goals state the direction of pre-school work and are stated for the first three of the areas named above. The pre-school curriculum includes, as opposed to that of compulsory school, no goals for what children shall achieve at different points in time. The objectives are formulated in broad and general terms. They state the direction of the pre-school work and are formulated as goals to strive towards. Since the goals do not state levels for children's abilities or performance, it is not the individual child's results that shall be assessed or evaluated.⁵

Guidelines state the responsibility that the staff in the pre-school has. Guidelines exist for all five areas. According to the curriculum, the pre-school operation shall be planned, carried out, evaluated and developed in relation to the established goals.

The curriculum is based on the Education Act, which contains the fundamental provisions about pre-school.⁶ The task of the pre-school is to, through pedagogic activities, offer children fosterage and care. Those requirements that are placed on the pre-school is that there shall be staff with the type of education or experience that satisfy the children's need for care and a good pedagogical activities, that the size of children's groups shall have a suitable composition and size and also that the premises shall be suited to the purpose. In the Education Act, it is also stated that pre-schooling shall be based on every child's needs and that children, who for different reasons, need special support for their development shall be given the care that their special needs require. In addition to this, there are also provisions about the scope of pre-schooling, provision of places, fees etc.

⁴ SOU 1997:157, Supplement 1 and 2: Committee Directive to the Child Care and School Committee. Stockholm: Ministry of Education and Science.

⁵ *On the pre-school curriculum. The governments preface to the curriculum.* Stockholm: Ministry of Education and Science.

⁶ *Education Act*, Chap. 2 a., 1–12§§

1.2 Pre-school in transition – the first national evaluation

National evaluations are for the purpose of reviewing and evaluating the quality of an operation in relation to governmental supervisory documents and also to study the consequences of various reforms. National evaluations can also make up a type of “mirror function” for municipalities and pre-schools. In order to see one’s own development, one needs comparison points and therefore, broad and centrally initiated evaluations can be valuable even at the municipal and local level. In 2002, the Swedish National Agency for Education initiated the first national evaluation of the pre-school after the pre-school reform. The results were published in 2004 in the report “Pre-school in transition”.⁷

The evaluation showed that the reform had major support at different levels and that the curriculum was being received positively by administrative management, pre-school managers and pre-school staff. Many felt that the curriculum had contributed to raising the pre-school’s status at the same time that it had had significance for the staff as support in the pedagogical work. However, it had little significance for the municipal decisions regarding frameworks and resources. The introduction of a new curriculum with clearer requirements on pre-school did not result in, for example, smaller groups of children. The results showed large variations in the size of children’s groups between municipalities, but especially within the municipalities. In certain pre-schools, personnel felt that larger groups caused difficulties in carrying out the assignment in a satisfactory manner.⁸

Another result was that the pre-school, five years after the reform, found itself in a period of transition between established traditions and new requirements. In several regards there was continuity in the view on the task of the pre-school and the way of working. Management and staff expressed strong support for the so-called educare model and were of the opinion that care, fosterage and learning belonged together and are prerequisites of each other. The impact for the curriculum’s different goals varied. Personnel were of the opinion that they had made the greatest progress within the area Norms and values, which is an area that has also previously been strongly established in pre-school.

⁷ Swedish National Agency for Education (2004) *Pre-school in transition. National evaluation of the pre-school*. Report 239. Stockholm: Swedish National Agency for Education

⁸ These problems were mostly expressed in pre-schools situated in low-resource areas

At the same time, other results were seen a relatively short time after the implementation of the reform. In the evaluation there was a certain aim toward a stronger emphasis on children's learning, as well as an increasing focus on children's individual development. Observations, identifications and documentation of the individual child's development within different areas existed to an increased extent. One example of this was that many pre-schools had formulated individual development plans. Often, political decisions or requirements from management formed the basis, despite the fact that there are no requirements for such plans in the pre-school curriculum or in provisions regarding individual development plans.⁹

In the report, the pre-school's transition to a goal- and result-based educational system is described as a comprehensive change. In such a system, the requirements for evaluation and the evaluation showed that the municipalities placed increased demands on the pre-school to assess and evaluate its own goal attainment. In a majority of the municipalities, pre-schools and schools were coordinated in mutual boards and administrations – often also with mutual goals in municipal plans. However, assessing goal attainment based on the pre-school's established goals was problematic. There were examples where both municipalities and pre-schools had formulated their own goals for how children should perform at a certain age, which is not in line with the intentions of the curriculum.

Research shows that reforms within the educational area need a long time to have an impact in practice – it often takes 10–15 years before it is possible to see concrete effects. In view of this time perspective, which research has indicated, the first national evaluation was carried out a relatively short time after the reform. Despite this, the evaluation showed a series of changes within the pre-school, which, to a large extent, can be connected to the reform, but also to other factors such as changed frameworks and organisation. In other regards, the reform had a lesser impact or contributed to a development that was hardly intended.

The previous national evaluation's purpose and implementation has great similarities with the first one, which provides good possibilities for understanding the pre-school's development after the reform in a longer time perspective. In the various sections of this report, comparisons will be made with results from the previous evaluation.

⁹ See also Nordenstam, U., Ulveson, E. & Åsén, G. (2006) *Individual development plans in the pre-school*. PM 2006-02-23. Network for pre-school and child-care. Stockholm: Swedish National Agency for Education

1.3 The evaluation's purpose and issues

The purpose of the evaluation that is presented in this report is to follow-up the previous national evaluation and to study the impact of pre-school reform and consequences almost 10 years after the introduction of the curriculum. The study has been initiated by the Swedish National Agency for Education and has been carried out during the years, 2007–2008. In the evaluation, the following issues are most central:

- *What significance does the pre-school curriculum have for the activities in pre-school?*
- *What are the structural conditions for pre-schooling at the municipal level and at different pre-schools?*
- *How are pre-schools organised, steered and managed in the municipalities?*
- *How do the municipalities and pre-schools work with evaluations, quality development and assessment of goal attainment?*
- *What diagnostic and assessment materials are used?*
- *How do municipalities and pre-schools work with children in need of special support?*
- *What similarities and differences are there between municipalities and pre-schools in regard to what was stated above?*

The empirical material consists of a municipal survey, case studies with interviews and studies of written documents. The survey has been sent to all municipalities/municipal areas in the country, while the interview material is not as comprehensive as in the previous evaluation. However, we have placed greater emphasis on document studies in this evaluation and in addition, more in-depth studies have been carried out within several areas where the previous evaluation showed the need to illuminate the continued development through more detailed analyses. This primarily applies to the municipalities' principles for resource allocation, children in need of special support, and also the use of individual development plans and diagnostic and assessment materials. We have also reviewed other studies that were carried out by the Swedish National Agency for Education during the period 2004–2008 (follow-up statistics, inspection reports, and in-depth analyses within certain areas) that complement the empirical data that was collected within the framework for the evaluation.

1.4 The evaluation approach

The present evaluation has, as does the previous evaluation, a broad approach where the development of pre-school, in regard to the current issues, is being studied at different levels in the organisation. The evaluation approach have the purpose of showing the complexities in the system by studying the goals as well as the conditions, processes and results, which together form an "evaluation chain". This structure for evaluation has its origin in the so-called frame factor theory, where pedagogical processes are viewed and analysed in relation to the frames, conditions and prerequisites that are given. That, which under certain given prerequisites, occurs in the process, later fall out in the form of different types of results.¹⁰ Evaluations should, if possible, include an analysis of the entire chain, goals – frames – processes – results. If you only focus on one link in the evaluation chain, for example, the results, it is difficult to explain why you have achieved certain results. It is also insufficient to study only the conditions since good conditions do not necessarily lead to good processes and results. Evaluations whose purpose is to investigate goal attainment should also not be limited to comparisons between goals and results, but include an analysis of an entire course of events where the differences between goals and results can be related to and explained based on knowledge about the process and the frames. This approach also forms the basis for the current evaluation of pre-school.

Goals

Frames

Processes

Results

Different components in an evaluation chain

The national **goals and requirements**, which are considered in the evaluation, are formulated in the Education Act and the pre-school curriculum. In the evaluation we have chosen to explain how the pre-school has developed after the pre-school reform in relation to those requirements that are formulated, in part by the Education Act's so-called quality paragraph (personnel shall have relevant education or experience, children's groups shall have a suitable composition and size, the premises shall be suitable, pre-schooling shall be based on every child's needs and children in need of special support shall be given the support their special needs require), and in part, on the goal areas that are found in the curriculum.

¹⁰ Lundgren, U.P. (1979) *Att Organisera omvärlden. En introduction till läroplansteori*. Stockholm:Liber.

The **frame factors** that are studied in the evaluation are principles for resource allocation, the size and composition of children's groups, access to educated staff and also premises and the internal environment.

The **process** is about how the operation is led and structured and about the tools utilised by the staff in order to be able to work in line with the curriculum's intentions. In the evaluation, the process is studied by explaining how municipalities and pre-schools work with competence development, evaluation, diagnostics and assessment materials, pedagogical documentation, planning and mutual reflection.

The **results** is about the goal attainment. Here, it is vital to originate with that the pre-school curriculum only contains goals to strive towards, i.e. goals that describe desired processes more than complete results. This means that the results and processes are difficult to distinguish in pre-school. In the evaluation it is studied how municipalities and pre-schools work in relation to certain central areas in the curriculum and Education Act, including how they view the assignment, the possibilities to adapt the activities according to every child's needs and conditions, how the pre-school provides for children in need of special support and how the professionals (principals and staff) view and individually assess goal attainment within those areas where goals and guidelines are stated in the curriculum.

1.5 The evaluation's structure and implementation.

Based on the evaluation's purpose and issues, two different partial studies have been carried out: a survey to management personnel in all the country's municipalities/municipal areas, and case studies in a selection of a few municipalities. We have also, as a complement to this used results from different studies that the Swedish National Agency for Education carried out during the years 2004–2008, including statistics, in-depth analyses within certain areas, and also inspection reports. A closer description of the structure and content of both partial studies is given below.

Survey to management personnel

A central question in the evaluation is how the municipalities organize, steer and manage the pre-school and also what frameworks and resources that is allocated. For the purpose of getting information about pre-school at the municipal level, and therefore, a broader base for the interpretation of results from the case studies, a survey has been carried out among municipal heads of education in all the country's municipalities/municipal areas.

The survey covered the following question areas: The pre-school's governing and management, the size of children's groups, children in need of special support, quality development and competence development, evaluation, diagnostics and assessments of children's developments. The question areas are, with the exception of the latter two, identical with those in the previous national evaluation, which makes it possible to make comparisons and to study changes over time.

The survey was distributed in April 2007 to all of the 360 municipalities and municipal areas in the country. After customary reminders we received 342 responses, in other words, 95 percent, which may be considered as a high frequency response.¹¹

Case studies

To get in-depth knowledge about the pre-school at the municipal and local level, a large part of the empirical data in the project has been collected through case studies in six municipalities. None of these municipalities participated in the previous national evaluation. In regard to selection of municipality, different municipal types are included in the selection. We have also strived for geographic distribution, variation in regard to population, population structure, and the percentage of municipal and private pre-schools.

Within every municipality, in consultation with administrative managers, we have selected two pre-schools that differentiate in regard to size and reception area. In addition, a total of three independent pre-schools were selected in those case municipalities where there is the largest percentage of independent pre-schools. This means that a total of 15 *pre-schools* were included in the case studies.

Interviews were carried out with two pedagogues¹² at every pre-school that works with children of different ages as well as principals or equivalents. In total, 15 principals, 24 pre-school teachers and 6 child minders have been interviewed.¹³ In addition to that, there are interviews with the municipal heads of education in the six case municipalities. In total, 51 interviews have been carried out in connection with the case studies. All of these interviews have been taped and transcribed in their entirety.

¹¹ A drop-out analysis shows that no municipal type is over-represented in the drop-out.

¹² In the report of the result, the concept *pedagogue* is used as the collective name for the occupational groups, pre-school teachers and child minders.

¹³ In the evaluations, the principals, together with the staff, got to select the persons that would be interviewed, however, departments with children in different ages should be represented. Of the interviewed personnel, 9 people work with younger children (1–3) years, 9 with older children (3–5 years) and 12 in mixed age groups (1–5 years).

For case studies, the project has formulated *interview guides* that are used at interviews with staff and principals as well as municipal heads of education. To a large extent, the same questions have been asked to the three different levels in order to facilitate comparisons. The interview guides address issues, which, for example, explain the operation's frameworks and direction, competence development, pedagogical management, children in need of special support, planning, evaluation, the use of diagnostic and assessment materials, pedagogical documentation, individual development plans, the view of the assignment as well as the pre-school's development in relation to the goals and guidelines in the curriculum. The majority of question areas are identical with those in the previous evaluation and are also associated to the questions in the municipal survey, which makes it possible to gain in-depth knowledge within those areas where the survey provides a wider national view.

Questions regarding the majority of these areas have been asked to everyone who was interviewed, but the questions have been formulated differently depending on whether a person wants to explain the operation from a municipal management, pre-school manager, or pedagogue perspective.

The case studies also include document studies. Those documents and other materials that have been collected are, municipal plans (school plans or separate plans for pre-schools, development plans), local work plans, municipal and local evaluations, quality reports, examples of documentation, possible templates for individual development plans, and also different types of diagnostic and assessment materials. The content in these documents has been analysed in relation to the municipality's survey responses and different statements in the case study interviews.

Summarized and discussed below are the main results, which in different ways can be connected to the reform and where it is possible to assume that the reform has affected the pre-school's development. In this context we would also like to relate the Swedish pre-school's development to research and make some international comparisons.

Results

2. Results

2.1 The impact of the reform

Experience shows that it is important to allocate a longer time perspective when evaluating a reform. The Swedish pre-school's current structure and content is the result of a long-term development where previous reforms are also of importance.¹⁴ It is a known pattern from evaluations within the educational area that reforms need time to take effect, to get support and especially to have an impact in practice. In the school area it often takes 10–15 years or more before you see the results of established reforms.¹⁵ It is also not unusual that central reforms have a different development and lead to other results than those intended. The reasons that reforms have a poor impact or lead to undesired effects can be that the reforms have insufficient support, that they have not been clarified nor have inner contradictions, that there are poor conditions in regard to the implementation, or that the reforms are not sufficiently strong enough in relation to existing traditions and established systems.¹⁶

The first national evaluation of the pre-school showed that the curriculum had had a relatively strong impact just five years after the reform. One reason for this can be that the curriculum was desired and had a high degree of legitimacy at all levels: among management personnel, principals, and pedagogically active staff. Another contributing cause to the strong impact can be that the curriculum captured certain development tendencies that were underway in pre-schools during the latter part of the 1990s and these were considered to be the norm for all pre-schools. This has meant that the curriculum was perceived by many as a document that described and defined the work that was already being carried out in pre-school. The results also showed that the curriculum had contributed to raising the status of pre-school and functioned as a support for the staff in the pedagogical work.¹⁷

The current evaluation shows that the curriculum today, ten years after it was introduced, has gained increasingly larger significance for the pre-schools. The curriculum, its implementation and impact, is perceived by many as the

¹⁴ Liedman, S.E. (1997) *I skuggan av framtiden. Modernitetens idéhistoria*. Stockholm: Bonnier Alba

¹⁵ Haug, P. (2003) *Om kvalitet i förskolan. Forskning om och utvärdering av förskolan* 1998–2001. Forskning i focus, nr. 8. Stockholm, Swedish National Agency for Education

¹⁶ Sarason, S.B. (1990) *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers. Tyack, D. & Cuban, L. (1995) *Tinkering toward Utopia. A Century of public school reform*. London: Harvard University Press.

¹⁷ Swedish National Agency for Education (2004) *Pre-school in transition. National evaluation of the pre-school*. Report 239. Stockholm: Swedish National Agency for Education

greatest change in pre-school in recent times. The curriculum has had major significance as a driving force for developing the pedagogical work in pre-schools and many of those changes that have occurred in the last ten years can, to a large extent, be connected to the reform and the introduction of the curriculum. At many pre-schools, today the curriculum functions as “a living document” that characterises the work that is being carried out. At the municipal and local levels, the curriculum is used as a basis for formulating municipal and local goals, for competence development and quality work as well as for evaluations. A comparison with results from international studies of the curriculum reforms in the school’s areas shows that the Swedish pre-school reform has had an unusually fast impact.

An important purpose behind the pre-school reform was that all pedagogical operations whose purpose is to foster and support children in their development and learning should be seen as a whole. The importance of pre-school in lifelong learning should be reinforced and a link in this should be a closer integration of pre-schools and schools at a governmental level. The pre-school reform can be set in relation to OECD’s recommendations that are formulated in the report, *Starting Strong* (2001). OECD emphasises the importance of a more unified view on learning in pre-school and school and that the operations for younger children should be included in a strong and equal partnership with the rest of the educational system. OECD states in a later report that different policies have been developed in different countries.¹⁸ France and English speaking countries advocate a “preparation for school” and focus on the development of cognitive abilities. In these countries, the content and pedagogical methods have grown closer in pre-school and schools, but at the expense of pre-school pedagogy. Another policy has been developed in countries with a social pedagogical tradition, such as in the Nordic region and Central Europe. Here, pre-school is viewed as a broad preparation facility for life and as the first step in lifelong learning. In these countries there is broad support around that pre-school pedagogy shall influence at least the first years in school.

The evaluation shows that pre-school and school are getting closer to each other in an organisational sense in municipalities since the reform. Pre-school and school are generally organised in mutual boards and administrations and also have joint municipal supervisory documents. The development has moved towards an increased coordination over the last five years. The coordination between pre-school and school is also expressed in how the municipalities organise operations at the unit level. The most common way to organise pre-

¹⁸ OECD (2006)

schools are in units that include pre-school, pre-school class and compulsory school, and sometimes leisure time center and special school. In our case study interviews, pedagogues expressed awareness about the task of the pre-school, which is based on a long tradition – that care, fosterage and learning belong together and are conditional upon one another. At the same time, it is shown that the major focus in pre-school has been shifted towards an increased emphasis on children's learning after the pre-school reform, something that was already seen in the previous evaluation and that now appears even clearer. There is also a stronger emphasis on the pre-school's role as preparation for school.

The pre-school curriculum states goals and/or guidelines for the areas, Norms and values, Development and learning, Children's influence, Pre-school and the home as well as Cooperation with pre-school class, school and leisure time center. Both the municipal survey and the case studies show that the impact has been strongest within the first previously named areas, but there has also been progress with several pre-schools within the areas, Children's influence and Parents and the home. The impact has not been as strong in the areas Cooperation with pre-school class, school and leisure time center.

One explanation for the strong impact for the objective area, Norms and values, can be that it connects to a strong tradition in the Swedish pre-school and builds on the principle that development occurs in groups and that children develop through interaction with others. Many pre-schools worked with developing a child's ability to take into consideration and think about how other people think and feel even before the curriculum. The result indicates that the work within this area has been further developed and is more in-depth.

In regard to the areas, Development and learning, there is more of an element of change. In certain cases these changes indicate a break with earlier traditions through increased individualisation where children's development and learning are considered more as an individual project. But we also see the results as indicating that the distinctive character of the Swedish pre-school has been further developed through increased awareness about what children want to learn and how they learn. The perception of children as curious and competent has been strengthened.

Children's influence, as well as Cooperation between the pre-school and the home, is also indicated as an area with a relatively strong impact. New methods for developing children's influence have been formulated where children are more often involved in evaluations. Sensitivity and respect for children's initiative have also increased. Cooperation between the pre-school and the home has always been an important cornerstone in the pre-school's work. This area seems to have been further developed in different ways. The pre-school's

assignment is clearer due to the introduction of the curriculum and there are many indicators that the legitimacy of the pre-school has increased among parents.

On the other hand, cooperation with pre-school class, school and leisure time center have not developed to any large extent since before the evaluation, despite the fact that the operations today are often organised within the same unit and have a joint manager.

2.2 Increased decentralisation – increased municipal supervision and control

Different reforms have led to the fact that responsibility for the pre-school since the 1990s has become increasingly decentralised. In the Swedish National Agency for Education's first national evaluation of pre-schools, it was shown that many municipalities had implemented a far-reaching decentralisation of responsibility and decision-making in a series of important questions. The current evaluation shows that the decentralisation has been further strengthened wherein resources have been allocated directly to the units and whereby responsibility and authorisation within a series of different areas are placed on the units. Principals often have major freedom to decide how they will utilise the resources, and in the majority of municipalities the principal can also allocate resources between different operational forms. Whereby the principals' responsibilities and work tasks have been expanded, the room to focus on pedagogical leadership has been limited. One consequence is that the pedagogical responsibility is often delegated to the staff. Another sign that decentralisation has increased is that the municipalities' supervision over the size of children's groups has decreased since the previous evaluation.

In the evaluation it is also shown that parallel with an increased decentralisation, the municipalities' supervision and control over pre-schools has increased in several regards. The fact that decentralisation often goes hand in hand with expanded control is a known pattern from other studies. In a decentralised system, follow-up and evaluation are important functions in order to maintain the necessary control.¹⁹

The results shows that extensive evaluations are carried out both at the municipal level and at the pre-school level. There, a broad spectrum of different evaluation models is used including self-evaluation, colleague evaluation, parental surveys and evaluations where children are involved. Judging from

¹⁹ Weiler, H (1990) Decentralisation in educational governance: An exercise in contradiction? I Granheim, M., Kogan, M & Lundgren, U.P. (Eds) *Evaluation of Policymaking*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

the case studies, different types of evaluations and self-auditing activities are a more common element in pre-school today than when the previous national evaluation was carried out. According to the municipal survey, the follow-up and evaluation is of more importance for quality in pre-school today compared with five years ago. One contributing cause for this can be the requirement that every pre-school shall establish its own quality audits and where different types of evaluations become an important base. In 2006, a provision was initiated regarding quality reporting in pre-schools, which among other things, meant that every municipally driven pre-school shall formulate a written quality report as a link in the continual follow-up and evaluation of the operation. According to the municipal survey, administrative management is to get information about the pre-school's quality development primarily through the pre-school's own quality reports and conferences with principals, but also through centrally and locally initiated evaluations.

Other results that indicate increased municipal governance is that many municipalities centrally has decided that pre-schools shall establish individual development plans and use materials for assessing children's knowledge and proficiency within different areas.

2.3 An equivalent pre-school?

The pre-school's special responsibility for children in need of special support is emphasised in both the Education Act and the curriculum. Administration managers in more than half of the country's municipalities realise that the percentage of children with support needs has increased at the same time that it has been assessed that resources for children in need of special support is insufficient. The most common efforts are that the staff have consultation/guidance or that the pre-school is allocated extra personnel resources. All case municipalities have a central organisation for special support where they assemble specialist competence that the pre-schools can engage, which is appreciated by the staff. However, staff and principals often say that it can be difficult to get extra personnel resources for a child that is in need of special support. In principle, a medical/psychological diagnosis is needed, which can take a long time to obtain. This result can be placed in relation to the fact that the use of different diagnostic materials is often motivated by the fact that identification is needed in order to identify children who need support at an early stage. However, the results shows that this connection functions worse in practice when resources in many municipalities are insufficient.

According to the municipal survey, nearly three-fourths of the municipalities have carried out follow-ups for children in need of special support in the last five years. Only 40 percent of the respondents assess that the resources are

sufficient. On the other hand, a larger percentage (75 percent), believe that the efforts for children in need of support are effective.

In the pre-school curriculum it is stated that account should be taken of the varying conditions and needs of children. This means that the pre-school cannot be organised in the same way everywhere and that the resources of the pre-school shall not be distributed equally. When municipalities allocate resources to pre-school, a combination of different principles is often used, but *volume-based resources* are clearly the most common principle. Nearly 9 out of 10 municipalities utilise this type of model, which often constitutes the majority of the total budget. This means that resources, to a large extent, are allocated based on the principle of a sum of money per child or a sum corresponding to a certain number of services per child group regardless of what the children's conditions are in general. Municipalities also allocate resources to pre-schools, which in different regards can be designated as compensatory. Two-thirds of the municipalities have *supplemental-based resources* for children in need of special support while only 20 percent of the municipalities allocate supplemental resources based on socio-economic factors. These supplemental-based resources, however, constitute a smaller percentage of the pre-school's total budget – normally a few percentage points. In those municipalities where the respective type of principles exist, the average for supplemental resources for special support is 5 percent and the average for socio-economic supplemental resources is almost 4 percent of the pre-school's total budget (exclusive premises). Municipalities with municipal district administrations, like the three major urban areas, are not included in these averages. Municipal councils in these municipalities take into consideration the municipal district's socio-economic structure when they allocate resources to the respective municipal district and the socio-economic supplement makes up a significantly larger percentage of the budget there, from almost 10 percent to closer to one-third of the budget.

In our municipal survey it is shown that the size of children's groups is primarily the result of economic priorities, while the reception area's character has little significance for the municipality's decision regarding the size of children's groups. The result has major similarities with those in the previous evaluation. Compared with five years ago, today there is a larger percentage of municipalities that totally lack standards or guidelines for the size of children's groups – 51 percent compared with 40 percent five years ago. The municipalities' governance over the size of children's groups has also decreased to a certain extent. The average group size has decreased somewhat since the previous evaluation, but variations are large due to the fact that the percentage of part-time children has increased. In the country's municipalities, the "ceiling" varies for the number of children in different age groups with approximately 5 children.

The percentage of employees with a college education has basically remained unchanged in recent years. While the education level has increased somewhat in the municipal pre-schools, it has steadily decreased in private pre-schools during the 2000s at the same rate that these have increased in number.²⁰ In regard to access to educated staff there are major differences between different municipalities, but also between different reception areas in the same municipality. All case municipalities have the ambition to increase the number of pre-school teachers, but since there are not a sufficient number of educated teachers available, this often remains only an ambition.

In the previous evaluation it was shown that the design of the premises is an important quality aspect from a staff perspective. Today, more are satisfied with the premises and many of those interviewed describe how they constantly try to adapt the internal environment to the children's needs, conditions and interests. The staff often divide the children into smaller groups and work in a more structured manner.

In total, the evaluation shows that the reform and those earlier requirements that the curriculum placed on the pre-school have not resulted in any major changes in regard to pre-school's frameworks and conditions. Neither were any extra supplements in the form of economic resources connected to the reform, and over the last ten years there have been only marginal changes in the question of the size of children's groups, number of personnel and access to college educated staff.

The previous national evaluation of pre-schools showed that there were variations in different regards *between* municipalities, but above all, *within* municipalities. Pre-schools within the same municipality often worked under different conditions including varying sizes of children's groups, the design of the premises and the possibilities to recruit educated pre-school teachers. Pre-schools located in socially challenged areas often had more difficulties in carrying out their assignment in a satisfactory manner.

These variations between municipalities and pre-schools in regard to frameworks and conditions are thought to remain. When municipalities allocate resources, it is relatively unusual with supplemental resources based on social differences, and when these exist, the compensatory share is often a small percentage of the pre-school's budget.

Seen from an international perspective we can state that equality within the Swedish pre-school is at a high level in many regards.²¹ Despite this, the evalu-

²⁰ Swedish National Agency for Education (2007a) *Barn och personal i förskola 2007*.
www.skolverket.se

²¹ Bertram, T. & Pascal, C. (2002) *Early Years Education: An International Perspective*. London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority; OECD (2006)

ation shows certain deficiencies as seen in relation to the ambitions that exist in the governmental supervisory documents. Certain municipalities, especially in major urban areas, have, however, tried to counteract such deficiencies through allocation of more comprehensive supplemental resources to pre-schools that work under poorer conditions.

2.4 Increased assessment of the individual child's development

One result from the previous national evaluation was that both municipalities and pre-schools sometimes had difficulties in discerning goals to strive towards and goals to attain and how goal attainment can be assessed in pre-schools and schools. Today, the results indicate that awareness has increased among management, principals and staff regarding the fact that the pre-school's curriculum only contains goals to strive towards and that the results of individual children shall not be evaluated.

But at the same time, the governance of municipalities of pre-schools indicates another direction. The use of individual development plans (IUP) in pre-school has increased substantially since the previous evaluation, despite the fact that neither the curriculum nor any other provision states any requirements for establishing IUPs in pre-school.²² In nearly half of the country's municipalities and in two-thirds of the municipalities in major urban regions, there are central decisions to introduce IUP in all pre-schools. When the municipal survey was sent out in connection with the previous national evaluation, barely one-tenth of the municipalities had decided to introduce IUP in pre-schools.

One-third of the municipalities have also developed joint templates for what the individual development plans shall contain. Often, many aspects of children's development are addressed in the plans in accordance with existing templates. The most common are children's social and language development. From the case studies, it has been shown that it is complicated to use IUP in pre-schools. Many pedagogues and principals are doubtful or skeptical, especially when pre-schools and schools shall have a joint template for IUP. These doubts are related to difficulties with confidentiality, but it is mainly described as a difficult balancing act to use IUP without assessing the individual child's development. The fact that there are such difficulties with IUP in pre-schools has been noted in previous research.

²² On the other hand, since January 2006 there have been provisions with requirements for individual development plans in compulsory school.

The assessments in the plans tend to, in certain cases, be grade-like in contradiction to national directives stating that an individual child's performance shall not be evaluated and assessed. The development plans also contain evaluations of a child's personal characteristics, which is in opposition to the general recommendations for the individual development plans that are aimed at compulsory school.²³

Another clear result is that the utilisation of diagnostic and assessment materials, which focus on the individual child's development, has increased in pre-schools. The majority of these materials are connected to the municipalities' efforts in language and language development, an area that is prioritised both in the school plans and in the municipalities' investments in competence development. A consequence of this, which is sometimes revealed in the case studies, is that the staff have become more observant about how children develop linguistically, but also that the material, in practice, means that the individual child's performance has become the object for assessment. The latter has also been given attention by the Swedish National Agency for Education's education inspectorate, which in several reports have pointed out that both IUP and different assessment materials must be handled with major awareness and caution, which also places major demands on pre-school management and the pedagogical leadership.²⁴ There is also material that indicates that the pre-school's school preparatory role has been strengthened. In close to two-thirds of the municipalities, pre-schools use diagnostic materials for children's reading development. Case studies show that diagnostic and assessment materials are used in different ways in different municipalities and pre-schools. Certain municipalities/pre-schools apply selective use in regard to diagnostics and formulating action programs for children in need of special support. In other municipalities/pre-schools, the materials are generally used for all children, even those without noticeable problems or difficulties. There are also differences regarding whether the parents are informed. Sometimes parents are informed that the child has been subject to diagnostic testing but sometimes the material is used without the parents' knowledge.

The evaluation consequently also shows an increase in the identification and assessment of the individual child's development based on the concept of what children should be able to do at certain ages. This development can probably partially be associated to the introduction of the curriculum and the increased

²³ Vallberg-Roth, A-C. & Månsson, A. (2008) Individuella utvecklingsplaner som uttryck för reglerad barndom – likriktning med variation. *Pedagogisk forskning i Sverige*, nr 2/2008

²⁴ Swedish National Agency for Education (2006) *Utbildningsinspektion i Gnesta kommun*. Inspektionsrapport 2006:80 Stockholm: Swedish National Agency of Education; Swedish National Agency for Education (2007e) *Utbildningsinspektion i Gotlands kommun*. Inspektionsrapport 53-2006:3378. Stockholm: Swedish National Agency for Education

emphasis on children's learning, but the increased usage of assessment materials and individual plans are also a part of a larger international trend.²⁵

Another way to study and follow the children is to document their development and learning, something that is also emphasised in the pre-school curriculum. In the OECD report, "Starting Strong II", two different curriculum traditions are described, which can be discerned internationally. Within one of the traditions, school-like content and methods are introduced in pre-school.²⁶ In those countries where this tradition is strong, quality control is based on what is in regard to the child's learning of clear goals and tests of previously gained knowledge and proficiency.²⁷ Several researchers are critical and question the benefits of these tests for various reasons. For example, studies show that the child's cognitive abilities are primarily strongly influenced by the home environment and the parents' socio-economic class, which is why it can be problematic to assess the quality of an operation by measuring a child's performance.²⁸

Within the other tradition, which is designated as the Nordic and Central European tradition, there is a strong belief that the pedagogy of the pre-school can influence the first years in school.²⁹ In several of the countries where this tradition is strong, what children learn is illustrated through documentation for the purpose of following a child's progress. But this documentation is also used as a starting point for joint reflection by the staff in regard to the child's learning.³⁰ One of the researchers who is responsible for the OECD study means that if the purpose is to develop the quality of pre-school, then the first named tradition is insufficient at the same time that he states that the majority of countries currently avoid testing younger children:

“Most countries avoid testing or noting young children, a position comforted by early childhood experts who argue that such tests are often poorly designed and developmentally inappropriate.”³¹

²⁵ Vallberg-Roth, A.-C. & Månsson, A. (2008) Individuella utvecklingsplaner som uttryck för reglerad barndom – likriktning med variation. *Pedagogisk forskning i Sverige*, nr 2/2008

²⁶ OECD (2006) p 61. Among the 20 OECD-countries in the study, this tradition is found in, amongst others, Australia, Canada, France, Ireland, Holland, Great Britain and the USA.

²⁷ OECD (2006), p 141.

²⁸ Berliner, D. C. (2005) Our Impoverished View of Educational Reform. *Teachers College Record*, August 02, 2005; Barton, P.E. & Coley, R.J. (2007) *The Family: America's Smallest School*. Princeton, New Jersey: Educational Testing Service.

²⁹ OECD (2006), p 59-61. Also see Martin-Korpi, B. (2005) The Foundation for Lifelong Learning. *Children in Europe*, Issue 9. 2005

³⁰ OECD (2006), p 141.

³¹ Bennett, J. (2008), p 7.

The municipal survey shows that pedagogical documentation is an area that more than half of the municipalities have chosen to prioritise in their work with competence development. Pedagogical documentation is for the purpose of making the children and the activities more visible as well as to evaluate the importance of the context of the learning and the learning environment to children's learning, play and cooperation.³² Pedagogic documentation can be seen as a collective evaluation instrument and differentiates from individual development plans and such documentation that is only directed at the individual.³³ All personnel and all principals that were interviewed in connection with the case studies have stated that they document the operation in their own departments or units. This can be compared with the previous evaluation when approximately three-fourths of those interviewed worked with documentation. The most common is that the staff establish portfolios for each child where it is possible to follow their development during their time in pre-school. Compared with the previous evaluation, today, it has become more common that the documentation forms the basis for joint reflection among the staff. In other words, the documentation has become pedagogical documentation. In the OECD report, "Starting Strong II", it was noted that the work with documentation, including inspiration from the municipal pre-schools in Reggio Emilia in Italy, had had an especially strong impact in Swedish pre-schools.³⁴ But pedagogical documentation has also begun to be increasingly used in pre-schools in other countries, where it is also discussed as an alternative to the use of different types of tests.³⁵

2.5 Narrowing the curriculum?

The result of the evaluation provides a composite image of the fact that children's language development is currently considered to be increasingly central in pre-school. Compared with the previous evaluation, language and language development is prioritised in considerably more school plans, especially in municipalities in major urban areas. Language and language development is also the area that the most municipalities prioritise in regard to competence development among

³² Lenz-Taguchi, H. (1997) *Varför pedagogisk dokumentation?* Stockholm: HLS Förlag.

³³ Elfström, I. (2005) *Varför individuella utvecklingsplaner? En studie om ett nytt utvärderingsverktyg i förskolan.* Stockholm: HLS Förlag

³⁴ OECD (2006)

³⁵ E.g. Smith, A.F. (2000) Reflective portfolios: Preschool possibilities. *Childhood Education*, 76(4), 204-208; Horm-Wingard, D.M. (2002) The Reggio Emilia approach and accountability assessment in the United States. In Fu, V.R., Stremmel, A.J. & Hill, L.T. (Eds) *Teaching and learning: Collaborative exploration of the Reggio Emilia approach.* Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Merrill Prentice Hall; Solley, B.A. (2007) On Standardized Testing. *Childhood Education*. Fall 2007 s 31-37.

personnel. Case studies also show that the work with language development is especially emphasised in the descriptions of how pre-schools have worked within the curriculum area, “development and learning”. Language development is also the focus of many individual development plans and in those diagnostic and assessment materials that are used at an increasing number of pre-schools. It is also an area where it is common with efforts for children in need of special support.

At the same time that the majority of the areas in the curriculum have had a relatively fast and broad impact in pre-school, we can consequently see a development where, in regard to the area, development and learning, especially in the municipalities, a large number of these prioritise the work with language and language development with the justification that over the long-term, this improves the achievement of goals in compulsory school. This increases the possibility to interpret the results in terms of a shifting of the pre-school’s assignment to increasingly involve acting as a preparation for compulsory school. The question is whether the strong prioritisation of one area in the curriculum is being made at the expense of the assignment to promote children’s all-around development? International studies have brought attention to such developments in other countries where “narrowing the curriculum” has become a more common pattern in pre-school and school.³⁶ The increased use of tests has also contributed to such a development where teachers focus on things that they know will be tested (“teach to the test”).³⁷ This is a development that is strong, primarily in English and French speaking countries. Several comprehensive studies of primary schools in England show, however, that a stronger focus on the key areas, reading, writing and arithmetic among 5–7 year-olds with accompanying national tests seems to have no positive effect on the students’ knowledge development.³⁸

The Nordic countries have, up to now, had another tradition and another perspective. In the report, Starting Strong II, pre-schools and pre-school systems were compared within 20 OECD countries. There, the development was described against a more narrow discourse and an increased focus on school preparation goals. In the report, the importance of broad general goals was emphasised:

³⁶ Set ex Frost, J.L. (2003) *Bridging the Gaps: Children in a Changing Society*. Paper presented at the ACEI Annual Conference in Phoenix, Arizona, April 2003; Kenny, B. (2006) Schools Narrowing Their Curriculums, *School Library Journal*, May 2006:17

³⁷ Solley, B.A. (2007)

³⁸ Harlen, W. (2007) *The Quality of Learning: assessment alternatives for primary education*. Primary Review Research Survey 3/4. University of Bristol; Tymms, P. & Merrel, (2007) *Standards and Quality in English Primary Schools Over Time: the national evidence*. Primary Review Research Survey 4/1. University of Durham. Whetton, C., Ruddock, G. & Twist, L. (2007) *Standards in English Primary Education: the international evidence*. Primary Review Research Survey 4/2. National Foundation of Educational Research.

“In the early childhood field, an instrumental and narrow discourse about readiness for school is increasingly heard. Faced by this challenge, it seems particularly important that the early childhood centre should become a community of learners, where children are encouraged to participate and share with others, and where learning is seen as primarily interactive, experiential and social. Learning to be, learning to do, learning to learn and learning to live together are each important goals for young children.”³⁹

The Swedish curriculum for pre-school is characterised by just such broad general goals. The results show that the curriculum has had a strong impact and contributed to development and more in-depth work within the curriculum's different objective areas. The results also show that the work with evaluation has developed wherein different evaluation models are used parallel in order to provide a broad and nuanced image of the pre-school and where methods have been developed for evaluations against the goals to strive towards. Children's motivation and interest for what the pre-school offers is often in focus when pre-schools are evaluated. The evaluation is also used as a basis to change and develop the work. Through pedagogical documentation, the pre-school activities and the children's development have been made visible. The starting point for such documentation is that children's development and learning are not regarded as isolated but put into an additional context where the child group, the environment, and the approach of the staff have major significance.

At the same time there are several results that point in another direction. The pre-school has gained increased importance as a preparation for school, and the assignment has become narrower with a larger focus on language development. Children's development, performance and proficiencies are being identified and assessed to an increasing extent. This development is hardly in line with the reform's intentions and is in opposition to the curriculum tradition, which in an OECD context, is designated as the Nordic model and where Sweden is used as a good example. Consequently, the evaluation shows a complex and somewhat contradictory image where the educare model lives on and is being developed at the same time as the Swedish pre-school, in certain regards, is moving closer to another curriculum concept.

³⁹ OECD (2006) p 221

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