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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN SWEDEN: THE MARKET CURRICULUM 2000-2013?

***La educación de la primera infancia en Suecia:
¿El currículo de mercado 2000-2013?***

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood education in Sweden has long had an international reputation for being a systemic and integrated approach to children's needs, a family model of preschool centers and an interest in the holistic development and well-being of children. However, traces of this reputable past are hard to discern today as the neo-liberal agenda for education that is influencing education around the world has impacted Sweden. The changes in Sweden, however, have successively occurred since the 1980s, due to the failure of the Swedish economy to provide the necessary surplus to support the extensive social and welfare reforms that previously gave Sweden its international reputation. The effects of the neo-liberal agenda along with the reforms implemented by the Social Democratic government and the Conservative government have had and continue to have an impact on early childhood education in Sweden. As more and more governments are faced with economic

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problems, the case of Sweden and the measures taken by both the Social Democrats and the Conservative parties over the last few decades make a study of the Swedish reforms of early childhood education relevant and interesting for other countries. In this article early childhood education in Sweden will be presented and discussed from a historical and a conceptual perspective, focusing on its objectives and features and explaining the shifts made by political parties vis-à-vis early childhood education in Sweden.

KEY WORDS: Early childhood education, Sweden, History of education, Educational reform.

RESUMEN

La Educación Infantil en Suecia ha tenido una gran reputación internacional, por tratarse de una aproximación sistémica e integrada a las necesidades de los niños, un modelo familiar de centros prescolares y por su interés en el desarrollo holístico e integral de los niños. Los cambios recientes acaecidos en la educación en Europa y en otros lugares, junto con las reformas emprendidas por el gobierno conservador que ha estado en el poder desde 2006 en Suecia han tenido y continúan teniendo impacto en la educación de la primera infancia. En este artículo se presenta y se discute la educación infantil en Suecia desde una perspectiva histórica y conceptual y se debaten las implicaciones que dichas perspectivas tienen en la educación infantil de este país en la actualidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Educación infantil, Suecia, Historia de la educación, Reforma educativa.

INTRODUCTION

«Childhood and youth are ends
in themselves, not stages»
Friedrich NIETZSCHE
(1875/1980: 93)¹

In Sweden early childhood education is undergoing change as is the education system in its entirety. The change that is taking place can be attributed to three main reasons. Firstly, the neo-liberal agenda, a powerful

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), German philosopher, classical scholar, critic of culture.

factor in the re-structuring of the concept of education itself elsewhere, has also influenced early childhood education (O'DOWD, 2009). Secondly, the present Conservative government has exerted an influence on the provision of education, opening up this sector to widespread privatization and such providers as risk-capital investors and other for-profit organizations (JOHANSSON and O'DOWD, forthcoming). Thirdly, the values and goals of the education system that had been the main reason for Sweden's international reputation have been abandoned by the Social Democrats. The changes that have taken place would have been inconceivable prior to 1980, but are in many ways reminiscent of the far past when education was reserved for the elite and the privileged. In this article contemporary early childhood education will be presented and discussed, first from a historical perspective and then from a conceptual perspective, focusing on three different contexts where theory and practice as regards childhood and the child have been differently perceived and practiced.

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1.1. The far past

The need for childcare provision arose with industrialization and the growing numbers of individuals who sought gainful employment in Swedish cities. In the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, childcare provision was supported by donations and philanthropy. Lohmander (2004) maintains that middle class women's work was of utmost importance for the provision of childcare:

«The first “pre-school teachers” appeared during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in a context of industrialization and urbanization. Whereas, according to prevailing views, middle class women were not supposed to work outside the home, single mothers and poor mothers did not have a choice. They were obliged to work for their living and had to take whatever job was offered to them. Their need for child care provision was often met by unmarried middle-class women, who became the first “pre-school teachers”. These teachers were expected to think of their work as charitable work, as a vocation or inner calling, meaning in effect low pay or very often no pay at all» (LOHMANDER, 2004: 23).

Westberg (2011) documents the importance of fees and interest revenues for the economy of “infant schools, day nurseries and free kindergartens,” which were the main early care and education programs in Sweden during the period 1845–1943. The first infant schools were established in Sweden during the 1830s, day nurseries in the 1850s and free kindergartens in the 1900s.

Pre-schools and pre-school teacher training programmes sprang from this charitable work of middle class women. At the beginning of the twentieth century, when the training of teachers became more formalized, the development that took place was inspired by the philosophy of Friedrich Froebel, whose ideas had been adopted by many kindergarten leaders throughout the country. The impact of Froebel on Swedish pre-schools and teacher training cannot be over-emphasized (Johansson, 1992, 1994). It is mirrored in the concept “kindergarten leader”, which was chosen rather than that of kindergarten teacher in order to emphasize the basic educational philosophy of Froebel. These leaders were indeed different from traditional school teachers in that they were expected to act as role models, as “intellectual mothers”, and to lead both the child and the mother rather than conducting formal teaching (Kihlström, 1998). Personal qualities were key factors when it came to selecting kindergarten leaders (Tallberg Broman, 1995). It was not until 1955 that the official title was changed from kindergarten leader to pre-school teacher (LOHMANDER, 2004: 24).

An important person at this time was Ellen Key, a school teacher, feminist and author, who published *The Century of the Child* in 1900. In it Key describes her philosophy of education and nurturing:

The central points in Ellen Key’s thinking on education can be found in the chapter “Education” in *The Century of the Child*. The starting point is an individualistic view of education. Ellen Key quotes Goethe, who maintains that in every child there is something good from birth. She shares this opinion. She expresses her views on education in this way: “Allowing nature quietly and slowly to help itself, taking care only that the surrounding conditions help the work of nature; this is education” (1900, p. 107). Ellen Key’s aim for education is that each child will develop into a free and independent individual. But this is only one side of her system. There is another aspect: consideration for others. Already in the introduction to the chapter “Education” she explains that egoism on the part of the child is justified to a certain extent, but that it must be balanced by consideration for others. She says,

among other things: "The right balance must be kept between Spencer's definition of life as an adaptation to surrounding conditions, and Nietzsche's definition of it as the will to secure power." (1900, p. 119) Reflections on this problem of balance are the essential question in Ellen Key's system of education (LENGBORN, 2000: 10)².

Lengborn underlines that Key was a controversial person and her views on "the role of woman, marriage, culture, religion and politics became the subject of lively discussions in Sweden. Her radical ideas often encountered strong resistance. Time to time she was even the object of persecution. Her ideas on education, however, went largely unnoticed in contemporary Sweden and caused little debate (LENGBORN, 2000: 10). Her work received attention outside of Sweden, however, and she was called upon to lecture around the world, notably in Germany. Key's work was translated into nine European languages during her lifetime. In both the United States and the Soviet Union Key's work figured in the debate on education, referred to alongside the work of Dewey and Montessori.

In the late 1930s a consensus existed in educational and psychological circles that poverty is the result of individual shortcomings, rather than the result of societal dysfunction (O'DOWD, 1995, 2003, 2006). Similarly, the consensus was clear in the same circles that intelligence was hereditary, rather than being related to social factors. This view had severe consequences for society's responsibility for the poor and the conditions that existed in areas in which many poor had come to reside as Sweden industrialized. The pre-conditions for the rise of the Social Democratic party were in place with poverty and a social relief policy that underlined the perception of the poor as

² Lengborn (2000) stresses: «If we —with a perspective of nearly 100 years— look at her ideas on education, we find that development in certain respects has taken completely the opposite path to the one favoured by Ellen Key. She wanted a revival of the home in taking care of the children. In her native country the importance of the home in this respect has diminished and mothers have become involved in work outside the home to a far greater extent. Ellen Key furthermore argued that early education should take place in the home, with children beginning school at a later age. Quite the contrary has occurred. However, in a lot of other respects her ideas have been implemented, although again this has taken quite some time in her native Sweden. She emphasized the freedom and individuality of the child; she argued for equality in the home; she was opposed to corporal punishment; she fought for co-education and common schools for all children, regardless of the social class; she saw the activity of the child as central; she wanted the different teaching subjects to be co-ordinated into a comprehensive system with special classrooms for special subjects».

solely responsible for their poverty. Poverty, dire working conditions, inadequate housing and sanitary conditions gave rise to ill-health and short life expectancy. All of these conditions affected children most. Some were left unattended. Others were abandoned³. And others were never born, due to illegal abortion which had harmful effects on the mothers.

Given the rise of the Social Democratic Party and the important role that Alva Myrdal⁴ assumed within the party as regards childcare and education, it is understandable that Key and her views became a source of controversy. Alva Myrdal and her husband Gunnar published *The Population Crisis* in 1936, in which they clarified their views on poverty and the future of Sweden, given the decreasing birth rates at the time, while advancing their support for forced sterilization of the «unfit». In 1935 Alva Myrdal founded the Social Pedagogy Seminar, a pre-school teacher training college. Inspired by new psychological theories of child development and aspirations towards the modernization of Sweden and a welfare state, Alva Myrdal insisted that the «new» Sweden needed a new education (MYRDAL, cited in KÄRRBY, 2000: 7). What was new and different about her training institute were the definitions and perspectives: «the somewhat religious and authoritarian approach to education of the Froebel Movement conflicted with the radical secular and anti-authoritarian approach of Alva Myrdal» (JOHANSSON, 1994: 113). The «new» Sweden in Alva Myrdal's vision required state-run and supported «large children's nurseries», enabling mothers to work on the labor market and relieving their children of the detrimental effects of being fostered by «unfit» mothers⁵. In retrospect it is apparent that Myrdal's thoughts have highly influenced development in Sweden, not least as regards

³ In Sweden children, whose mother could not care for them, were left by their mothers with those who were called «angel-makers». Other abandoned children were taken in by the church or the county, which had the right to auction them off to the lowest bidders as hired help. Needless to say, the pre-conditions for these children were affected by the practice of placing them with those who offered the lowest bid for the sustenance.

⁴ Alva and Gunnar Myrdal were highly influential members of the Social Democratic Party. Alva Myrdal was especially interested in education reform and was an influential member of the 1946 School Commission.

⁵ *The Population Crisis* is an alarming read, where the Myrdal's air their views of the «unfit» and made the case for their support of the law on forced sterilization. This law and the consequences for individuals who were forcefully sterilized in the following years is a dark chapter in Swedish history. That which is even more alarming is that the Myrdal's opinions were not considered controversial at the time, as evidenced by the fact the sterilization law was passed without greater debate.

the provision of «large children's nurseries» and the predominance of psychological theories of child development.

In 1945 teacher training establishments received state grants for the first time (TALLBERG, 1995). Since the 1940s early childhood education has developed in line with the increasing need for the provision of childcare services, within the framework of the Swedish welfare state.

With hindsight it might be proposed that the most controversial views that Key held were her demand that the State legislate against woman and child labor and her insistence that the mothers were the most important persons in the life and fostering of their children. It should be noted that Sweden in the late 19th century was not the rich country that it is today. The transformation that took place was to a large extent the result of a class struggle and a deep-seated discontent with the unjust distribution of wealth and privilege that was prevalent in Sweden.

One of the solutions implemented by the Social Democratic government is what came to be called the «Swedish model», which according to Lindbeck (1975), provided Sweden with a reputation as a «laboratory for economic and social experiments» (LINDBECK, 1975). Moreover, Lindbeck (1974) described development in Sweden in the following manner: «Growth and industrialization in Sweden during the last one hundred years is an example of successful export-led or “export-based” growth in the context of a private enterprise economy with a remarkable innovative capacity of private entrepreneurs and the rather “liberal”, market-oriented economic policy —combined with an elaborate, publicly operated infra-structure in transportation, education, health, etc.— and later on a rather comprehensive social security system» (LINDBECK, 1974: 4). As far as early childhood education is concerned, the «Swedish model» can be traced in one of the main principles for this sector, i.e., cooperation, both between children and personnel and between the home and the daycare

1.2. The near past

Until the middle of the 1980s the «Swedish model» was highly successful, but has since encountered a number of problems. In the late 1990s it was becoming apparent that a dismantling of the welfare state was in

progress, especially as regards the education and care sectors (O'DOWD and MIRON, 1997). In this dismantling process the Social Democratic Party was active. It should be noted that the Social Democratic model of a strong state government and a capitalistic economy was highly successful, keeping the Social Democrats in power for over 40 years. It was first in 1991 that the Social Democratic government was seriously challenged by the conservative parties. Among the many reforms introduced by the four center/right party coalition that came to power in 1991 were: organizational decentralization, privatization, and school choice. These reforms were implemented through free choice and a new curriculum, designed by the Conservatives, but implemented by the Social Democrats with broad consensus. The reform opened private schools, of which only a few existed prior to the reform. Miron describes this short, but intensive reform-intensive period, 1991-1994, as a «paradigm shift». The speed with which the many social and educational reforms were made and implemented by the Conservative government in this short period contrasts sharply with the manner in which previous Social Democratic governments have effectuated change, i.e., working slowly and effectively to test the reforms prior to implementation, engaging researchers to evaluate on-going reforms, adjusting and adapting measures to ensure success, while establishing a broad consensus throughout (HUSÉN, 1994).

Both the Social Democrats and the Conservatives have since the late 1970s and the early 1980s expressed concern regarding the efficiency and quality of the national education system. Miron maintains, however, that «the difference between them is the nature and the manner in which they wish to reform the education system» (MIRON, 1997: 130). Conservatives argue that democracy can only be preserved in a market economy, advocating the sale of state-owned companies and introducing market-like mechanisms in many public sectors. Viewing the education system as too large, complex and difficult to alter, the Conservatives have focused their attention on the private sector, with the school choice reform of 1992 as an example of this strategy. The school choice reform⁶ received criticism even before the Bill was passed⁷. However,

⁶ The so-called free choice reform was the result of the Government Bill on Freedom of Choice and Independent Schools (1991/92: 95). This Bill was approved by the Parliament in June 1992 and went into effect on July 1, 1992.

⁷ Criticism of this Bill was formulated in the Motion to the Parliament (1991/92:Ub62) presented by the Social Democratic Party in early June, 1992 and was supported by the Social Democrats and the Left Party, but the motion was defeated.

the fact remains that once the free choice and privatizations policies were put in place by the Conservative government, the Social Democrats did not alter these policies when they returned to power. Similar arguments such as those advanced above by the Conservative government in 1991 to promote the Government Bill on Freedom of Choice and Independent Schools (1991/92: 95) have been used by the Conservative government for the reforms that have been implemented since the coalition parties came into power in 2006 and were re-elected in 2010⁸. For all intents and purposes the Social Democratic party has been ineffectual when it has come to counter-acting the diverse reforms implemented by the Conservative government, limiting itself to opposing the reforms, but not providing alternatives. As had happened before, when the Social Democratic party was not in power, it seemed to lose its ability to be pro-active and reverted to being reactive only. The failure of the Social Democratic Party to win the 2006 and 2010 elections can be viewed as a result of voter discontent with the party's politics and the turbulence within the party itself⁹, which is reflected in the ineffectual politics and unclear political program that characterized the party in opposition. It should be noted, however, that the Social Democratic Party's success in the far past has been based on the manner in which they brought about change through the use of the profits from a market-oriented economic politics to finance social reform and welfare politics. It can come as no surprise that, when financial difficulties arise and profits decrease, Swedish politics is not as clearly distinguishable as an arena where there are two clear blocs, a right and a left bloc, and thus the dismantling of the Swedish welfare state becomes a task for both the Conservatives and the Social Democrats.

One of the changes the Social Democratic government made when it came back into power in 1994 was to decrease the amount of funding to independent schools, from the 85% stipulated in the Conservative government bill (1991/1992) to 75%. However, the laws passed during this period by the center/right coalition were not repealed, but remained in place when the Social Democratic government came back into power. A declining

⁸ Only four general elections (1976, 1979, 1991 and 2006) have given the centre-right bloc enough seats in Parliament to form a government.

⁹ Within the social Democratic party there have been conflicts as to which direction the Party should take, with a conflict arising as to whether the Party should support more traditional social Democratic values or whether it should «re-new» itself, i.e., adjust itself to the current political neo-liberal agenda. With the election of the new head of the Party, Stefan Lovén, it appears that the latter direction has been chosen. .

economy, rising unemployment, large external loans at home and international trends for privatization and reliance on market forces raised questions as to the future of the Swedish welfare state. The number of structural reforms the Social Democratic government undertook after returning to power provide evidence of a shift in politics, motivated by claims that such reforms are necessary to save the welfare state. The structural reforms included, among other things, re-organization and drastic cutbacks in the education and the daycare sectors:

«During the last few years the renowned Swedish welfare state has been undergoing a dismantling. The magnitude of the dismantling process and the pace at which it has been taking place has given rise to alarm. In the field of education, alarm has been voiced by parents, teachers and students alike, as a disproportionately large amount of the cutbacks have taken place in the field» (O'DOWD and MIRON, 1997: 1).

Against the background of the dismantling that has occurred in the field of education, Pramling-Samuelsson and Sheridan (2009) write:

The various reforms of the past few decades have prepared the way for integrating preschool into the Swedish educational system and producing a national curriculum for children ranging in age from 1 to 5 years (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998a). In Sweden, early childhood education has never been just a question of child-minding. Even for the youngest children, there have always been pedagogical intentions, and these have been strengthened by the preschool curriculum, especially as the national curriculum for preschool is linked to the curriculum for compulsory school (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998b). The aims are that the curricula should express a common view of knowledge, development and learning in the direction of the overall goals, in order to enhance quality throughout the education system (PRAMLING-SAMUELSSON and SHERIDAN, 2009: 135).

It is too soon to ascertain if, indeed, the goal of enhancing quality throughout the education system can be achieved through the reforms undertaken either during the last few decades or the last few years. A number of questions appear to be of importance, not the least of which is where these reforms will lead. What is clear, however, is that the neo-liberal discourse on education is apparent in the above, with its focus on quality, goal-steering,

and the assumption that the curriculum should express a common view of knowledge, development and learning in order to meet these goals. This new curriculum is interesting when seen in the light of Vallberg's work on the curriculum history of early childhood education.

1.3. Curriculum History of Early childhood education

Vallberg (2006) describes the curriculum history of early childhood education in Sweden for the period of 1840 to 2000, based on a broad definition of curriculum, using curriculum theory and gender theory. Her results show four gender-related concepts and codes, linked to the following periods of time:

- Curriculum of God, circa 1850 to 1890: The patriarchal code.
- Curriculum of the Good Home, circa 1890 to 1930/40: The sex-segregated common code.
- Curriculum of the Welfare State, circa the (1930/40) 1950s to the middle of the 1980s: The gender-neutral equality code.
- Curriculum of the Situated World Child, from the late 1980s to 2000: The pluralistic sex/gender code (VALLBERG, 2006: 94-95).

This brief account of childhood education in Sweden documents a re-direction the aims of early childhood education. First and foremost the reforms have displaced the emphasis previously placed on «equality», «democracy», and «solidarity» and replaced them with an emphasis on «efficiency», «quality» and «individual liberty», constituting a re-conceptualization of the child and early childhood education.

2. CONCEPTUALIZING THE CHILD

Constructions of «childhood» have historically been influenced by Rousseauian Naturalism, Romanticism, and Evangelicalism (FLEER, HEDEGAARD and TUDGE, 2009: 4). Later childhood was viewed in relation to wage-earning labor, giving rise eventually to what Henriks (1997: 35-36) terms «children of the welfare state». According to Henriks, modern childhood

was «legally, legislatively, socially, medically, psychologically, educationally and politically institutionalized», giving rise to what Kincheloe (2002) terms as the description of children in universal terms, a situation that Kincheloe rejects as simplistic, «undermining the diversity and complexity of childhood» (2002:76). Cannella and Kincheloe (2002) maintain that «childhood» is a cultural construction, and hence deserves to be studied in diverse contexts, making clear the varied conceptualizations that exist in different contexts. Moreover, it is timely and vital to scrutinize how the child and childhood is being represented through the powerful influence of policy development (NEWBURN, 1996; OPPENHEIN and LISTER, 1996; PARTON, 1996; PILCHER and WAGG, 1996; WINTER and CONNONLY, 1996), the children's rights movement (FRANKLIN and FRANKLIN, 1996), representations in art and popular print (HIGONNET, 1998), education, entertainment and advertising (KENWAY and BULLEN, 2001). Over and above the aforementioned, the corporate world «has actively used the construct of «childhood» to «create, sustain and legitimate a type of consumer ethic that has come to dominate the landscape of childhood imagination» (KINCHELOE, 2002: 42, cited in FLEER, HEDEGAARD and TUDGE, 2009: 5).

In the following section conceptualizations of the child and childhood will be presented in relation to several contexts, i.e., the legal context, the education context, the context of children themselves.

2.1. The legal context

Two models for conceptualizing the child have emerged in the western world: the protectionist model and the children's rights model (KELLY, 2005: 375). According to KELLY, neither of these models is an appropriate way in which to conceptualize the child: «Protectionism is paternalistic, essentialises the child, and denies the child a voice. Equally problematic, the children's rights model presumes the social desirability of the liberal individual, and emphasizes rights over relationships, and universal principles over concrete situations» (KELLY, 2005: 375)¹⁰. Using these arguments,

¹⁰ KELLY proposes a third way of conceptualizing the child in legal terms which is based on «feminist «ethic of care», as advanced by Carol GILLIAN (1982), among others.

Kelly puts forth a third model, based on a feminist «ethic of care»¹¹. This third model is based on the acknowledgement that children have needs and that they are both formed in and by their relationships to others. However, the acknowledgement of children's needs, can be seen historically to have provided space for the agendas of adults, rather than children:

«The more the needs of children become harnessed by specific campaigns, such as the desire to preserve marriage, or the goal of moving women out of the labor market, or the rights of fathers, the less possible it is to have a debate that starts with the standpoint of children. Adult agendas take over and children become symbols rather than real persons.» (SMART, NEALE and WADE, 2001: 22, cited in KELLY, 2005:384).

Of importance with Kelly's third model is the distinction between «caring for» and «caring about», especially as regards the practice of family law. Drawing on the work of Tronto (1989) and Smart (1995), Kelly (2005: 393) maintains:

«In Smart's view, "caring for" is almost entirely excluded from recognition as moral activity because it is perceived as "natural or instinctive" and not as a "reflexive, conscious form of choice and/or action"... "Caring about" is traditionally seen as an ethical stance and involves caring about such things as AIDS in Africa, war in the Middle East, or poverty in the Canada. In contrast, "caring for", often referred to as the "activity of care", is the actual act of caring, which might involve nursing sick people, feeding the poor, or looking after children. Smart argues that "in orthodox moral theory caring for is not seen as a moral activity, whilst caring about—which may not entail action—is"» (SMART, 1995: 177).

Kelly's third model acknowledges the child in a relational context, where life-affirming relationships, rather than legal or biological relationships, are of importance:

¹¹ GILLIAN's work questions KOHLBERG's theory (1984, 1958), which was based on the «universal voice of morality...Gilligan found that the women she studied had a distinct way of speaking about moral problems and describing the relationship between the other and the self. She also found that the voice that emanated from this group of women was different from the psychological descriptions of identity and moral development that dominated psychological literature. Gilligan began to connect the absence of this «different» voice from psychology to the absence of women in psychological research» (KELLY, 2005: 386).

«While protectionism and children's rights are based on universal and abstract notions of the child's (and the individual's) inherent «nature» or «best interests», an ethic of care takes a contextual approach to childhood, grounded in the concrete circumstances of each child's life. Smart and Neale have labelled this element of the ethic of care the “principle of actuality”» (SMART and NEALE, 1999: 192, cited in KELLY, 2005: 389).

Through the principle of actuality, the ethics of care can «prevent the emergence of universal assumptions about what is in children's best interests, and will allow for an analysis of the quality» of relationships (KELLY, 2005:389). This issue is driven home by West (1997), who maintains:

«[I]f . . . the act of caring for others to whom we are connected in some way is central to our moral lives, then our capacity for care should be at the center of our understanding of our public and legal, as well as private and personal, virtues, and specifically that it should be central to the meaning of legal justice» (WEST, 1997: 9 cited in KELLY, 2005:390).

An ethics of care, such as that proposed by Kelly (2005), necessitates that we recognize:

«Care at the centre of how we understand children. It would acknowledge the fundamental role that caregiving plays in children's lives and would give appropriate recognition to it and to those who provide it. In particular, it would give due recognition to the actual activity of care, and would support and protect those engaged in that work» (KELLY, 2005: 390).

2.2. The education context

2.2.1. From childcare to early childhood education

Of importance is the work of the 1968 Commission on Nursery Provision. At the time child care was provided mainly in three different forms: day care centers, play schools, and family day care homes. As the economy in Sweden flourished at this time, women:

«Were demanding gender equality, participation in working life and society on equal conditions, and they wanted to contribute to supporting the

family and have their own professional life outside the home. In no small part, they were assisted by a booming economy—since women were necessary on the labour market» (KORPI, 2007:22).

An important influence in this reform of daycare was Prime Minister Olof Palme, portrayed as «a radical and equality oriented new generation of politician in the Government» (KORPI, 2006: 23). The work of the Commission can be summarized as follows:

«A gigantic commission based on around 1000 pages of document was the foundation, ideologically, pedagogically and organisationally for the full-scale expansion of child care...The scientific foundation was based on Jean Piaget's [1896-1980] development psychology and Erik Homberger Eriksson's research in social psychology into the growing child. Work teams, children in mixed age groups, integration and normalization of children with functional disabilities, pedagogical dialogue, theme work, the importance of play, design of the premises, pedagogical materials and cooperation with parents... all were highlighted by the commission. The aim of this was to bring about a powerful democratization of activities for children, and introduce a progressive pedagogy for creating equivalent conditions for growing up» (KORPI, 2007: 24).

The work of the commission laid the ground for a common organisation to be known as the «pre-school»: «Organisationally, it could be run as a full-time or part-time pre-school, but the only distinguishing factor between these two forms was the time at which activities were provided during the day, and not their pedagogical content» (KORPI, 2007:25-26).

In 1972 the Commission's report was presented to Olof Palme, who received it positively. This became the starting point for legislation –the Pre-school Act– that came into force in 1975. Along with this reform of child care, other reforms were put into place to support families, notable is the expansion of general maternity allowance from six months to nine months and the transformation of general maternity allowance to parental insurance which included both parents.

The Curriculum for Pre-school was passed by the Swedish Parliament in 1998. It is a curriculum that explicitly identifies early childhood education

in Sweden as a systemic and integrated approach to children's needs, a family model of preschool centers and an interest in the holistic development and well-being of children. For many years the values and norms clearly stated in the curriculum for pre-school education have characterized Swedish childhood education, with a special emphasis on the importance of learning and play, democratic values, equity and a child-centered pre-school environment with cooperation between children's home and the pre-school. In the Curriculum for Pre-school child care is termed early childhood education, re-defined in accordance with the shift in responsibility for this sector from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education and Science on July 1, 1996.

Close study of pre-schools in Sweden confirms, according to Pramling-Samuelsson and Sheridan, this characterization of Swedish early childhood education:

«During the last few years, several evaluations of Swedish preschool have been carried out. Sweden was one of the 12 countries that the OECD (2001) evaluated in the project Starting Strong. One of their conclusions was that “democracy” could be seen even in the groups for young children, something which we have also found in our study. Today democracy and participation are seen as prerequisites for all kinds of learning at all ages. This can be related not only to the curriculum of preschool but also to the social policy that characterize it, low fees, accessibility and efforts to maintain good quality» (Regeringens proposition 2004:05/11; Skolverket, 2005) (PRAMLING-SAMUELSSON and SHERIDAN, 2009: 50).

The Swedish report compiled and sent to the OECD in conjunction with its study of child care in 12 OECD countries begins with the following statement:

«Child care in Sweden has been given high priority for nearly three decades and is one of the cornerstones of Swedish family policy. Reforms in the child care area have also been widely supported in the Swedish Riksdag. This has enabled implementation of a policy, whose guidelines were drawn up by the government at the beginning of the 70s and which has since then been subsequently developed—child care of high quality, expanded

with the aim of providing full coverage, with the municipalities as the main organisers and financed out of public funds» (OECD, 1999: 9).

Oberhuemer views the unified approach in the following manner:

«In Sweden, the focus up to 2001 was on early childhood education and care (0 to 6 years), but since then has been part of a unified approach to teacher education across the pre-school and school system, and early childhood professionals (*lärare för yngre åldrar*) may now also work in pre-school classes and the first grades in school» (OBERHUEMER, 2012: 125).

The curriculum for pre-school was revised in 2010, an initiative undertaken by the Conservative government. On the government website, the following explanation of the revised curriculum is given: The pre-school curriculum was revised in 2010 and now contains clearer objectives for children's development in language and mathematics, and in natural sciences and technology. The guidelines for staff responsibilities have been clarified, both at individual teacher level and at team level. New sections on monitoring, evaluation and development, and on the responsibilities of pre-school heads, have been added (SWEDISH MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND RESEARCH, 2011).

As indicated by the above, education reform has high priority for this Conservative government, encouraging widespread privatization in education and other welfare sectors and exercising greater control through the legislation and regulation of the education system (see also RÖNNBERG, 2012). High on the agenda for the government is the promotion of more discipline measures and greater control over schooling, reform of education and teacher education and the introduction of national tests in the early school years. The neo-liberal agenda is clear: the purpose of education in Sweden is market-oriented and such values as «equality», «democracy», and «solidarity» are not a priority (JOHANSSON and O'DOWD, forthcoming), but rather dismissed as «soft core», while value is attributed to «hard core» school subjects, such as mathematics, natural science and technology and facilitated by the use of extensive evaluation and monitoring strategies.

2.2.2. An interdisciplinary and critical view of childhood

Reminiscent of the conceptualization of the child and childhood in the legal context is Fleur, Hedegaard and Tudge's interdisciplinary and critical view of childhood, positioning children as «central political agents» (2009: 5). The thrust of the argument presented is that conceptualizations of the child and childhood deserve a «wholeness» approach, which includes «a global-local dialectic in which childhood and children are seen in interdependent relation to their activities, institutional practices, and societal conditions» (Ibid.: 9). Such an approach necessitates that:

«The concept of institutional practice has to be seen in connection with the upbringing and education of children, and how children's active participation in their everyday practices influences the practices themselves and thereby become part of their learning and development conditions... We believe that the child's everyday life at home, as embedded within the child, has to be included in the institutional practice of the school, and through this influences the conceptualization of his or her learning and development» (FLEUR, HEDEGAARD & TUDGE, 2009: 10).

The wholeness approach shares the same concerns as those expressed in the work of Vygotsky (1998) and Leontiev (1978), as represented in a Scandinavian research tradition (HEDEGAARD, 2002, 2008) and the ecological approach as represented by Brofenbrenner (2005) and Brofenbrenner and Morris (2006) and adapted by Tudge (2008). The common ground that both of these conceptualizations of the child and childhood share are a recognition of the contextualization of these concepts and a rejection of an abstract and universal understanding of the child and childhood. Indeed, rather than view the child and childhood in Anglo-American and European terms, here there is an attempt to understand the child and childhood in an interactive relationship to the socio-cultural contexts that constitute the environments in which children live their lives and in which childhood is conceptualized through the factual institutional context in which children are framed. The child and childhood are viewed as constructs that are continuously re-constructed by political, practical, social, cultural and ideological forces, capturing children and their childhoods in a framework that severely limits and restricts their freedom to define

themselves and their futures. The relevance of Kelly's ethics of care is apparent as regards early childhood education.

2.3.1. The context of children's needs

With the introduction of the integrated curriculum for pre-school in 1998, efforts were made to also integrate the common foundation values of the education system into the pre-school sector, aligning it with the educational goals of the school curriculum. The vital question is, given that the pre-school sector is aligned with the educational system with the integrated curriculum for Pre-school in 1998, what is being displaced? It is clear that the previous emphasis on play and cooperation is not apparent in the new curriculum. However, children's accounts of what they wish and need in pre-school tell another story than what is reflected in the curriculum:

«The best thing about day care is you're free to be a child. You can play hide-and-seek, climb in the climbing frame and do all sorts of other fun things», according to five year old Amanda.

«When I play on my own I have a funny feeling in my tummy. It's no fun. But when I can be with someone else it's sunny in my tummy», Ahmed, aged 5, says.

When asked what they learn at pre-school and why they are there, the answers provided by pre-school children are precise and clear:

«Do you learn anything at pre-school? «Of course, we learn to be clever and kind».

«Why are you at pre-school?» — «Because we're children» (KORPI, 2007: 75)

Contrary to the phrase associated with a sinking boat —*women and children first*—, the rise, fall and the dismantling of the Swedish welfare state has placed women and children last. Despite Sweden's success in many other areas (EGER, 2010), the same processes that have ensured economic progress and social stability, have not advanced women's position in society. Wikander (1992) stresses that the societal economic structure ensures women's subordination in salaried work and in unsalaried work in the home and with child care. Despite a demand made by the Social Democratic Women's Association in 1946 for «the same salary for the same work», at

one time since halve women's salaries for the same work been equivalent to men's. Nor has increased female participation in the labor market signified a qualitative change in relation to men, but only that subordination has been established in new forms in new positions. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the educational system. Women represent the greatest portion of the workforce in the lower levels of the educational system, while at the top, the number of female professors at university level account for only 21% of the total number of professors employed at Swedish universities (STATISTICS SWEDEN, 2011). In the Statistics Sweden report it states, since 1995 the number of female professors in Sweden has increased with less than one percent a year (see SELLERBERG, 2007, with reference to the hierarchy in Swedish universities). In 2010 Eger wrote:

«Sweden stands out as arguably *the* most egalitarian, humanitarian, and democratic country in the world. Indeed, all key indicators point to just that. With consistently high economic growth and a strong welfare state that ensures low inequality, Swedes enjoy a high standard of living, universal health care, education, and generous unemployment benefits. Further, the Economist Intelligence Unit's (2007) index of democracy ranks Sweden as the most democratic country with a near perfect score» (EGER, 2010, 204).

Seen in a historical perspective, the contemporary status of Sweden as «the most egalitarian, humanitarian, and democratic country in the world» has entailed an often bitter political and social struggle, with education viewed as the spearhead for the development of Swedish society. However, it is questionable if the attempts to achieve equality through education can be viewed as favorably as Eger does. Fägerlind and Saha (1989) argue that the educational system functions to mirror society, reproducing it consciously or unconsciously, as this is the basic understanding of the function of education. Longitudinal data shows that the development of the welfare state for those born in the 1920s did not promote women to the same extent as men (O'DOWD 1995). Rather the same data confirms Wikander's assessment of the effects of the «societal economic structure» on the relative subordination of women (WIKANDER, 1992). Other school-based research shows that Swedish school children base their perception of competence on gender, viewing boys as socially competent and girls as less socially competent (VEDDER and O'DOWD, 1996, 1998, 1999). These and other research results raise questions as to the extent to education alone can promote equality.

3. THE MARKET CURRICULUM 2000-2013?

Whether or not future curriculum history research will describe 2000-2013 as the «market curriculum» can only be speculation at present. However, a number of factors appear to support this interpretation. As Vallberg suggests, the Curriculum of the Situated World Child, as she terms it, from the late 1980s to 2000 was under the authority of the Ministry of Education and Science and the National Board of Education:

«The distinguishing features of this period are goal-related tuition, decentralisation, globalisation, market orientation and individualisation... Preschool classes are introduced as a new school form for six-year-olds. The goals of the national curricula are formulated as goals to aim at (Lpfö 98 – the curriculum for preschool; Lpo94 – the curriculum for compulsory school) and as goals to be reached (Lpo94)» (VALLBERG, 2006: 90).

With regard to this curriculum, Vallberg (2009) notes that towards the end of the preceding period (The Curriculum of the Welfare State) «a political, ideological and economic system shift could be discerned» (2009: 89). This shift is also? Daun and Löfving (1995), assert that the space assigned to issues of equality began to shrink in the 1980s, replaced by the market, freedom of choice and privatization. Vallberg (2009) describes the *Curriculum of the Situated World Child* in the following manner:

«It is possible to discern a reinforced globalised, situated and “child-centred” trend that can be formulated in terms of the “*Curriculum of the Situated World Child*”. Lifelong and life-embracing learning is emphasized, and the continuous care content is toned down. The world child’s rights and competence and what is best for children should be given the highest priority. Even though children had not participated in formulating the global, national and local plans, goals to the effect that they should be joint participants in conversations and in the design of their own individual plans were now expressed. The participation of children, parents and teachers as curriculum makers is likely to be an area of further development. Learning, creating meaning and acquisition of knowledge are not just a matter of some predetermined subject matter outside the children and formulated in a curriculum ratified by other people, but could be something that is partly open and alive and constructed and negotiated in the relation between children and the world around them, i.e. a *Me-in-the-World Curriculum*» (VALLBERG, 2006: 89).

Oberhuemer stresses the problems that have arisen as regards the unified approach to teacher education:

«In Sweden, a national evaluation of the unified teacher education/training scheme in operation since 2001, combined with recruitment problems across the education system and particularly for work in the early years, has fuelled debate about the present system of teacher education. Up to 3,600 new recruits will be needed by 2012 in order to combat the shortage of early childhood teachers and maintain the current levels of quality in centres. The fact that the new teacher education profile has resulted in a drop in the number of students wishing to work with young children is a cause for concern among experts in the field (Karlsson Lohmander, 2009). These issues and developments have led to a government proposal to introduce four separate teacher preparation specialisations instead of the current unified approach. Included in the proposals is a reduction in the length of professional study courses for early years teachers from 3.5 years to 3 years; also, they would no longer be able to work in the pre-school classes (in school) for 6-year-olds without an additional one year qualification. Understandably, these proposals are controversial in the field» (OBERHUEMER, 2012: 125).

Over and above these problems, Beach notes as early as 2000 that:

«Previous investigations have highlighted one of the problems associated with integration via common content inclusions as a problem brought about through different categories of students having different views of knowledge needs and through students thus being committed to different investments of self in different education components of teacher education programme» (BEACH, 2000: 278).

Indeed, the «old» unified integrated pre-school teacher education program was well grounded in practice in contrast to the new program, providing teacher students with more and better opportunities to «develop a collectively shared teacher identity. In the new programme, developing a teacher identity has become an individual responsibility» (KARLSSON, 2004: 32). Moreover, Karlsson reasons as does Johansson (2003) that this problem, taken together with:

«The growing dominance of the traditional university structure of subject disciplines, has far-reaching implications for the future of early child-

hood education. There is an obvious risk that the very special character of pre-school teacher education will fade away -if not completely disappear in the future, and with it a specific pre-school pedagogy. Maybe in future the only remaining «early childhood» teachers will be teachers qualifying to teach the age group 5–10. The important question will then be: who will teach the children under six?» (KARLSSON, 2010: 32).

4. CONCLUSION

What is apparent from the above is that early childhood education in Sweden is undergoing change, as are other systems of early education and care in Europe (OBERHUEMER, 2012: 129). Although Oberhuemer (2012) claims that it is difficult to ascertain if a common ground can be discerned among the different changes of early childhood education that are occurring throughout Europe, she seems to share Karlsson's (2009) concerns regarding the future of early childhood professionals. Although Pramling-Samuelsson and Sheridan (2009) maintain that the needs of the child have been of central importance in early childhood education in Sweden, where the institutional setting has allowed for the needs of the children to influence activities, other research shows that this might not be the case. Tullgren has shown that during «free play» in pre-school, teachers influence the activities of children, restricting their freedom to engage in activities as they choose. As a result of her analyses, Vallberg concludes that her:

«Results also justify questioning the rigid view that the content in preschool has been child-centred, whereas the content of school has been subject-centred. The present study shows that their respective histories are more complex and varied than that. Different types and degrees of subject-centring and child-centring can be discovered, something which *per se* creates a need for further discussion of what is implied by “child-centring” and “subject-centring”» (VALLBERG, 2006: 94).

Näsman (1999: 285) expresses concern as to how children are perceived, with children being viewed from an adult perspective as «not-yet» adults and where childhood has little value in itself, but rather is perceived as a transitional period towards adulthood.

As this article has attempted to show education in the Swedish context has been influenced by a number of different political and social agendas which have exerted pressure on the system in different directions, affecting how individuals and their development are viewed. As Vallberg observes in her study of the Swedish Curriculum history: «Different kinds of patterns inherited from the curricula of earlier periods and mixed with new elements at different levels can be discerned in the curricula of the present day. They can thus be said to contain traces of historical change» (VALLBERG, 2006: 92).

Although the three contexts discussed in this article might at first sight appear to have little in common, taken together they present an understanding of what the child and childhood means in the legal and education contexts and how children express their needs and wishes as regard early childhood education. Neo-liberal politics —implemented both by the Social Democrats and the conservative parties— have not only re-structured the education system, its goals, content and values, but have impacted on perceptions of the child and childhood. The building of the Swedish welfare state has necessitated the full participation of all on the labor market and state-run and supported «large children's nurseries», enabling mothers to work on the labor market. In this vision, expressed by Alva Myrdal and appropriated by the Social Democratic Party, childhood is viewed as a stage, rather than as an end in itself. Far be it from me to question women's need to contribute to the support of their families and to have a profession identity outside of the home. However, the fact remains that children's needs are in fact defined and limited by adult agendas:

«The more the needs of children become harnessed by specific campaigns, such as the desire to preserve marriage, or the goal of moving women out of the labour market, or the rights of fathers, the less possible it is to have a debate that starts with the standpoint of children. Adult agendas take over and children become symbols rather than real persons.» (SMART, NEALE and WADE, 2001: 22, cited in KELLY, 2005: 384).

The focus on Production with a capital P in the context of Sweden has several implications, not the least of which is the importance allotted to working life and the value that contributions to production are awarded. This focus has great relevance for the child and childhood, and for all those engaged in activities of care. Näsman (1999) maintains that children are

viewed from an adult perspective as «not-yet» adults and that childhood has little value in itself, but rather is perceived as a transitional period towards adulthood (NÄSMAN, 1999: 285). Kelly's (2005: 390) discussion on the distinction between caring-for and caring-about has relevance both for children and those who care for them: An ethics of care necessitates that we recognize «care at the centre of how we understand children. It would acknowledge the fundamental role that caregiving plays in children's lives and would give appropriate recognition to it and to those who provide it. In particular, it would give due recognition to the actual activity of care, and would support and protect those engaged in that work», at the same time as it rejects the legal frameworks being used to frame the child and childhood globally. Finally the neo-liberal politics impacting the education system in Sweden today places individual responsibility for success and failure in all facets of life on the individual her/himself. This is clearly reminiscent of the far past when education was reserved for the elite and the privileged and the state was absolved from responsibility for poverty, social injustice and economic hardships, as these were seen as the result of individual shortcomings, rather than societal dysfunction.

At present the situation in Sweden is highly contentious, especially as regards education, social welfare and Sweden's future. Social unrest, ethnic conflict and discontent along with economic problems characterize present day Sweden. This is a situation that Sweden shares with many countries in Europe. For this reason alone the history of early childhood education in Sweden and the reforms that have taken place appear to be relevant for other countries to know. From the perspective of the child and care-providers the shrinking space assigned to issues of equality that began in the 1980s (DAUN and LÖFVING, 1995) is a vital issue. As Vallberg notes «a political, ideological and economic system shift could be discerned» in the Curriculum of the Welfare State (2009: 89). What remain of the values of the near past is difficult to assess, even if traces of the past can be present, as Vallberg maintains. It is disturbing to note HENRIKS's view of modern childhood as «children of the welfare state», i.e., «legally, legislatively, socially, medically, psychologically, educationally and politically institutionalized» (HENRICKS, 1997: 35-36). Against this background there appears to be reason for concern as regards the integration of early childhood care into the education system. It is argued here that there is much to be said for care, cooperation and play for children 0-5 years of age. And much to object to in the institutionalization of

children from the early age of 0. I am reminded of a quote from the 1970s, when the debate on education and its social role was intensive among educators themselves. Today the debate on education policy and practice is dominated by economists, politician, administrators and other self-proclaimed education experts, another of the effects of neo-liberal politics:

«Schools in all nations, of all kinds, at all levels, combine four distinct social functions: custodial care, social-role selection, indoctrination, and education as usually defined in terms of the development of skills and knowledge ... It is the conflict among these functions which makes schools inefficient. It is the combination of these functions which tend to make schools a total institution ... and which makes it such an effective instrument of social control» (REIMER, 1970: 13)

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