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What do children think of their time in preschool? In the present study, twelve ten-year-old children collected data from their classmates. The children tend to remember their friends, and reflect on what games they played and with whom. Only about one in three respondents even mentioned the day-care professionals or pedagogues as we call them in Scandinavia. The overall question we set out to answer is: What is pedagogical quality from a child's retrospective perspective?

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Ten-year-olds' reflections on their life in preschool

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Introduction

Nearly all children (ninety-eight per cent) in Denmark attend preschool, and, much like school, preschool is a place where all children meet. When many children spend a lot of time in preschool – twenty per cent of children spend more than forty hours a week there (Søndagsavisen, 2011) – it is obviously very important that it is a nice place for them to be, that it has what we often refer to as «pedagogical quality».

Pedagogical quality

Studies of quality are important as background for development of the pedagogical quality in preschool. However, there is no precise definition. Over more than two decades, researchers, day-care professionals (or pedagogues as we call them in Scandinavia) and politicians have struggled with the concept pedagogical quality in order to define and implement educational and care quality in preschools.

However dependent on the used research approach, different dimensions of quality are found and described. According to Katz (1993), four approaches and perspectives are seen in quality research and measurement. A *top-down* perspective is

where quality is defined based on general research, for example a literature research review. In contrast, a *bottom-up* perspective investigates and determines how the educational practice is experienced by participating children. Related to this, an *inside-outside* perspective describes the involved parent's experiences. In addition, an *inside* perspective reflects how staff experiences the educational practice and often a specific educational program: a kind of self-evaluation. Finally, an *outside* perspective describes how the preschool pedagogy serves society in general.

Several surveys have been conducted, both formal research (e.g. Undheim & Drugli, 2012) and local surveys, in order to describe both parents' and early childhood teachers' views, that is, both inside-outside and outside perspectives. Many Danish municipalities, for instance, conduct annual user satisfaction surveys among parents, and many institutions conduct their own surveys as well.

Politicians and stakeholders seem to lean on the so-called top-down perspective, which defines a set of quality dimensions used as indicators for quality in pedagogical practice. As an example, the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS)* (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998) offers a tool to measure those factors in the everyday pedagogical context that are assumed to promote quality (among others: space and furnishings, personal care routines, language-reasoning, activities, interaction, programme structure, and parents and staff).

Also, the project *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE)*, carried out by Sylva et al. (2010), and a new Danish review by Christoffersen et al. (2014), can be seen in line with a top-down approach. Both studies define high quality preschools as settings characterised by 1) educated preschool teachers who are able to establish an empathic

relation to children, and 2) succeed in creating a goal-oriented educational environment in which 3) children interact with each other in play and creative activities.

The quality dimension «empathic relation between preschool teacher and child» has often been emphasised as important. Thus, Katz and Goffin (1990) describe some characteristics of preschool teachers, namely: an extensive and manifold role with care and responsibility according to each child's needs and well-being, and with a specific view of the child's vulnerability.

The concept of pedagogical quality has often been defined on the basis of psychological criteria, which is to say researchers' view of the conditions and relations that contribute to children's well-being and learning (Broström, 2006b; Kragh-Müller, 2013; Svinth, 2008). By establishing a set of indicators that are assumed to determine a child's well-being and learning, we can home in on the concept «pedagogical quality».

However, the *bottom-up* perspective must also be taken into consideration. There is a need to take a child's perspective, to listen to the child's voice. Katz (1993) makes the conditions possible for the bottom-up perspective by asking, «What does it feel like to be a child in this environment?» This way, she set up a numbers of possible questions to the participating children in order to get their perspective:

- Do I usually feel welcome rather than captured?
- Do I usually feel that I am someone who belongs rather than someone who is just part of the crowd?
- Do I usually feel accepted, understood, and protected by the adults, rather than scolded or neglected by them?
- Am I usually accepted by some of my peers rather than isolated or rejected by them?

- Am I usually addressed seriously and respectfully, rather than as someone who is «precious» or «cute»?
- Do I find most of the activities engaging, absorbing, and challenging, rather than just amusing, fun, entertaining, or exciting?
- Do I find most of the experiences interesting, rather than frivolous or boring?
- Do I find most of the activities meaningful, rather than mindless or trivial?
- Do I find most of my experiences satisfying, rather than frustrating or confusing?
- Am I usually glad to be here, rather than reluctant to come and eager to leave?

Taking a child's perspective of pedagogical quality can be measured in other ways than through fixed quality criteria produced by, for example, a literature review. On the basis of observations and interviews with the children, research on «quality of children's lives in preschool» (Broström & Thyssen, 1996) describes a number of children's experiences of life in their particular setting. In the conclusion of the research, children experience quality in their lives in preschool as the possibility to «create culture together with other children» (p. 65), in other words when they are active participants, for example in play and aesthetical activities with peers, where they influence the world and thereby themselves.

Quality is thus not a fixed term, because it evolved in a particular context, comprising day-care professionals (pedagogues), children and their parents. To quote Sheridan:

Based on interactionistic theories, pedagogical quality does not exist in itself, but takes shape and develops in pedagogical processes through the interaction between people and people and objects in learning contexts of preschool (Sheridan 2007, p. 203).

Sheridan's definition indicates that pedagogical quality emerges in the particular situation and as a result of interaction between children, and between children and day-care professionals. This would make it next to impossible to come up with a generally applicable definition of the term «quality»; rather, quality is contextual, and defined in and by the interplay between all participants, which is to say children, parents and professionals.

Nevertheless, pedagogical quality is contextual and related to the specific participants and their construction of their everyday lives. Both researchers and pedagogues are aware of a number of indicators which, among others, constitute pedagogical quality and the quality of children's lives in preschool. So, based on a combination of some of the earlier mentioned top-down studies and bottom-up studies, they put forward the main quality dimensions as being: 1) an active empathic interaction between pedagogue and child, 2) goal-oriented educational activities, and 3) child-child interaction and friendship. Though there are more quality dimensions, these three are the main ones, and they also refer to both the aforementioned top-down and bottom-up studies.

Retrospective design and research question

Some research has taken a bottom-up perspective in examining children's perspectives of their experience in childcare environments. Many studies have examined relationships among preschool teachers and children via observation of teacher-child interaction in order to measure quality. As an example, an old study of toddler-teacher interactions in urban childcare centres (Honig & Wittmer, 1982) showed that toddlers sought care and attention when they called

for support. However, the preschool teachers ignored or negatively responded to toddlers about one-third of the time. Corresponding, a new Danish observation study (Hansen, 2015) shows that toddlers have very few close relationships with the preschool teachers (but more and prolonged interactions when life in preschool was planned and organized in small groups).

Such observation studies describe quality seen from the researcher's point of view. A more radical approach is to involve children more directly. In a number of research projects children have served as informants and have described their views of life in preschool (Bratterud, Sandseter & Seland, 2012; Dockett & Perry, 2003; Clark & Moss, 2001; Einarsdottir, 2005; Langsted, 1994).

In these studies, children were interviewed about their assessment of various aspects of, and activities in, preschool. As is the case with all research, it may be tainted by various sources of error or bias that skew the findings. One possible source of error is a recent event in a child's life, which disproportionately taints the child's narrative. This means there is a certain advantage to coming back to the children at a later stage, to conduct a retrospective survey (Langsted, 1994). In such a survey, however, there is a real possibility of a different type of bias, if, for example, the children look back on their «lost» childhood through rose-tinted glasses.

We have seen a few retrospective surveys of children's views of their life in preschool. Strandell (1997) and Rasmussen & Smidt (2001), for instance, retrospectively asked youths to recount their experiences from preschool. Strandell (1997) interviewed a group of youth about their memories of preschool, and compared the data with a body of observation data of those youth when they attend preschool in the age of four years. She found that first of all the youths remember preschool as a place where play

and friends are in front, and also a life without pressure of a bell. Among other things in the study of Rasmussen & Smidt (2001) the youths remembered the pedagogues and their friends they played with.

The present study is also a retrospective survey, and is based on the informants one would expect to have the best first-hand knowledge, i.e. former preschool attendees. A big number of ten-year-olds were asked to reflect on their life in preschool, and their responses formed the data we used to answer the research question: *What is pedagogical quality from a child's retrospective perspective?*

One might state, that we already have knowledge about elder children's view of their lives in preschool. However, the above-mentioned studies by Strandell (1997) and Rasmussen and Smidt (2001) are old, and illuminate a preschool life characterised by an educational profile with play, care and a child-centered educational approach. At that time, Danish preschool teachers shared a fundamental belief that a rich environment and children's self-governed activities would give the best opportunities for the comprehensive development of each child (Broström, 2006b). This educational orientation was challenged in Denmark in 1998 with the learning concept (Socialministeriet, 1998), and some years later with the implementation of a national curriculum (Socialministeriet, 2004). Because the responding children spend their preschool life in quite another type of preschool, one can suppose that they will express what amounts to another preschool experience.

Methodological reflections

Through the use of observations and interviews, we have an opportunity to adopt children's perspectives, and allow their voices to illuminate us about pedagogics, pedagogical quality and about children's lives in pre-

school. However, this has predominantly been in a form where researchers have attempted to understand how children perceive and experience various situations, a so-called *child perspective*. The more radical approach would be to use the term «child's perspective» (with an apostrophe) to describe situations in which children themselves take a more active role as participants in education or in research.

In a Nordic context, the concept of child perspective was presented in the late 1980s (Åm, 1989), was discussed by Nordic researchers in the journal *Barn* (Gullestad et al., 1991), and became quickly incorporated into early childhood education and research (Kampmann, 1998; Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2014; Strandell, 1997).

By adopting a child's perspective (with an apostrophe) in research, we perform a transition that echoes the one in pedagogics: we go from doing research *about* children to research *with* children. This requires that the researcher hands over the microphone, camera, video recorder, and so on, and allows the children a measure of autonomy in the collection of data. The aim is for the children to be empowered, and to allow them to participate in and even guide the research (Broström, 2006a, 2012; Einarsdottir, 2005).

The fundamental concept underlying the «children's perspective» and «children as participants» orientation is that children are competent, have rights, and should be viewed as contributing members of a democratic society (UN, 1989). Children are not preparing to be competent or to earn rights or to contribute. They *already are* capable of active participation and of competent use of their rights and agency. As an example, Melzoff and Moore (1998) examined the non-verbal infant's universe of experiences, and documented its intentional actions. Thus, children are seen as competent, capa-

ble and experts on their own lives (Clark & Moss, 2001; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998).

They are included as active participants, as opposed to merely being used as informants (in interviews), and take on the role of co-researchers, including in the use of photographs (Einarsdottir, 2005; Fasoli, 2003; Koch, 2013; Prosser, & Schwartz, 1998), children's drawings (Punch, 2002), and also as active interviewers (Hviid, 2000).

There are different ways of being involved in the research process, which can be seen as a continuum from helpers or assistants to co-researchers. According to the definition of the *research topic*, in one approach the researcher already has a research idea and consults the children in order to listen to their ideas, and then defines the research question himself, or together they discuss and formulate the research question. In a more extensive version, the researcher invites children to define the research topic by telling the researcher about issues in preschool, which they want to understand or change. With regard to *construction of research tools*, children can be left out or they can be co-constructors (as an example, a child suggested, «We can ask our friends,» and then they created some interview questions). According to the extent of children's *participation in collection and analysis of data*, children can be seen as helpers who are involved in parts of the research process, or they are genuine co-researchers who participate in all parts of the research processes.

In the present study, the research topic was given by the researcher, namely an aim to understand children's views and memories of their lives in preschool. Corresponding research methods and means were given in advance and children were asked if they wanted to be involved in the data-collecting phase. Although there was some interaction about how to arrange the data-collecting and a number of other practical details, in

general the children acted as research helpers or assistants.

Involvement of research assistants

The present study consists of a questionnaire with three questions about children's memories and reflections on their preschool lives. In total, 251 ten-year-olds from 12 different schools in June 2014 completed a survey that comprised three questions. The 251 responding children were not merely selected at random. In connection with an annual interview of twenty child informants, who have responded to a number of questions about their lives in school since they attended pre-school class in 2010, we gave the children the opportunity to become co-researchers in their own class. Twelve children out of twenty-two agreed to interview their classmates, and thus were involved as co-researchers or assistants.

The twelve co-researchers were asked to obtain permission from their class teacher and their principal to conduct the survey, and then to inform their classmates about the three questions of the survey, and then request informed consent from their classmates and the classmates' parents. Only then could they – at a time chosen by the teacher – conduct the survey, which included handing out the questionnaire with the three questions, and reading the questions. The co-researchers and their classmates then filled in their answers, and all the questionnaires were collected and sent back to the researchers in sealed envelopes.

Therefore, each of the twelve co-researchers received a «researcher's packet» with a project description, a manual for the co-researcher and his or her parents, letters to the principal and class teacher, a letter about informed consent for children and their parents, and the envelope with which to return the questionnaires.

None of the co-researchers had any major problems in conducting their part of the project. A few questions about the children's anonymity were clarified by email. In principle, the survey was anonymous, but some children signed their name anyway, and many of the co-researchers (or their parents) chose to put the sender's name on the return envelope with the questionnaires.

The children answered each question as a handwritten response of two to ten lines, except in one case, where a class teacher typed in the children's responses (in the original spelling) on a typewriter.

The questions

In order to illuminate the research question – What is pedagogical quality from a child's retrospective perspective? – the children were asked three questions:

- 1 What is the first thing that comes to mind about your preschool?
- 2 What was the most interesting thing that happened to you in preschool? That might be anything – something you did with your friends, a project, work on a topic, or something else entirely.
- 3 Who meant something to you in preschool? Please write who, and why.

These questions are a form of operationalisation of the three theoretical dimensions of educational quality: 1) an active empathic interaction between pedagogue and child, 2) goal-oriented educational activities, and 3) child-child interaction and friendship.

Some methodological reflections

Some critical reflections are pressing. More or less, the co-researchers or helpers were left to themselves. Although the children (and the parents) got some advice via postal correspondence about how to present the questions to their classmates, they presented the questions in their own way, and thus

there were different conditions for different respondents, which might have affected the result. Moreover, the respondents were not given any supportive means for helping the memory process, so-called stimulated recall (Calderhead, 1981). By using such methods, the children's answers would probably have been elaborated more. Yet it is likely that the children and their parents discussed the topic «my time in preschool» in their dialogue about informed consent. All the same, they answered the three questions rather unpreparedly. Thus, one can question the quality of the answers. Are these ten-year-old children able to remember their preschool life without genuine preparation? Are their answers characterised by accidental and not typical memories? How valid are their answers?

First of all, there is no evidence to show that children's answers present objective truth. No memories can be seen as clear reproductions of what happened in the past (Neisser, 1982). The specific memories are to be seen as subjective but still truthful narratives. However, memories can be expressed in different ways. According to Strandell (1997), children's memories can be expressed in two varied forms: an episodic memory or a generalised memory.

Episodic memories report a specific incident, often described with details. For example, a child wrote:

I crashed down on a radiator, and landed right on my nose, so I had to go to the emergency room and the grown-ups had to call my dad.

Such a memory is not seen as a typical event from preschool life, and narratives like this cannot be used to create a general picture of children's views of their preschool lives.

Generalised memories, as opposed to episodic memories, report incidents which build on frequently-repeated episodes or in-

cidents which, according to Stern (2004), are remembered as a generalised pattern. For example children's outside play is a recurrent activity in preschool life:

I always played outside with my friends. We played on the swing together. This was great fun. Every day we climbed on a big structure. And we ran around and thought we were on a real adventure, but there probably were some natural explanations.

This memory is identifiable and is in accordance with most children's memories because it describes a daily recognisable routine, a typical pattern from preschool. Thus, it is easy to conclude that only generalised memories count as valid data, but this is not so certain. Most of the short narratives from the involved 251 children can be defined as episodic memories. They all contain genuine memories, which seem to report incidents the individual child wants to present. As we understand children as competent and reflective persons, we also have to acknowledge when a child chooses to create a narrative. Based on this premise, children's narratives are experienced as valid expressions.

Analysis of the data

In the next step, a content or thematic analysis was conducted in accordance with guidelines as described by (among others) Braun and Clarke (2006). This analysis was carried through based on the three categories defining pedagogical quality described earlier: 1) an active empathic interaction between pedagogue and child, 2) goal-oriented educational activities, and 3) child-child interaction and friendship.

The first step was reading and re-reading the 251 answers in order to get a sense of the data. The reading revealed a number of categories corresponding to the different re-

sponses. Following this process, it became apparent that questions 1 and 2, and, to some degree, 3 (which concerns friends and adults in particular), could be organised according to the same categories: pedagogues/adults, classmates/friends, playground, play, field trips, camps, projects, birthday, building tree forts, sports, swings, bicycles, creative and exciting activities (water fights, campfires, singing, drawing, Lego), as well as dangerous activities and events where the child got hurt, and «major» events such as finding a grasshopper, getting locked inside a playhouse or shed, and performing in a circus or in plays.

However, looking across all answers, the total data are related to three areas: 1) interaction with peers and friends (as the most important), 2) positive view and memories of the preschool teacher, and 3) memories of interesting activities.

In general, the children's answers are in accordance with three categories defining pedagogical quality: 1) an active empathic interaction between pedagogue and child, 2) goal-oriented educational activities, and 3) child-child interaction and friendship.

In addition, we reflected on the gender perspective. Though the children's responses have been anonymised, it seems that gender is fairly easy to guess from the answers. Yet because the responses could not *reliably* be identified as coming from a boy or a girl, we were unable to explore the gender perspective further, and so missed an opportunity to examine a potentially interesting gender-related difference between the children's views of their time in preschool.

Results

Despite a certain variation among the children's responses, there is enough material to outline these ten-year-olds' reflections on their lives in preschool. By way of introduc-

tion, here are a few typical comments from the children:¹

«No one teased anyone, everybody was good friends and no one was best friends forever, and everybody played with everybody else the whole time.»

«Friends – nice adults, play time (too bad I don't have that now in school), fun games.»

«The smell in the hall of apple ice cream, the nice pedagogues and the fun playground.»

«Played Star Wars with Sofus [another child]. We were so into the game, we could play for hours and hours.»

«The best thing was when they let us paint our own paintings.»

These quotes touch on elements that crop up again and again. First and foremost is the importance of friends and playmates. Secondly, the children express the feeling of having had nice pedagogues around, who made room for play. Finally, interesting educational and creative activities made up the third category.

In addition, a number of answers contain dimensions which do not fit in with the three dominant categories. As examples, there were special and dramatic events («Climbed a fence with Sebastian»), some critical comments («The toys were boring; not many friends, bad time»), and sometimes a romantic picture («We were free and we could do nearly everything»).

Friends and playmates

The importance of friends and playmates permeates all 251 responses. In the vast majority of the responses, friends and playmates are mentioned in the response to each of the three questions, and not just to question 3 («Who meant something to you in preschool? Please write who, and why.») The children write very candidly about their friends. Below are two short, typical narratives:

My best friends, they helped me whenever I was sad, then they would help me be happy again. There was Gustav, Sebastian, Nicklas, Victor, Lasse, William, Frida, Selina, Camilla and Celine. But my best friends were Victor and Niklas. They stood by me and were nice... they were some of the best in my life, and I loved them ever so much. I was happy, when they were near me. We were best friends and played together a lot.

Mia (from the class I am in now), she was the girl I liked the best in preschool – and she was the only one that came to me and asked to play with me, when I first started – even though she did not know me... that was sweet of her... the others just played with their friends.

All our respondents report a close connection between their experience of preschool and the friends they had then. Friends is the common theme in all the responses. Typically, the children's explanations are that the friend or friends give comfort, they help and support, they inspire, spread good cheer and engage in exciting activities; and you can trust your friends.

Nice and inspiring pedagogues

The pedagogues and the other adults also crop up in the children's responses, which is hardly surprising when the adults around them more or less defined the lives they had in preschool. Yet, the pedagogues/adults are only mentioned in 75 of the 251 responses, even though question 3 specifically asks the children to describe anyone who meant something special to them in preschool. The children typically mention the pedagogues/adults by name, which would indicate that they recall them as people. The pedagogues are mostly referred to in relation to the comfort and sense of safety they provided, and in relation to the exciting activities that the children remember:

A grown-up called Vivi, who would always come to help when you needed it. A grown-up called

Belinda, who made good soup and always helped out. Outside at the playground they arranged funny games, we played hide-and-seek, and also we played a game of tag. All grown-ups were super nice.

Kenneth and Sammi were two pedagogues, who worked in the preschool. They were the coolest. They had the most crazy stories to tell. Kenneth told army stories and played war with the vegetables. Sammi also knew a lot of crazy games and he said the weirdest things, like, «I want to tell you two things for a second.» And Steffen (a grown-up) was dressed as Gertie Goldentooth with balloons under his shirt – that was just so much fun and he had painted his teeth.

The pedagogues do mean something to the children. But the children seem to remember those adults who played a significant role for them as individual children: those adults who expressed empathy and provided comfort, but also those adults who did something out of the ordinary, who could sing, play or come up with something exciting for everybody to do together.

Interesting activities

The children mention activities and events that made an impression in all three questions, which is hardly surprising, since we ask them about just that in question 2. The children find many things interesting, but their responses can generally be categorised as: playing with their friends in the playgrounds, outdoor activities, field trips (e.g. to a farm), water games, projects, for example playing Indians, digging and building forts, campfires, creative activities, camps, holidays, outdoor sports, grandparents' day, performing (e.g. singing or circus) for the parents. The vast majority of the children mention one or more activities or events that made an impression, both from everyday life in the preschool and from among things they did outside preschool:

We always had nice activities. There was lots to do: we painted, I had to do a self-portrait; and we did a performance of «The Wild Swans», and a project on rubbish, we brought milk cartons to build castles and all sorts of things.

I recall when we went on walks in a forest where we said that the Log Witch lived, and later we all made elderflower squash. We picked the flowers, we put them all into a huge pot, we put in a lot of sugar and we put all the elderflowers in there.

We went to Endelave [a small island], where, in the evening, we had a party with popcorn and crisps and limbo dancing. We also went to the beach at Endelave, where we built castles in the sand and swam and found crabs and jellyfish, and we made bread twist over campfires. When we were sent to bed, we played with our flashlights, and then the grown-ups came and said good night.

The children remember and appreciate an active life with friends and pedagogues in their preschools. They touch upon everyday activities, but in particular they mention activities that afforded them new impressions and experiences, such as making elderflower squash, feeding a goat and building castles out of milk cartons.

Discussion

Playmates

It is no surprise that all 251 child informants all choose friends and playmates as the key element of their lives in preschool. This is completely in line with findings from other surveys, for example Langsted (1994), which was an interview survey that found that children identified other children as the most important aspect of their lives in preschool. A number of more recent surveys have corroborated this finding: children seek out other children, and children consider the other children to be the essential aspect of

preschool. Playmates and friendships, interaction and play is considered of vital importance to their lives in preschool (Andersen & Kampmann, 1996; Broström, 1998; Corsaro, 2002; Einarsdottir, 2011; Gulløv, 1999; Nilsen, 2000; Rasmussen & Smidt, 2001; Pedersen et al., 2009; Stanek, 2011).

When the children write about the importance of playmates and good friends, they also describe the shared activities – primarily the play and the fun activities they invented together. This is in line with previous surveys and is confirmed in the present survey (Kousholt, 2011; Bratterud, Sandseter, & Seland, 2012).

Pedagogues

Obviously, the pedagogues also play an important role for the children. Frønes (1994) shows how children, although they find other children most important, also depend on the pedagogues to ensure the children's comfort and well-being. Plus the children do also appreciate adult participation in their activities.

A large number of respondents speak very highly of the pedagogues, and many of them mention a specific pedagogue as their favourite, as an adult, who meant a lot to them. This is in alignment with a Norwegian study, which determined a correlation between children's well-being and their experience of having a favourite adult, who showed an interest in them, who recognised them and listened to them, who greeted them, praised them, and who created a fun and cheerful atmosphere (Bratterud, Sandseter, & Seland, 2012).

In that light, it may be surprising that the adults only appear in seventy-five of the responses, particularly when question 3 asks the children to indicate people who meant something special to them. However, the relatively low score does not mean that the children did not have pedagogues who cared

about them, and with whom they had a fine relationship. It may just be because the respondents think firstly and foremostly of their friends and playmates. Similar findings have been reported by others. Several surveys have provided cameras to children along with an instruction to take pictures of whatever they found most interesting (Clark, 2010; Einarsdottir, 2005; Kristensen, 2013). These studies all found that pedagogues were rarely at the centre of children's attention. A recent Danish survey (Koch, 2013) of 200 pictures taken by 16 children in preschools depicted playmates, toys, aesthetic elements, and so on, and hardly any pictures of adults.

The fact that pedagogues rarely show up in surveys like these should not be taken to indicate that pedagogues do not play a vital role in the children's daily lives and well-being in preschool. Langsted (1994) reports that children consider adults as caretakers, and a more recent study shows that pedagogues play more with the children now than they used to before (Broström, Hansen & Jensen 2012). Similarly, Bratterud, Sandseter and Seland (2012) show that children appreciate pedagogues. This is in accordance with the Danish study, where all the pedagogues are described as «nice». As a contrast, the survey by Rasmussen and Smidt (2001) shows children who speak of both «tough» and «nice» pedagogues. They spoke about their favourite pedagogue, but also about pedagogues who disappointed them by breaking their promises. Corresponding to the youths in Srandell's (1997) research, they divided the adults into those they liked and those they did not like.

Although the present study asked the children to describe someone who meant something to them in preschool, the reason for the fairly infrequent mention of pedagogues may be that the children were not specifically asked to explain their views on the adults/pedagogues.

Despite the infrequent mention of adults in the responses, other research (Sylva et al., 2010) has shown that educated pedagogues are a key factor in pedagogical quality, and the deciding factor for children's learning. It is, after all, the pedagogues who facilitate all the good memories mentioned in the present survey. When children wear face paint, when the place smells of apple ice cream, when they make elderflower squash, dance on a beach, perform a stage play or paint a self-portrait, there is always a pedagogue behind the activity. So in that sense, the pedagogues are very much present in the responses, although they are rarely mentioned outright.

Activities

As mentioned above, the material comprises an extensive list of fun and interesting activities and events. A preliminary analysis of life in preschools would indicate very exciting preschool lives for the children. Yet a closer reading of the responses may cause one to wonder why we did not get at least 251 examples of very interesting activities and events in the children's responses. There is a cause to wonder because we asked them directly (in question 2) to tell us about the most interesting thing they experienced in preschool (whether it was a project, a topic they worked on or something else entirely), but also because previous research has shown how focused children are on their playmates and the activities they encounter in preschool (Clark, 2010; Einarsdottir, 2005; Koch, 2013). However, we have to keep in mind that the children were not specifically asked to talk about their recollection of preschool experiences and activities with the pedagogues. Furthermore, it could be a weakness in the research design that it may in fact be difficult for many ten-year-olds to remember what happened four years ago in preschool, and to write about what they ac-

tually do remember. The responses were in writing, and it would seem a fair assumption that some children may have preferred brevity over complete and exhaustive accounts.

Finally, it must be remembered that any speculation about the scarcity of exciting activities in the responses concerns what the children did not say, and not what they actually did say.

Summing up

The above indicates that the children are capable of reflecting on their time in preschool and recalling very specific and more general experiences. It is evident that they primarily mention friendships and playmates, and that they look back on preschool as a safe haven which afforded them nearly unlimited room for exciting activities and play with their friends. Somewhat less prevalent in the responses is the children's relationship with the pedagogues. Nearly all the respondents mention a memorable activity, although narratives of particularly exciting, challenging or fun activities are rather few and far between.

A Nordic dimension?

Do the findings relate to what is characteristic for Nordic early childhood education and care? The so-called Nordic model is defined as a balance of care, freedom, child participation, democracy, children's self-governed activity *and* a goal-orientated pedagogy related to children's learning. Such a combination of care, play and learning units is called *educare* (Broström, 2006b; OECD, 2006; Pramling, Samuelsson, & Carlsson, 2008).

The answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, children's memories of their preschools are in accordance with two out of three quality dimensions, namely «interaction with peers and friends» and also «a pos-

itive view and memories of the preschool teacher». This is parallel to two out of three categories defining pedagogical quality: «an active empathic interaction between pedagogue and child», and «child-child interaction and friendship».

The missing third quality dimension, «goal-oriented educational activities», is not expressed by the children. Instead of this typical learning dimension, the Danish children express «memories of interesting activities» (e.g. play, painting, doing a project), which is more play oriented than specifically learning oriented. Thus, the Danish children's memories of their preschool lives are not total in accordance with the Nordic model and the *educare* concept.

Though the children attend preschool under the implementation of the national curriculum in 2004, they do not explicitly reveal the learning dimension in their memories of preschool life. Instead, nice adults, friends, play and interesting activities were to the fore. The ten-year-old children from 2014 remembered and reflected upon their preschool life more than less in the same way as the Danish children from 2000 did (Rasmussen, & Smidt, 2001), the memories characterized by play, traditions, birthdays and activities like music, song, drawing and meals.

Thus, the Danish ten-year-old children's memories do not reflect the *educare* concept, but more an earlier version of a play-oriented preschool. Maybe their memories are in accordance with their actual preschool life around 2010. Or maybe they made up a kind of romanticised preschool life with play and no ringing bell:

You could do whatever you wanted, you could do so many things without having to think about your future; we had a lot of freedom without realizing it.

Critical reflection of method

If children had a tendency to bring up selective memories describing a preschool without any demands, this calls for criticism of the used method. Are the three questions, with any attendant recall methods, appropriate for describing preschool life four or five years before? How much can we actually expect ten-year-olds to remember about their lives in preschool? The vast majority will probably have spent time with interesting pedagogues and participated in interesting activities, but just failed to recall them at that specific moment when they were asked to fill in the survey in writing. More specific questions aimed at learning activities might have stimulated children's reflections.

Conclusion

The overall picture painted by the 251 responses is predominantly positive. The recurring impression is one of a fun time with friends and playmates. Nearly all the respondents write fondly about their experiences and about the time they spent with their best friends, who provided comfort and who appreciated the respondents, and helped make the time in preschool a good time. The pedagogues and other adults are also presented as positive factors in the children's lives. In spite of the low number of respondents who mentioned adults at all, those who did by and large speak of trustworthy, empathetic and appreciative pedagogues.

Allowing for certain reservations against the method (e.g. that it may be difficult for children to remember everything from their time in preschool, and that criticism touches upon things that were not said in the responses), the 251 child informants generally seem to have had a good time in preschool. All of them report that they place a very high importance on life with their friends and

playmates; the fun and games with playmates made life a party. The pedagogues are highly regarded, and many children even had favourite pedagogues. (However, it is a cause of wonder that only about one in three respondents mention their pedagogues.)

Preschool life is full of positive and exciting activities. Some children talk about preschool as a place of unrestrained freedom and only very few respondents have negative things to say about preschool.

The present survey cannot be said to provide a comprehensive picture of the way children view professional adults in their preschools. In order to do that, we would need a larger number of respondents and we would have to apply several different methods, such as questionnaires combined with child interviews and drawings. This is definitely a topic worthy of further study, first and foremost because preschool today is seen as the first level of the education system. Hence the pedagogues have to be both academically and personally qualified. As pedagogues are pivotal for young children's well-being, learning and development in preschool and subsequent success in school, this question is of common societal interest.

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Noter

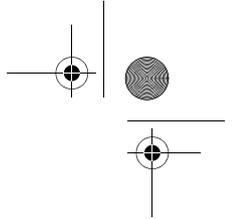
1 All quotes and narratives are our translations.

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