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# Preschool Democracy And Children's Choice-Making

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## Abstract

*This paper concerns how and when teachers create opportunities for children's choice-making in preschool. The empiric data, which consists of interviews with six preschool teachers and observations from two preschool departments in Sweden, is analysed from a critical didactic perspective. My focus is on how teachers handle*

*the relation between children as individuals and as a group. I have found that most choices that teachers present are made individually by the children, and that the teachers experience dilemmas concerning this individualisation. Another finding is that the children in the study tend to choose activities with other children of the same sex, when possible. This raises interesting questions about how teachers work with gender equality in relation to children's influence and choices.*

## Introduction

Preschools in Sweden have for many years been closely linked to the development of the democratic society. This is especially the case with democracy in the sense of creating equal opportunities for different groups. In the 1970s there was a considerable increase in the number of preschools in Sweden, and a main motive for this was the equality between men and women. Women were the supposed to have the same opportunities to work outside the home as men (Persson, 1998). Giving all children possibility to attend preschool is also a means to provide children with equal opportunities in life. Today many schools are dealing with problems that are related to segregation and exclusion, which bring the issue of equal rights for children to the fore.

The discussion about democracy and preschool has not only been about the interest of the child and the family but also about the interest of society. From a societal point of view, public child-raising means that it is not only up to each family, which norms and values the children will incorporate. Preschools have for a long time been engaged in citizenship education, with aim that children grow up to embrace the appropriate democratic values (Socialstyrelsen, 1987:3). My research takes interest in the influence of children from a critical didactic perspective, and the research questions that have guided my writing of this paper is: What opportunities do teachers create for children's decisions and choices in preschool? What implications do the teachers' practices regarding choice-making have for preschool democracy in a wider sense?

## The case study

In my case study, I investigate the work that preschool teachers do to enhance children's influence and participation. The study includes two preschool departments at different preschools in urban, multicultural environments. At one of the departments, Orion, there are 18 children with ages between 4 and 5 years old. There are nine girls and nine boys, and half of the children have a first language other than Swedish. Three teachers work at Orion. Some days they have extra help from other personnel, one special teacher and one language teacher who works with the Arabic speaking children. At the other preschool department, Pegasus, there are 20 children between 1 and 5 years old. Nine of the children are girls and eleven are boys. Two of the children speak Swedish as their first language. There are four teachers, but one of them only works part time since she is also studying at the university. The empiric material was collected in 2008 and 2009. First, the teachers were interviewed about their conception of influence and on their work to enhance children's influence. After that, in the spring of 2008, I did participant observations at Orion and Pegasus. The observations were registered with field notes and video camera. In the spring of 2009, when I had organised and begun to analyse my material, I let the teachers read some of my material and comment on it in a second series of interviews.

## The collective and its individuals – a theoretical base

A fundamental issue in theories on democracy is whether democracy should be directed towards individualism or collectivism. Liberal democracy focuses on the individual rights like autonomy and

freedom, while republican democracy emphasises the importance of common decision-making and participation rights for all citizens (Habermas, 1996; Jacobsson, 1999). Swedish democracy shows elements of both directions, an orientation towards individualism as well as towards collectivism. There is no homogenous definition of how democracy in Sweden is developing, since different ideals are apparent in different contexts (Jacobsson, 1999). Eva Forsberg (2000) studied student participation in her dissertation. She argues that the different interpretations of democracy should not be viewed as opposed to each other, rather as dialectically intertwined. Democracy implies interaction between individuals in a society, and therefore both directions are of importance. A Swedish governmental inquiry in 2000, however, expressed concerns about an increasing individualism, which puts a greater responsibility on the individual. This demands an increase in solidarity to prevent a spreading of egoism and loss of support for the weak (SOU 2000:1).

In the critical-constructive didactic theory developed by Wolfgang Klafki (1997; 2005), both the individual and the societal needs are regarded. According to Klafki, all education must strive towards enhancing children's abilities of self-determination, co-determination and solidarity, in order to change schools into more democratic institutions, and give children tools for living in the democratic society as active citizens. In my research I have taken note of Klafki's use of these three concepts. I use them as a frame of interpretation that includes different approaches to the relation between the individual and the collective, without viewing them as opposites.

Another theoretical inspiration comes from Moira von Wright (2000), and her development of a pedagogical relational perspective based on her readings of G. H. Mead. According to her relational theory, individuals express their subjectivity in interaction with others. It argues against an essential notion of subjectivity, where the subjectivity is defined by the characteristics and the background of individuals. The relational perspective has pedagogical implications since it encourages teachers to seek less for *what* the children are, and more for *who* they are in contextual interaction.

### **Choice-making - a part of children's participation**

Choices and decisions constitute a part of children's participation and influence in preschools. In the national preschool curriculum, it is stated that children shall have opportunities to take part in different kinds of decision-making (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1998). *Deciding* or *choosing* are also commonly used definitions when influence is being exemplified (see e.g. Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). In my case study, which the empiric data in this paper is taken from, I investigate a variation of methods in the teachers' work with enhancing children's participation. When I have asked the teachers to describe this work, they give multifaceted descriptions. Their efforts to let the children exert influence are in no aspect homogenous. Creating possibilities for children's active choice-making is only one part of their work. I have focused specifically on choices and decisions in this paper, in order to discuss the questions which have appeared when I have observed choice-making in the preschools. These are questions about gender and individualism. I highlight these issues because of the interesting relation between children's possibilities for choice-making in preschool and democracy in a wider sense, where equal rights, solidarity and gender equality are emphasised. Choices and decisions are treated similarly here. The reason for this is that, although there is a slight difference in significance between the two words, in the pedagogical practice it appears to be hardly any difference at all between them. When the teachers actively let the children decide, it is usually presented as choices. In this discussion of choices that children make, I only consider the situations where the teachers initiate the choice-making, and where there is an interaction between children and teachers. Johansson (2003) stresses the difference between when teachers let children express their opinions, and when the teachers actively ask for the children's opinions. This difference is something that I also regard in my work. Teachers have a responsibility to actively invite children into situations where democracy is practiced, to make sure that all children have the chance to get involved in experiences of democracy.

In most cases, the choice-making that teachers initiate agrees with one of the following patterns: 1) a few alternatives within a structured context, 2) a proposal, which the child can choose to do or not, and 3) open questions like 'What do you want to do?' where teachers want the children to come up with suggestions.

An example of the first type of choice-making is when a small group of children at Pegasus vote about which storybook they want the teacher to read at storytime. When the youngest children at Pegasus are sleeping, the older children usually listen to a story while resting. Another example of the first kind,

which occurs several times in both preschool departments, is when the children are painting and they can choose what colours they want to use.

The second kind of choice-making is when teachers suggest activities, but it is up to the children whether they participate or not. One day during playtime at Orion, a few boys are playing loudly with cushions. One of the teachers suggests that they go outside and play, which they happily do. Some of the other children also wish to go outside, and in the end about half of the children stay inside while the others play in the yard. At Pegasus, one day there are only four children in the department because of the Easter holidays. Then the children can choose whether they want to participate in the activities that the adults are engaged in, like baking, shopping and making pictures to be used in circle-time. This day, the teachers commented to me that it is easier to let the children be a part of activities like shopping when there are only a few children.

The last kind is also the least common. Then the teachers ask open questions. At Orion this kind of questions is mainly occurring in a specific context, when the children work together in small groups. In one group, the teacher sometimes asks the children to come up with suggestions about how they wish to do things. For example, the children have painted full body self-portraits, in the size of themselves, and the teacher asks what the children wish to do with them. When the children don't say anything, she changes method and gives the children suggestions about what they can do with the portraits. At Pegasus, the most common situation where the teachers ask this kind of questions is after the older children's storytime after lunch. Then the teachers ask the children what they want to do, and the children can come up with suggestions on activities.

### **Gendered choices**

Every time, when the older children at Pegasus could choose activities after their storytime, the boys chose to play with the construction material lego. The girls chose other activities, like painting, or playing games with an adult. When I asked the teachers at Pegasus, they confirmed that the boys very often choose to play with lego. This drew my attention towards gender roles in preschool, and how freedom of choice possibly could obstruct the deconstruction of gender stereotypes. Sometimes the teachers even encouraged gendered choices when presenting choices to the children. One afternoon, when the boys had been louder than usual, the teacher Barbara wanted to part the boys and gave them two alternatives to choose from.

Barbara: 'Now you can choose what to play.'

Ali: 'I know!'

Barbara: 'Wait a moment. Boys, two of you can play here in the big room, and two in the small room.'

Leon: 'I want to play here.'

Ali: 'I want to play with lego.'

Barbara: 'Who wants to stay here with Leon?'

After hesitating for a few seconds, Mohsen says: 'I want to.'

Barbara: 'Okay, then the two of you [Leon and Mohsen] stay here, and the two of you [Ali and Erik] go to the small room.' The boys get up from the floor, Erik and Ali leave the room, Mohsen and Leon go to the bags that hang on the wall, which they want to play with.

Barbara: 'Girls, what do you want to do?'

*– field notes from Pegasus 080514*

In this situation, the teacher not only divided girls from boys, but also directed two of the boys towards an activity that in this context reproduces gender stereotypes, lego. (The lego is the only activity available in the small room). This is of course all well meant, since she suggests activities that the children usually choose, and the children will then most likely agree with her suggestions.

I found other situations which also gave example of how the children tended to choose activities according to gender. When the boys at Orion played loudly with the cushions, one teacher suggested that they would go outside, which they did. On this occasion, it was up to each child whether they wanted to play outside or not, but it was mainly (with some exceptions) boys who were asked directly if they wanted to. And in the end, all the boys except one chose to play outside. All the girls except one stayed inside. One more girl wanted to go outside, but was asked not to, since it according to the teacher would take her a long time to get dressed. When I asked the Orion teachers on how they experience gender roles in their group, they confirmed that most boys like to play outside, and the girls prefer to play inside. They

also told me that gender was something they focused on particularly at the moment, but they found it hard to get the children not to choose gender stereotypical activities.

One of the teachers at Pegasus, Sophie, expresses a related dilemma. She feels that some children get 'stuck' in certain activities, and need help to find alternatives. As a teacher, Sophie feels that she has to stimulate the development of the children by introducing other activities than the ones the children normally choose.

*When we let them choose, maybe we should choose what they can choose from, maybe three, four things and then they can choose between them. Maybe they shouldn't choose from twenty things, but we could limit the choice so that they still feel that they have chosen, but we have to look at what they need. And what they like too, of course, but sometimes they need other things.*

– Interview with Sophie, Pegasus 080116

The dilemma that Sophie describes is that what the children want is not always what is 'best' for them. At the same time as children need to feel that they can influence their activities, they need to be introduced to new things to develop a variety of experiences.

### **Individual and cooperative choice-making**

In the interviews, teachers from both preschool departments express concerns regarding the independence of the children. They are afraid that children do not feel free to choose according to their own wishes, without taking the opinions of other children into account.

*Even if we don't steer them, maybe the friend says 'ride the bike', but maybe you don't feel like riding the bike yourself, but you want to do like your friend. And I mean, it doesn't matter if you ask for a game, and you ask them in turn, you really have to watch out in which turn you ask them. Because if you ask a leader first, many other will say the same. And I think it's a pity. And if you ask them first, they don't know, but when you have asked them all, they know... They like to step back and listen to others.*

– Interview with Lena, Orion 080107

Independence and self-determination appear to be of central importance in children's choice-making according to the teachers. In the data from my observations, over 70 % of the choices that children make (initiated by teachers) are made individually. When it is circle time at Pegasus, for example, it is common that each child can choose a song that they want to sing. In both departments, choices about which activities to take part in or where to play, are also made individually, as are choices about which colours to use when painting and other similar choices. The teachers sometimes ask questions about what clothes the children want to wear or what food they want to eat, which are of course also individual choices. At Orion, some of the choices that the children make together concern what book to read at story time, and which games to play at circle time. At Pegasus, examples of common decision-making are when the teacher asks whether the children want circle time or not, if they want to sing at circle time, and which playground they want to go to. In a few cases these decisions are made by voting or by discussing alternatives, but in most cases the first suggestion that comes up is the one that they do. One reason might be that it is difficult for a teacher to control a discussion between children. Anne, a teacher at Orion, describes feeling a loss of control in a situation when she wanted the children to make a decision together. The decision was concerning a game that they played together, but in the end Anne broke up the discussion because she felt that it got out of hand.

In my observations I noted that when a question is asked to the whole group of children, there are a few children who are always quick to answer. In such contexts, there are other children that rarely make their voices heard. This is something that the teachers are aware of and they wish to give all children the same conditions to be able to influence the decisions. Here is an example of how that can be done.

*If you come to a nap time [the older children do not sleep at nap time but are having other activities like reading] for example, and I say 'Today you can decide, what are we going to do?' I can tell you now who first says what we are going to do. And if I don't attend to that, the shy or insecure children will*

*never have a say. /.../ So I tell one of the children, who I know would like to say something, now you have time to think of a game or something, or a book that you want me to read. /.../ The ones that always are first, they don't get the chance then.*

– Interview with Birgitta, Pegasus 080219

Birgitta's example shows that individualisation is a means to make sure that everybody can make their voice heard, even those who don't like to speak in a larger group. Dividing the large group into smaller groups is another method for making it easier for all children to have a say, a method that is practiced in both preschool departments. Many of the teachers think that it is difficult to get every child to say what they want. At Orion this is especially the case with the 4-year-old children who just moved to Orion from the other department in the preschool, where the younger children are. The teachers feel that some children are not at all interested in decision-making, but that they become more interested as they grow older, and as they watch the older friends. In Pegasus, where there are children from 1 to 5 years old, the teachers describe their understanding of how children's ability to influence the activities in preschool is stimulated. This includes getting the chance to make choices of their own, and watching other children making choices and decisions. It constitutes an interesting contrast to the focus on the individual. Children are assumed to learn making choices, and also to be motivated to make choices, by the example of others, at the same time as teachers emphasise the individuality in the choices that are made.

## **Conclusion**

My interest has in this paper been focused on situations in preschool when teachers create opportunities for children's choice-making. I have asked how their efforts are related to preschool democracy in a wider sense. My results show that when the children choose activities, there is a tendency towards gendered choices. Teachers even risk encouraging choices that reproduce gender stereotypes, since they want to suggest activities that they believe that the children like. Another result is that most choices are made individually by the children. This is an expression for an intention that the teachers have, that children should choose for themselves and not by what others choose. Individual choices are also a method to make sure that everybody gets a chance to make their voices heard.

The results indicate that the context has a large influence on children's choice-making. With a relational approach (von Wright, 2000), it is questionable whether it is possible, or even desirable, that children make choices unaffected by others. However, it is still desirable to widen the possibilities of choices. The influence from other children could then be recognized, without being 'good' or 'bad' in itself. The relational perspective suggests that the subject is formed and expressed in interaction. Encounters with other people with different opinions, is a way to grow as subjects. The importance of difference is a central assumption, and difference is also a central element in democracy. When related to democracy, the relational perspective implies that dialogue and interaction are essential in practising democratic decision-making.

There are however very few examples in my empiric data, where children get the opportunity to make decisions together in dialogue with others. Klafki (1997; 2005) advocates a combination of self-determination, co-determination and solidarity in his construction of critical didactics. In the preschool departments in my study, self-determination, and making choices for ones-self seems to be of greater importance than co-determination, making choices together. This mirrors a view of democracy that is oriented towards the individual. In the light of my results, an interesting question is how to create a balance between the two ends on the bipolar scale from individualism and collectivism in preschool democracy. Sometimes children are assumed by the teachers to learn from each other, but it is in larger extent a matter of imitation than cooperation. In the words of von Wright (2000), the pedagogical practices of choice-making in the preschool departments represent a more punctual than relational perspective of the children. The study also raises questions about how to prevent the reproduction of gender stereotypes and at the same time recognize children's own choices. Gendered choices is another expression of how children's choices are situated in a context, their choices are not made from a pure and essential individuality. Expectations of what it means to be a girl or a boy affect the decisions children make about their own activities. When these questions are regarded in the preschool practice, they could benefit from a relational perspective, which emphasises interaction and takes intersubjectivity into account.

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