

International Perspectives on  
Early Childhood Education and Development 4

Niklas Pramling  
Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson *Editors*

# Educational Encounters: Nordic Studies in Early Childhood Didactics

 Springer

# Educational Encounters: Nordic Studies in Early Childhood Didactics

# International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development

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## Volume 4

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Early childhood education in many countries has been built upon a strong tradition of a materially rich and active play-based pedagogy and environment. Yet what has become visible within the profession, is essentially a Western view of childhood preschool education and school education. It is timely that a series of books be published which present a broader view of early childhood education. This series, seeks to provide an international perspective on early childhood education. In particular, the books published in this series will:

- Examine how learning is organized across a range of cultures, particularly Indigenous communities
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- Critique how particular forms of knowledge are constructed in curriculum within and across countries
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The series will cover theoretical works, evidence-based pedagogical research, and international research studies. The series will also cover a broad range of countries, including poor majority countries. Classical areas of interest, such as play, the images of childhood, and family studies will also be examined. However the focus will be critical and international (not Western-centric).

Niklas Pramling • Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson  
Editors

# Educational Encounters: Nordic Studies in Early Childhood Didactics

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ISBN 978-94-007-1616-2 e-ISBN 978-94-007-1617-9  
DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-1617-9  
Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg London New York

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011933670

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# Foreword

The OECD *Starting Strong* reports and the UNICEF 2008 *Childcare Transition* commended Sweden for the high quality of its early childhood system. However, as Professor Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson and Associate Professor Niklas Pramling, the editors of the present volume remark: “When quality is considered in an international comparison, it is the globality of support for children and families that is in focus.” Although international studies may identify the legal frameworks and the structures that sustain quality—such as the incorporation of the UNCRC into the laws of a country or a high level of state investment in early childhood services or respect for reasonable child–staff ratios—they rarely examine the quality of everyday experiences of children, partly because few such studies exist. The present volume addresses this gap and, in a series of studies mainly from Sweden (two studies are from Norway), presents its readers with detailed descriptions of the learning experiences of young children in preschools.

This study sets itself the dual objective of exploring how young children learn and of identifying the role and specific pedagogical skills of the early childhood practitioner in the child’s learning. To throw light on children’s learning, the various studies in the book focus on children in their everyday life in the preschool and investigate, in particular, the interaction and communication between teachers and children, and between children. Particular attention is given to children’s sense-making of the things presented to them, for example in ecology (Chap. 4), literacy (Chap. 10), art (Chap. 5), etc. A central feature of this dimension is the teacher’s ability to understand the child’s own perspectives and incorporate them into his/her strategies, approaches, communication and interplay. The intention is to be part of the child’s learning processes and to combine the child’s interests and intentions for learning with the goals of the preschool curriculum. However, the various knowledge strands of the curriculum, which a particular society identifies as important for children to explore, should not be the subject of direct teaching but rather emerge from broad themes attractive to or proposed by young children. These strands can be foregrounded by the teacher through questions, shared thinking and other pedagogical approaches. The focus will be on processes rather than outcomes, although it is important that the teacher should be clear about the intention of a particular ac-

tivity from his/her perspective as well as from the children's perspectives and have the skill to coordinate these perspectives.

*Educational Encounters* recognises that there are important lessons to be learnt from previous approaches to pedagogy, not least in that many have attempted to bring the authentic world of the child into preschool practice—the family and its members, the shop, the natural environment, the changing seasons and the professions that fascinate young children. The early childhood professional has, however, a particular role—to turn these authentic experiences into an education encounter. To qualify as an educational encounter, the experience itself needs to be worked on by the teacher, who will introduce the children to new aspects of knowledge, scaffold their appropriation of the 'tools of the domain' (which are more or less specific to the particular domain of knowing, e.g. music, visual arts), and through naming, categorising (abstract generalities, patterns) and making distinctions (pointing out differences) assist children to broaden their learning.

In my opinion, this is an important book. *Educational Encounters: Nordic Studies in Early Childhood Didactics* contributes, on the one hand, to a new academic discipline (viz, studying young children's learning, across a broad range of thematic activities, in the actual preschool setting) and, on the other hand, to the development of a science of early childhood pedagogy (or *didactics*, as referred to in the volume). Its publication at the present moment is particularly opportune. Across Europe, the need is felt to define more clearly the kinds of professionalism and the competences that early childhood professionals need in their daily work in early childhood centres. Thus, the European Commission issued in 2010 an invitation to European universities to undertake research and propose recommendations on the issue of staff competences in early childhood services. In so far as pedagogical competences are concerned, this well-focussed text provides a rich input to the European debate. Its impact, I believe, will be wide, reaching not only national and European policy makers, but also teacher training institutes and the many early childhood practitioners who are often unsure about their pedagogical role.

Visiting Fellow, Thomas Coram Research Unit

John Bennett

# Preface

Early childhood education (ECE), or preschool as it is called in Sweden, for children 1–5 years of age, is becoming more common all over the world, and ever-growing numbers of children are being enrolled. It is also becoming more regulated in many countries since curricula, frameworks, standards or plans of various kinds have been developed to guide practice.

In Sweden we are at the moment of writing, in the process of launching a new school law, and this includes preschool. This law states that “practice with children should be based on experience and research” (prop. 2009/2010, p. 165). Attention is drawn to research and what research tells us about important aspects of work with children in early years.

In this book we will give some examples of research of relevance to professional work with children. The specific areas covered are: arts (drawings, dance and music), ethics, nature-knowing/science, literacy, mathematics, democracy, gender and narrative. These studies share certain features: (1) They focus on problems of relevance to children’s learning and development in the context of preschool, (2) the studies have been carried out in everyday practice with children and (3) there is a genuine effort to improve practice based on the results.

This kind of qualitative research is more common and developed in the Nordic countries, perhaps due to the large number of preschool teachers who have pursued doctoral studies in education. This group has also contributed to the development of the academic field of ECE. In this book we want to share this kind of research with other professionals. Preschool teachers have participated in many of the studies presented and have supplied invaluable feedback, which encourages us to believe that this book could be very useful to professionals working in ECE as well as to researchers and those pursuing university studies.

Gothenburg  
January 2011

Niklas Pramling  
Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson



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**Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson** is professor and coordinator for early childhood education at the Department of Education, Communication, and Learning, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. She has a background as a preschool teacher and in 1996 she was the first Swedish chair in early childhood education. Her research mainly deals with how children make sense of different aspects of their surrounding world, in the context of preschool (day care and kindergarten). Another research interest is teachers' professional development. She is also World President of OMEP (Organisation Mondiale pour l'Éducation Préscolaire) and holds a UNESCO chair in early childhood education and sustainable development.

## About the Authors

**Marie Bendroth Karlsson** was awarded her PhD from Linköping University, Department of Child Studies in 1996. She is now a senior lecturer in art education at the University College of Gävle and guest lecturer at the University College of Borås. Her main interests concern art in early childhood and questions how to promote teacher training in the arts. Additionally, ongoing research concerns how children relate to outdoor places near their preschool.

**Elisabet Doverborg** is a senior lecturer with a background as a preschool teacher and a teacher educator. She has worked with teacher training and professional development of preschool teachers for 25 years. She is currently working at the National Center for Mathematics Education (NCM) at the University of Gothenburg, where she is responsible for early childhood issues and professional development of preschool teachers. She has served as manager for the NCM project “Young Children’s Mathematics” and is co-author and co-editor of the books *Små barns matematik* (Young children’s mathematics) and *Matematik i förskolan* (Mathematics in kindergarten). For these books, she and a colleague have composed a comprehensive study guide. Her special interest is preschool children’s learning and her research is documented in a number of articles and books.

**Anette Emilson** is an associate professor in education at the Linneaus University, Sweden. She has a background as a preschool teacher and has mainly worked with children under the age of 3 years. In 2008 she defended her doctoral thesis and her research focuses on the issues of fostering citizenship for toddlers in a preschool context, with a special focus on children’s participation and influence in everyday life in preschool. This research takes a critical approach and uses theoretical ideas derived from Jürgen Habermas.

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She received her PhD in educational science from the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, in 2007. Her dissertation, *Narrative meaning-making in preschool*, was based on narrative inquiry. Her scholarly interests include children's agency, cultural formation and children's and teachers' co-narrative practice, as well as historical, political and international perspectives on early years education. She is also the president of OMEP Norway, the Norwegian branch of the World Organization for Early Childhood Education.

**Gustav Helldén** is professor emeritus in science education at Kristianstad University College. He has been working in teacher education since 1984. During this period he has also to a great extent carried out in-service courses for teachers in early childhood, primary and secondary education. Prior to that, Gustav Helldén taught biology and science in lower secondary and upper secondary schools. His research interest concerns the long-term development of students' understanding of ecological phenomena. Through such long-term studies, it has been possible to identify personal contexts and continuity as recurrent themes in the students' explanations. Such studies also showed that early episodes in childhood have an important influence on students' future learning about scientific phenomena. Through the years, Gustav Helldén has collaborated with researchers at the University of Leeds, Cornell University in the USA and Deakin University in Melbourne. He was founder and leader of Learning in Science and Mathematics Research Group (LISMA) at Kristianstad University College between 1994 and 2004.

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**Sonja Sheridan** is a professor in early childhood education at the University of Gothenburg. She has been the leader of several research projects on the relationships between preschool quality, the competence of the teachers and children's learning. She has worked for the National Agency of Education in many different roles and she has been employed by the Ministry of Education to revise the Swedish curriculum for preschool. She has participated in the role of an expert in the government initiated evaluation of preschool education in Norway. She is a member of

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction and Frame of the Book

Niklas Pramling and Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson

Research is always carried out in a specific time and context and is based on certain perspectives. All studies presented here are from a Nordic context (see also Einarsdottir and Wagner 2006), but the theoretical frames will vary. This will be clear in each chapter. However, in this chapter, we will place the book in its historical and cultural context. More specifically we will be focusing on:

- Contemporary Early Childhood Education (ECE).
- What is didactics?
- The distinction between the process and product of learning.
- Profession-related research.
- A brief presentation of the chapters to follow and their theoretical frameworks.

The opening of a debate on educational objectives in the light of educational research.

### Contemporary Early Childhood Education

In the Nordic countries most children participate in ECE from early years. A recently published report from UNICEF (2008) shows the standard of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in 25 OECD countries. The benchmarking system is based on: parental leave, a national plan for disadvantaged children, subsidised and regulated for at least 25% of children under 3, subsidised and accredited ECEC for 80% of 4-year-olds, 80% of the staff trained (50% with a tertiary education with relevant qualification), minimum staff-to-children ratio of 1:15, 1% of GDP spent on ECEC, child poverty rate less than 10%, near-universal outreach of essential child health services. All Nordic countries are top ranked and Sweden is the only country that has achieved the highest score of 10 benchmarks.

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Kristjansson (2006) talks about the Nordic child-centredness, claiming that there has long been a social and political discourse in which the state has introduced numerous reforms to ensure that it shares the responsibility for children with the parents. Corporal punishment was prohibited at an early stage and children have their own ombudsman, a commissioner with statutory rights and duties to promote and protect the rights and interests of children (see further discussions about this in Sommer et al. 2010). When quality is considered in an international comparison, it is the globality of support for children and families that is in focus. However, this says nothing about the quality of everyday experiences of children. Studies have shown that even in a country with an ECE of top rank, evaluation of children's experiences has revealed a wide variation in quality (Sheridan et al. 2009).

Preschool has always had some kind of guidelines, although it had not been regulated by the state. Vallberg-Roth (2006) has analysed documents that have had an impact on ECE and describes a historical sequence of rationales: God (Protestant religious beliefs) up to the end of the nineteenth century, the good home up to the middle of the twentieth century, the welfare state up to the middle of the 1980s, the situated world child to the beginning of the twenty-first century and a now a beginning of 'me-in-the-world'. This means that there have always been texts guiding the professionals in their work, texts that create an image of the child and what is worth developing in children. These curricular texts have mainly been formulated by the professionals themselves, which is no longer the case in countries where the government makes decisions about the national curriculum. The Swedish national curriculum for children aged 1–5 years states that the teachers' commission is to support children's well-being, joy and learning (Skolverket 2006). The curriculum is based on an experience-orientated perspective, where interaction, communication and play are central aspects of the pedagogy. The humanistic child-centred perspective also expresses a participatory democratic view, where values of justice, equality and equity are central. Children's equal rights to be listened to, choose activities and learn in terms of developing skills and making meaning within specific areas are pointed out. These specific areas are: emergent mathematics, literacy, natural sciences and technology and arts. But it is also clear that these specific areas should not be viewed as traditional school subjects, but as dimensions dealt within thematic work with young children.

The intention of the work in preschool is not that children should reach a certain level of achievement in different content areas, but that they should be supported in developing meaning in the direction of the goals to strive for. Although preschool is supposed to work towards developing the child and his or her personality, the contemporary preschool is directed more towards the pedagogical assignment. Teachers therefore attach importance to specific content-related questions and, not least, to how these can be developed in practice. It is here that the research we will present in this book can contribute.

Traditionally, in school the focus is on subjects, syllabus and lessons, while preschool focuses on themes, i.e. on integrating phenomena existing in the children's surrounding world, such as 'the sea', 'the shop', 'the farm', etc. These are themes in which specific aspects of literacy and mathematics will appear in a context that

makes sense to children. Although the organisation of knowledge differs in pre-school and primary school, creating knowledge is central in both, but while pre-school teachers can be satisfied if children show interest and involvement in something specific, school teachers are held accountable for showing that children have gained specific knowledge by a certain stage. In preschool the learning context as such should be evaluated, while in school it is the children who are being evaluated. This means that children's development in preschool has to be related to the learning context provided for them, while children in school are evaluated no matter what school has provided them with (Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson 2009).

However, it is not only the content and the evaluations that distinguish the learning contexts of these two forms of institution from one another, but also the perspective of knowledge and how children can be given opportunities to make sense of the world around them. Although the gap between the two institutions has narrowed in recent years, the different traditions are still strong. Play and care are central in preschool, while skills are prioritised in school. Preschool teachers have a broad pedagogical competence and understand children in terms of their development, while school teachers are specialists in different areas and their main goal is to teach their subjects. In preschool the age-groups are mixed, while schoolchildren are in homogeneous age-based classes. Perhaps one can claim that, traditionally, the child is the centre in preschool, while the subject matter dominates school. Today, however, the intentions for both learning contexts have changed.

Nordic countries may be unique in many ways as regards ECE, but at the same time there are universal trends that reflect the influence of the UN Convention on the Right of the Child (1989) and the socio-cultural perspective of Vygotsky (1978, 1987) and others. Internationally there is, for example, a strong trend towards changing ECE in the direction of a new paradigm of children's learning (Pramling Samuelsson and Fleer 2008), seeing the child as a competent being who responds to experiences in many different ways and not necessarily at a predestined stage of development related to age. Children's voices (views, opinions and experience) and rights are brought to the fore and playing and learning are integrated in practice in a new approach to pedagogy (Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson 2008; Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson 2007). In trying to outline and develop a pedagogy for early childhood education today, the term 'didactics' keeps reappearing. But what is didactics, or, rather, what may it mean in the context of ECE?

## What Is Didactics?

While it is a common term in continental Europe, 'didactics' is a controversial term to use in conceptualising educational matters internationally. The term often meets resistance in the English-speaking world (Hamilton 1999, 2009; Hopmann 2007; Hopmann and Gundem 1998; Kansanen 2009; Nordkvelle 2003). For this reason, in this section we will elaborate somewhat on (a) the history and transformation of the term, (b) why we chose to use this term and (c) what we intend with this term

in this book. The term ‘didactics’ has its etymological roots in ancient Greek. In Hopmann’s (2007, p. 110) clarification, the word ‘Didaktik’ stems from “the group of words connected with ‘didaskhein’, i.e. teaching, showing something, playing out a drama”. The suffix ‘-tik’ or ‘-ik’, as in the German (and Swedish) ‘didaktik’, as Nordkvelle (2003, p. 321) clarifies, “is a Latinised ending derived from *techne*, the Greek term for skill, art, expertise, profession, science, technical knowledge and so forth”. Hence, according to Nordkvelle’s historical explication, “Didactics was a synthesised word from the Greek synonym for ‘demonstrate’ and the Latinised suffix for ‘art’”. Even if the term has a long history, in discussions of educational matters, the term is often referred to the early seventeenth century and the scholar Johan Amos Comenius (1592–1670). Central to this history is Comenius’ *Didactica Magna* [Great Didactic] from 1632. In the English-speaking world, however, ‘didactics’ seems to be understood as “formalist educational practices that combine ‘dogma’ with ‘dullness’”, as Hamilton (1999, p. 135) writes in an article with the title “The Pedagogic Paradox (or Why No Didactics in England?)”. Hence, in English the term ‘didactics’ may have connotations of what is today often seen as a historic relic in the history of education, i.e. a lecturing teacher and listening children, where the latter lack a voice and agency in their own learning. However, this is not at all how the term ‘didactics’ is understood in the continental European perspective from which we have written this book. As Hopmann (2007) clarifies, from the seventeenth century onwards, what accounts of ‘didactics’

all have in common, in spite of different approaches to [...] the psychology of learning, was the basic assumption that Didaktik is about how teaching can instigate learning, but learning as a content-based student activity, not as swallowing a sermon or a monologue or otherwise one-sided knowledge distribution by a teacher. (p. 113)

Another key feature of the European notion of didactics is “the necessarily restrained effort to make certain substantive outcomes possible, while knowing that it can always turn out completely differently from what was intended” (p. 117). Hence, this notion of didactics opens up for the empirical fact that people with different experiences will make different sense of the same situation. This is one reason why, as we will argue in this book (see also Sommer et al. 2010 for a theoretical and practical elaboration) for the importance of paying attention to the child’s as well as to the teacher’s perspective (in a learning practice as well as in conducting research into such a practice).

While didactics is a common term in many European countries, studies in didactics are very infrequently distributed across different knowledge domains. There is a substantial literature of this kind on science education. However, such studies are practically non-existent when it comes to arts subjects (Kansanen 2009). In addition, these kinds of studies are far more common with older children. Didactic studies of early childhood education are a rather novel phenomenon. One reason for this, as suggested by Kansanen, is that while teachers in the later grades are often specialised in a particular domain of knowing (e.g. physics), early years teachers have a more encompassing task of securing the development of the child. Also, in preschool settings, knowledge domains are seldom separated in the way they tend

to be in school. Instead, activities often take the form of working on encompassing themes. This realisation implies the need to pay attention in discussions of didactical issues for ECE of the relationship between particular knowledge and skills and more encompassing development.

Another interesting note is made by Kansanen (2009). He suggests that

[i]n the English-speaking educational literature it is very difficult to name the research basis of teaching and teacher education in the same way as it is possible to use *didaktik* in German [and other mainland European countries] teacher education. (p. 30)

Hence, the concept of didactics in a sense is functional in bridging between research and practice. It is important to find such tools of communication between these practices to be able to discuss and collaborate in making sure we provide good educational opportunities for children in early childhood education.

In this international context, we could perhaps have used the term ‘pedagogy’ instead. However, writing from a Nordic context, the current debate on early childhood education largely revolves around the term ‘didactics’ (e.g. Brostrøm and Veijleskov 2009). There may also be a point in trying to spread the European use of this term to the English-speaking world, which seems to have a very restricted understanding of the notion. However, in our view, the distinction between ‘didactics’ and ‘pedagogy’ is not important to our present purpose of studying and conceptualising the creation of opportunities and support for learning in early childhood education and how children make sense of what they encounter there. Finally, according to Hamilton (1999, p. 148), “recent Anglo-American usage of ‘pedagogy’ mirrors the mainland European use of ‘didactic’”. The reader of this book who is still hesitant to use ‘didactics’ in relation to early childhood education may thus think of the term ‘pedagogy’ instead. Still, for the reasons we have clarified (the continental European usage and the use of the term in these kinds of discussions in the Nordic countries) we have chosen to retain the term ‘didactics’. We do not intend to define what didactics for early childhood education could consist of or be characterised by in any clear-cut manner in this introductory chapter. Rather, at this point the term labels the empirical interests we have outlined. Still, some important features of ECE didactics will be mentioned with reference to some theoretical accounts and previous research. However, in the concluding chapter of this book we intend to outline—on the basis of the empirical studies of this book and the theoretical notions applied in these—features critical to such didactics.

At the very heart of what we will refer to as ‘didactics’ in this book lies the issue of intersubjectivity, understood not as teacher and child having shared, identical concepts, but as achieved coordination, enabling the interlocutors to ‘go on’ with their mutual activity (Rommetveit 1974; cf. Bruner 1983, on ‘joint attention’; Siraj-Blatchford 2007, on ‘sustained shared thinking’; Tomasello 1999, on children’s proclivity to share attention with another). That is, neither the teaching done by the teacher nor the discovery made by the child by him- or herself constitutes didactics. Rather, what we refer to as ‘didactics’ is the interaction and communication between teacher and child; how they achieve (or fail to achieve) intersubjectivity or joint attention. For this reason, joint activities, particularly communication (cf. the

etymological basis of the word ‘make common’, ‘share’ (Barnhart 2000, p. 195)) become the focus of attention. The nature of this relationship between teacher and child will be considered pivotal for didactics as understood in the present book. A key task in establishing such didactics is to consider and coordinate the child’s perspective and the teacher’s perspective (the perspective of the domain of knowing).

While emphasising that communication is a key feature of education, it is important to understand that what we refer to as ‘didactics’ is not any conversation. One distinguishing mark of an educational conversation, i.e. didactics, is that a learner encounters distinctions and relationships useful in grasping or managing a domain of knowing. Hence, while any conversation may be instructive in an informal sense, by didactics we refer to the kind of communicative event where someone (a teacher) introduces a child (a learner) to certain domain-relevant distinctions and/or categories and attempts to help the child appropriate these distinctions and categories (concepts), and, hence, to potentially transform the learner’s understanding (knowing). This is fundamentally what makes it an educational practice or a didactic encounter (an education out of a conversation), as understood in the present book.

## **Distinction Between the Process and Product of Learning**

An important distinction in researching children’s learning is between what can be referred to as ‘process’ and ‘product’ studies. Following from the pioneering insights of Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky and Heinz Werner, as well as more recent work by Neil Mercer and Jaan Valsiner, the importance and relative rareness of a process kind of study could be argued. A simple illustration of the difference between a ‘product’ and a ‘process’ study, as we understand it, could be the following from the domain of sport. If we are interested in studying high jumping, more specifically why Blanka Vlasic, at the time of writing, is the world’s preeminent woman high jumper, simply studying how high she jumps at different times in her development as a jumper and in comparison with other high jumpers would tell us that she gets better and that she is better at jumping than her competitors are. Hence, using this study method, we could clarify how a jumper improves in her development as a high jumper and rank the order of jumpers. However, these numbers would be ‘mute’, to use Valsiner’s (2005a, b) metaphor as to their explanation. In order to understand the heights jumped (and the relative placement of jumpers), we would have to scrutinise the process, i.e. in this case the jumps (as ‘unfolding’ or performed) over the course of the jump. Through analysing video recordings of these jumps we could find that, say, Vlasic is able to jump 2.08 m because of a combination (timing and coordination) of the speed of her approach, the radius of the turn and thus the angular momentum achieved, etc. That is, as we try to illustrate by this example, through studying the ‘process’ (running and jumping), we are able to gain a far better understanding of the ‘product’ (the result) than if simply studying and comparing ‘products’ (performances) at various points in time and/or between performances and performers. It should also be pointed out that ‘product’

is an unfortunate metaphor for knowledge, since knowledge is seldom either/or in any clear-cut sense, i.e. something the individual ‘has’ or ‘has not got’. Consider, for example, the issue of being literate. Even if they are able to read texts, people may encounter new texts and writing practices that they do not master. Being skilled at reading texts in one literary genre does not mean that the individual is necessarily able to make sense of and master another genre (e.g. specialised discourse). Hence, appropriating the written language (becoming literate) is in many cases a life-long process where we gradually become more familiar with different textual aspects and practices (Säljö 2005). Thus, whether an individual ‘has’ a certain knowledge or skill (has acquired the ‘product’) is rather ‘un-productive’ as a way of conceptualising learning and knowing. The studies of the present book build upon research interests that are focused on qualitative (process) rather than quantitative (product) issues of learning and development.

In line with our reasoning and writing with the substantial literature on children’s drawings in mind, Coates and Coates (2006) point out that this research

largely fails to explore what would seem to be an essential ingredient in each drawing’s production—children’s simultaneous utterances which might potentially inform the nature and content of the work and help elucidate their intentions and processes of thinking. (p. 221)

For example, Coates and Coates report data on Sophie, a 4-year-old, who “drew a fine ship but her accompanying narrative told a detailed Pirate story, the content of which was not at all obvious from the drawing alone” (p. 227f.). Importantly, we would add, studying the process of creation or learning gives us important insights into the child’s perspective (Sommer et al. 2010), i.e. what the child him- or herself is concerned with and how he or she understands the activity. Hence, in terms of learning, focussing on the processes of teaching and learning in an analytical way does not imply a lack of interest in the outcomes of learning (sense made, understanding reached, results achieved). Instead, it means, paradoxical as it may sound, a heightened interest in the content (the what) of learning. Traditionally, to argue analogically in relation to Valsiner’s (2005a, b) claim that the core phenomenon itself, i.e. ‘development’ is often missing from developmental research (cf. Werner 1937), we could say that research on ‘learning’ often does not, in fact, study learning empirically. Rather, what is studied is often (differences between) knowledge or information. What a learner is able (knows) differs between two (or more) points in time and as a result, it is inferred that learning has occurred in between these points. Situation 1 ≠ situation 2; hence it is inferred that learning has occurred between these points. But this ‘between’ has not, in fact, been studied empirically.

An alternative course, focusing on ‘process’ rather than ‘product’ may be outlined as follows. What is studied is how individuals and/or collectives (groups, classes) ‘go on’ in their learning, what challenges they face and how they take on these and what the outcomes of these communicative encounters are, or at the very least, what opportunities for learning the children encounter in this practice within the period studied. This alternative course may sound negative and insufficient, but, unless we are perhaps concerned with simple behaviouristic conditioning, we must realise that we can never cause learning in any simple and direct sense. What we can



do and what institutionalised educational practices need to do, is to provide ample opportunities and scaffolding (Wood et al. 1976/2006) for learning, i.e. to provide sufficient challenges and—as importantly—sufficient support (‘scaffolding’) for learners to take on these challenges. There is no doubt that we can and should study these matters if we are interested in children’s learning and development.

## Profession-related Research

Sweden may be special in that about a hundred preschool teachers having completed PhD studies and have worked towards developing an academic ECE field for many years (Klerfelt 2002). This has also generated numerous new doctoral students, including a special group that is partly financed by their employers, the municipality, in which they also work part-time during their studies. This arrangement has enabled us to recruit better educated professionals in the field of ECE who can develop the practice.

Often researchers with a background in ECE ask other research questions and strive to adapt their research so to also generate knowledge that can be of use to the professionals in the field. Research questions are often related to generating knowledge about children’s learning, being and playing in preschool, as well as about the contribution of the teachers to young children’s lives.

A model used in many studies is that the researchers try to orchestrate what they want to study by, for example, getting teachers to work with developing meta-cognitive skills in children (Pramling 1989), to make sense of early mathematical aspects (Doverborg and Pramling 1999), literacy (Gustafsson and Mellgren 2005), aesthetics (Pramling Samuelsson et al. 2008), etc. Some studies pay more attention to the professionals’ communicative skills (Pramling 1995) or capacity to integrate play and learning (Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson 2006). The main idea is, however, that the focus is on teachers’ and children’s interaction and communication. The empirical data on which the research is based are in most cases generated by video-recordings of group activities that can be used later as mutual points of reference for discussions between teachers and researchers and for analysis of the results.

## The Studies and Their Theoretical Frameworks

While the empirical studies of this volume all share an interest in analysing didactic issues from the perspective of the children (as well as from the perspective of the teachers), the chapters have evolved within a variety of theoretical frameworks. These perspectives include developmental pedagogy (Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson 2007, 2008), phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 1962), variation theory (Marton and Tsui 2004) and socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky 1978, 1987). Since every chapter will introduce the features of the framework of relevance to its



study, we will only briefly introduce these perspectives. Both developmental pedagogy (as applied by Pramling and Wallerstedt in their study of children engaged in learning and remembering a circle-dance and Doverborg and Pramling Samuelsson in their study of children's mathematics learning) and variation theory (as applied by Wallerstedt in her study of children learning to discern metre in music) are developments of phenomenography (Marton 1981; Marton and Booth 1997). Basic to these traditions is an interest in studying learning from the learner's perspective. Learning is described qualitatively in terms of what features of the object of learning having been discerned by learners. While sharing many features, developmental pedagogy and variation theory differ in their understanding of what variation and discernment entail. In the perspective of developmental pedagogy (as particularly developed to account for young children's learning in preschool), variation among children in a group is used as an asset in making the children aware of a greater number of different ways of understanding something, hence to develop a richer repertoire of ways of perspectivising (perceiving) phenomena. In variation theory, conversely, the variation between one particular object of learning and another is used as a means of helping the learner discern and hence understand, this object in a particular and singular way. Working with a well-delineated learning object may prove helpful in developing children's discernment of different aspects of a learning content. At the same time, there is an obvious risk that this way of working will result in a fragmentarisation of knowledge, which would be quite contrary to the preschool tradition of working with more encompassing themes. Helping children to learn something specific while being able to relate experience and knowing in meaningful activities in itself poses a challenge to early childhood education didactics that needs to be considered.

Johansson's study on children's moral learning builds upon the theory of phenomenology, particularly the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Central to Merleau-Ponty's account of phenomenology is the body. From this perspective (Merleau-Ponty 1962), studying, in this case, children's ways of being and learning morals/ethics means to attend to children as embodied subjects rather than abstract intellects. Moreover, this perspective nurtures an interest in the 'life-world' of children, i.e. the intersubjectively shared world into which the child is born and lives. We are human beings through being in relationships with others. Hence, it is of pivotal interest to study how children (and people generally) interact. In fact, it is out of the nature of relationships to others that children develop morality, according to this perspective. This perspective on morality is rather different from a traditional one where morality is seen in terms of rationality and logic (Johansson 2001). This phenomenological perspective on development allows even very young children's morality to come to the fore (see further Chap. 7).

Socio-cultural theory (Säljö 2000, 2005, or cultural-historical theory as it is sometimes referred to, e.g. Fleer 2010), stems from the pioneering work by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. This framework is used in this book by Bendroth Karlsson in her study of visual-art-making practices in preschool and Pramling and Ødegaard in their study of children's appropriation of the cultural tool of narrative. Some distinctive features of socio-cultural theory are the concepts of 'appropriation', 'cultural tools' and 'mediation' (Kozulin 1998; Leadbetter et al. 2005; Säljö

2005; Vygotsky 1978, 1987; Wertsch 2007). Arguing that human learning cannot be understood in separation from the cultural tools (material as well as discursive, e.g. speech), how learners are introduced to and supported in appropriating such tools will be decisive for the skills they develop. Appropriation means to take over and be able to use cultural tools in a relevant manner in various practices. Hence, learning is seen as inherently social and cultural in nature. The notion of cultural tools also means that our relationship to the world and its phenomena comes about in a mediated or ‘roundabout way’ (Vygotsky 1971), i.e. with the appropriation of tools we learn to see and understand phenomena in terms of the categories and distinctions of our (linguistic) tools. The same tools are used in communicating with others (e.g. in a classroom) and with oneself (i.e. thinking from a socio-cultural point of view).

## Educational Research and Educational Objectives

In this book we present a number of empirical research studies in Early Childhood Education. It is important that claims concerning children’s learning are based on such work in naturalistic settings in order to be ecologically valid in accounting for learning as it takes place in everyday encounters between preschool teachers and children. While it is important in our view to conduct this kind of research, it is also important to remember that education is always a normative activity. In his thoughtful account on the distinctiveness of educational research, Jerome Bruner (2006) argues that:

Perhaps the most important is that its objectives—the cultivation of mind, the betterment of life, or whatever else—are in principle culturally contestable issues that inevitably become ideological or political issues not readily resolved by scientific research alone. There is always disagreement about what “being educated” entails—what skills and sensibilities, what stock of knowledge and beliefs, what values constitute the educated person. (p. 206; cf. Bruner 1996)

As Bruner argues, what should be learned in preschool and school and more specifically within various domains of knowing (music, mathematics, visual art, etc.) is not necessarily self-evident. Neither is the related issue concerning what it means to be knowledgeable within a domain of knowing obvious. What are taken as indicators of having developed, for example, mathematical skills or language skills? What are seen as relevant abilities and knowledge in these and other domains? These are no neutral matters. They are inherently dependent upon perspectives. For example, what is skilled language development? Knowing what something is called or being able to use one’s speech in novel situations to communicate in a manner comprehensible to others about novel phenomena and experiences? The latter is one small indicator of an important and much debated issue in education, between what Bruner (1996) refers to as schooling as ‘cultural reproduction’ and ‘human development’ respectively. As Bruner (2006) continues,

education research should never have been conceived as principally dedicated to evaluating the efficacy or impact of ‘present practices.’ [–] Rather, the master question from which the mission of education research is derived is: What should be taught to whom, and with what pedagogical objectives in mind? (p. 212, italics omitted)

These are the classical questions of didactics. It is important that educational research is not only ‘backwards directed’, in evaluating outcomes, but also ‘forwards directed’ in pointing out what could be important to help children learn and what tasks teachers may need help in managing. Hence, with this book we also aim to open a debate on such normative issues as what should early childhood education help children develop in various domains. What should be the sense of language development, for example, or democracy learning, in institutionalised practices with children up to 8–10 years (i.e. ECE)? In our view, it is important that scholars engage in this kind of debate and do not leave it to other stakeholders, such as politicians, to set the agenda for these kinds of issues in Early Childhood Education.

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