

A SUMMARY OF  
**REPORT 239**  
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# Pre-school in transition

A national evaluation of the Swedish pre-school



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## **Pre-school in transition**

## Foreword

The study presented in this report is the first national evaluation of the pre-school after the reform of 1998 when the pre-school received its own curriculum and became the first step for children into the overall education system. The aim of the evaluation is to examine how the pre-school has developed in different respects after the reform, and also to study the importance of the reform in terms of its development.

Research shows that reforms in the education area require a long period before they have an impact on practice. From this perspective the evaluation can be described as formative. In other words it provides a progress report on the consequences of the reform and raises questions concerning the direction in which the pre-school is moving some years after the introduction of the reform. The evaluation also highlights important paths the pre-school can take in its future development.

The evaluation takes a wide-ranging approach and builds on three important sub-studies: a meta analysis of research and evaluations of the pre-school, a questionnaire survey directed to those responsible in all municipalities, as well as case studies based on a sample of municipalities and pre-schools.

This report summarises the most important results as well as the views of the National Agency for Education on the overall picture provided by the evaluation.

The report has been written by Lena M Olsson and Gunnar Åsén – project managers and co-ordinators of the different sub-studies. The report has been translated by Brian Turner, IMC, Stockholm.

Stockholm in November 2004

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# Introduction

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. The pre-school reform

The Swedish pre-school cares for children aged 1–5 while their parents are working or studying or if the children have special needs of their own.<sup>1</sup> Pre-schools are open all year round and daily opening times are varied to fit in with parents' working hours. Parents pay a maximum fee for pre-school activities, which will be no more than between one and three percent of the family income, depending on how many children the family has. In 2003 76 percent of all children aged 1–5 attended pre-school, or 351 800 children in all.

During the course of its development, the pre-school has been a part of the social sector and an important part of Swedish family policy. The reform, which was implemented in its entirety in 1998, means i.a. that the pre-school currently is a part of and represents the first step for children in the overall education system.

This is manifested by a number of changes at the state level which were introduced when pre-schooling and school-age child care<sup>2</sup> was transferred on 1 July 1996 from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education and Science. The National Agency for Education took over responsibility for the whole of the child care sector in January 1998 and at the same time the legislation was transferred from the Social Services Act to the Education Act.<sup>3</sup> One stage in the reform was the introduction of the Curriculum for the pre-school (Lpfö 98) which is binding on all pre-schools.<sup>4</sup> The curriculum aims at creating conditions for an equivalent pre-school of high quality. This expresses a policy orientation where the goals set up are formulated in general terms.

There were several reasons for the reform. From an international perspective, emphasis was increasingly being given to the importance of education as a

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<sup>1</sup> In recent years children whose parents are unemployed or on parental leave are to be guaranteed a place at pre-school or in a family day-care home for at least three hours per day.

<sup>2</sup> The term pre-schooling covers the pre-school, family day-care home and open pre-school. The term school-age child care covers the leisure time centre, family day-care home, as well as open leisure time activities.

<sup>3</sup> At present there is a proposal from the Commission on the Education Act (skollagskommittén) concerning joint legislation for the pre-school and school. See SOU 2002:121. *Skollag för kvalitet och likvärdighet (Education Act for quality and equivalence)*. Betänkande av 1999 års skollagskommitté (*The report of the 1999 Commission on the Education Act*). Stockholm: The Ministry of Education and Science.

<sup>4</sup> The reform not only aimed at developing a new steering document for the pre-school, but revisions were also made to the Curriculum for compulsory schooling (Lpo 94) to cover the leisure-time centre and the pre-school class. Lpo 94 contains numerous formulations on the importance of play, creativity and the well-being of the whole individual.

factor promoting economic growth and competitiveness. The statement on government policy in 1996 stipulated that the pre-school, school and school-age child care should be integrated in order to enhance the quality of the important early years of the compulsory school. It also stated that lifelong learning should be a foundation stone in education policy and that a shared view of development and learning should permeate all activities involving children and young persons. The child should not be confronted by one attitude in pre-school or school-age child care and a different one when starting compulsory school. A starting point for the government is that the child's preconditions for development and learning are largely influenced by the social environment and the pedagogical stimulation which they encounter during their childhood years. For this reason, the pedagogical role of the pre-school should be strengthened at the same time as the pre-school's pedagogical approaches should be given greater scope in the school.<sup>5</sup> The reform thus aims at raising quality in both the pre-school and the school.

The pre-school's incorporation into the education system can be described as a comprehensive reform which deals with changes of principal importance.<sup>6</sup> But at the same time that the pre-school is a part of education, it also performs other important functions. The directives to the Commission on Child care and School reiterate not only the importance of the child's early learning but also the role and task of the pre-school in creating equivalent conditions for the future.<sup>7</sup> The preamble to the curriculum also expresses the importance of the pre-school in terms of family policy:

”It is crucial that the pre-school, both qualitatively and professionally, functions effectively within the education system. The intention, however, is not that the pre-school should thus change its function. The pre-school should continue to be an important complement to parental care and upbringing. Parents should be enabled by the pre-school to combine parenthood with gainful employment. Children should be provided with an environment which is secure, rich in learning and promotes development by means of close and confidential cooperation between the home and the pre-school.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Bill. 1995/96:206. *Vissa skolfrågor m.m. (Specific school issues etc).*

<sup>6</sup> Haug, P (2003). *Om kvalitet i förskolan. Forskning om och utvärderingar av förskolan 1998–2001.* Forskning i fokus, nr 8. Stockholm: National Agency for Education.

<sup>7</sup> SOU 1997:157. *Att erövra omvärlden. Förslag till läroplan för förskolan.* Slutbetänkande av Barnomsorg och Skolkommittén, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Bill. 1997/98:93. *Läroplan för förskolan (Curriculum for the pre-school)*, p. 15–16.

The Swedish pre-school model is based on the premise that children learn and develop in all the contexts in which they are involved – and not just specifically selected situations. This has consequences on how pre-schooling should be organised and means that care and pedagogy are to be interwoven in daily practice. The model has been highly praised in OECD contexts and described as "outstanding".<sup>9</sup>

The reform has a dual purpose – that the pre-school should change – and at the same time maintain its special characteristics. After the incorporation of the pre-school into the education system, new reforms have been implemented in the pre-school area – a universal pre-school, maximum fee, as well as the right to a place based on the child's own needs. These reforms aim at making the pre-school more accessible and a right for all children. In a report to the OECD on the Swedish pre-school, its socio-political function is emphasised – namely that a pre-school for all children is an important policy goal for creating equivalent opportunities.<sup>10</sup> The importance of the pre-school in shaping the life conditions of the child is increasing and it is thus essential to deepen our knowledge of how the pre-school has developed and changed in the aftermath of the reform.

## 1.2 The curriculum for the pre-school

An important milestone in the pre-school's incorporation into the education system was the introduction of the first curriculum for the pre-school (Lpfö 98), which entered into force on 1 August 1998. The pre-school's incorporation into the education system and the introduction of the curriculum has led to a more advanced form of management by objectives and results based on the principles that were set out in what is known as the Bill on Responsibility (*ansvarspropositionen*).<sup>11</sup> The new division of responsibility in essence means that the role of the state is to formulate at an overall level the national goals and guidelines for the pre-school. The municipality as principal organiser should provide the preconditions so that education is provided in accordance with the goals of the curriculum, whilst the professionals, i.e. heads of pre-schools and staff, are responsible for interpreting and applying the goals.

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<sup>9</sup> OECD (2001) *Starting Strong. Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD.

<sup>10</sup> Gunnarsson, L., Korpi, B. & Nordenstam, U. (1999). *Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Sweden*. Stockholm: The Ministry of Education and Science.

<sup>11</sup> Bill. 1990/91:18. *Ansvaret för skolan*.

The curriculum of the pre-school is an ordinance with binding provisions, and these should thus be used to steer all pre-schools in the country. The curriculum aims at creating conditions for increasing equivalence. It expresses the demands that the State imposes on pre-schooling, as well as the demands and expectations children and parents may impose on the pre-school.

The curriculum was introduced in a specific historical and social context, and its contents reflect compromises between different interest groups. In a comparative study of curricula in Nordic countries, it is clear that they have different functions and structures in different countries and at different points in time.<sup>12</sup> The Swedish curricula – both that of the pre-school and the school – contain guidelines, but are also in many respects a normative policy instrument. They contain overall goal descriptions in order to strengthen scope for professionals at the local level and ideas on participatory goal steering are an important starting point.<sup>13</sup> Local and regional development work should be regarded as an important pre-requisite for success.

The curriculum sets out the fundamental values of the pre-school, its tasks as well as goals and guidelines for pre-schooling. Under the heading "Fundamental values", emphasis is placed on the importance of adults' attitudes and concrete experiences in enabling the child to develop an understanding of democratic values:

”The foundation on which these values rests expresses the ethical attitude which shall characterise all pre-school activity. Care and consideration towards other persons, as well as justice and equality, in addition to the rights of each individual shall be emphasised and made explicit in all pre-school activity. Children assimilate ethical values and norms primarily through their concrete experiences. The attitudes of adults influence the child's understanding and respect for the rights and obligations that apply in a democratic society. For this reason adults serve an important role as models.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Sivesind, K., Afsar, A. & Bachmann, K. (2003) *Nordiske laereplaner*. Oslo: Laeringssenteret.

<sup>13</sup> Participatory goal steering means that those who are affected by the goals should also participate in the process of transforming the goals and making them more concrete. C.f. SOU 1992:94. *Skola för bildning (School for Life). Report of the Commission on the Curriculum*. Stockholm: The Ministry of Education and Science.

<sup>14</sup> *Curriculum for the Pre-school. Lpfö 98*. Stockholm: The Ministry of Education and Science; p. 7.

Under the heading *The tasks of the pre-school* it is clear that the tasks of the pre-school are broad and comprehensive. This is evident, not least in the introductory paragraph, where the following is stated:

” The pre-school should lay the foundations for lifelong learning. The pre-school should be enjoyable, secure and rich in learning for all children. The pre-school should provide children with good pedagogical activities, where care, nurturing and learning together form a coherent whole. The development of children into responsible persons and members of society should be promoted in partnership with the home.<sup>15</sup> ”

The curriculum also contains goals and guidelines which are to be understood in the context of the fundamental values and tasks of the pre-school. The pre-school curriculum sets out goals and guidelines for the following areas:

- Norms and values
- Development and learning
- Influence of the child
- Pre-school and home
- Co-operation between the pre-school class, the school and the leisure-time centre

*The goals* specify the orientation of the work of the pre-school and set out the qualitative development desired. Goals are laid down for the first three sections mentioned above. The guidelines set out the responsibility which the staff in the pre-school have. *Guidelines* are set out for all who work in the pre-school, but also the responsibility the work team has in ensuring that work is directed towards the goals of the curriculum. Guidelines exist for all the areas.

The curriculum for the pre-school has a number of similarities to that of the compulsory school. The guidelines are built up in a similar way and contain features in common, such as promoting the child's development and learning, and providing a firm foundation for the fundamental values of society. However, there is one vital difference. The goals in the curriculum are formulated as goals to strive towards and set out what the "pre-school should strive to ensure in terms of each child's development" in different respects. They thus describe processes rather than final outcomes from pre-schooling. One consequence of this is that the individual child's outcomes are not to be assessed or

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<sup>15</sup> *Curriculum for the Pre-school. Lpfö 98*, p. 8.

evaluated. This is expressed clearly in the introduction to the curriculum of the pre-school:

” In the pre-school the outcome of the individual child is not to be formally assessed in terms of grades and evaluation. The pre-school provides pedagogical activities which children can begin and participate in at different ages over varying periods of time. The pre-school should be secure, developmental and rich in providing learning opportunities for all children participating on the basis of each child’s individual conditions.<sup>16</sup>”

The curriculum for the pre-school thus differs from that of the school where the goals to be attained are set out and where pupils’ outcomes – which are ultimately expressed as grades – are an important instrument of assessment. However, the main focus in the curriculum of the pre-school is that children develop their desire to learn and curiosity, and also a belief in their own ability – and not the attainment of a specific level of knowledge.

The curriculum is based on the Education Act, which is designed as a framework act, and contains the fundamental provisions governing pre-schooling, of which the pre-school is one part.<sup>17</sup> The so-called quality paragraph states the following:

” The task of the pre-school is to provide children with pedagogical activities where care, learning and nurturing form a coherent whole /.../ In order to provide pre-schooling /.../ there should be staff with the education or experience appropriate to satisfying the child’s need for care and good pedagogical activities. The groups should have an appropriate size and composition. The premises should be suitable for their purpose. Pre-schooling /.../ should be based on each child’s needs. Children who for physical, mental or other reasons are in need of special support for their development, should receive care appropriate to their needs.<sup>18</sup>”

In addition to this, the Education Act also contains provisions on the scope of pre-schooling, provision of places, fees etc.

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<sup>16</sup> *Curriculum for the Pre-school. Lpfö 98*, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> *Education Act*, Chap. 2 a, 1–12§§.

<sup>18</sup> *Education Act*, Chap. 2 a, 3§§.



**The first national  
evaluation of  
the pre-school**

## 2. The first national evaluation of the pre-school

This report presents a summary of the first national evaluation of the pre-school subsequent to the reform and the introduction of the curriculum. The study has been carried out by the National Agency for Education. The overall aim of the evaluation is to *examine how the pre-school has developed after the reform and study the importance of the reform in its development*. The evaluation is more a progress report of quality in the pre-school some years after the introduction of the reform. The assessment of quality is based on the demands imposed on the pre-school in the Education Act and also the goals and intentions that were laid down in the curriculum. The evaluation examines different quality aspects – structure, process and outcomes – and provides a basis for assessing goal attainment in the pre-school. In the evaluation, goal attainment was studied from the viewpoint that the goals to strive towards focus on processes in pre-schooling. For this reason, the pre-school's own descriptions and assessments of its activities could be regarded as assessments of outcomes and goal attainment. The evaluation also studies possible differences between municipalities and pre-schools from the perspective of equivalence.

In the evaluation, the following questions are central:

- *In what ways has the curriculum been implemented and received in municipalities and pre-schools?*
- *How is the pre-school organised, steered and managed in the municipalities?*
- *What are the structural conditions for pre-schooling, both at the municipal level and at different pre-schools?*
- *How do the municipalities and pre-schools perceive and implement their task in relation to the goals and intentions of the curriculum?*
- *What similarities and differences exist between municipalities and pre-schools in terms of the factors mentioned above? How can possible variations be understood and explained?*

In the evaluation, three different sub-studies have been carried out; a *meta analysis* of research about and evaluations of the pre-school, published during the years 1998–2001, a *questionnaire survey* directed to the municipal heads of education in all municipalities and municipal districts, as well as *case studies* in a sample of 10 municipalities and 33 pre-school units, located in different kinds of catchment areas,<sup>19</sup> where municipal heads of education, pre-school

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<sup>19</sup> The pre-school units, selected in the case studies, are situated in different kinds of housing-areas: high resource areas, low resource areas and mixed areas.

heads and pre-school staff were interviewed. In connection with the case studies, different types of plans and other written documents have been collected, including municipal school plans, local work plans, individual development plans, action plans and quality reports. In order to highlight possible variations, the sample has been drawn from different types of municipalities and pre-schools working under different conditions and external requirements.

This report summarises the results in relation to the aims and questions of the evaluation. The questions concerning variations are reported and discussed in relation to the other issues. Analysis and discussion of results is related to the meta-analysis of research and evaluations carried out in the project, but also to earlier research and evaluations of reforms implemented in the education area. The chapter concludes with two sections – "An equivalent pre-school?" and "Pre-school in transition" where the National Agency for Education provides an overall assessment and evaluation based on the results of the study.

The overall aim of the evaluation is to examine *how the pre-school has developed after the reform and to study the importance of the reform on its subsequent development*. When evaluating a reform, it is difficult to distinguish between the direct effects of the reform itself and what may be due to other external factors. The results show that changes in structural conditions and increased decentralisation have taken place parallel with the incorporation of the pre-school into the education system and the introduction of the new curriculum. The interviews describe how the pre-school has been confronted by increasing demands and challenges without the benefit of new resources, which has had different consequences in municipalities and pre-schools. In the evaluation, it is evident that municipal heads of education, heads of pre-schools and staff regard the large groups of children brought about by financial savings as the major change within the pre-school in recent years, in addition to the curriculum reform. Viewed against this background, the time at which the new curriculum was introduced was relatively unfavourable.

When evaluating a reform, it is also important to take a longer time perspective. The activities of the pre-school can then be understood as the overall effect of long-term development, where earlier reforms have also had an impact.<sup>20</sup> A recurring pattern from evaluations in the educational area is that reforms need time to be introduced, secure acceptance, and not least transformed into practice. In the school area, it often takes 10–15 years, sometimes

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<sup>20</sup> Liedman, S.E. (1997) *I skuggan av framtiden. Modernitetens idéhistoria*. Stockholm: Bonnier Alba.

even longer, before the results of decisions made under new reforms become apparent.<sup>21</sup> Neither is it uncommon that reforms at the central level lead to different development paths and outcomes other than those originally intended. The explanations provided by research cover a wide and complex range. This may involve *a lack of support* for the reforms, internal contradictions and *lack of clarity* in the reforms, *shortcomings in preconditions* concerning implementation or that the reforms are not sufficiently strong in relation to existing *traditions* and established systems.<sup>22</sup>

Given the background and the importance research attaches to the time perspective, this evaluation has been carried out relatively shortly after the introduction of the reform. Viewed from this perspective, the evaluation should be viewed as formative rather than summative.<sup>23</sup> It provides a progress report on the consequences of the reform and raises questions concerning the direction in which the pre-school is moving some years after the introduction of the reform. The evaluation also indicates important paths the pre-school can take in its future development.

The evaluation shows a number of changes in the pre-school which are largely connected to the reform and the introduction of the curriculum, as well as other factors such as e.g. changes in frames and organisation. In other respects, the reform has had less impact or contributed to a development that was hardly intended. This can be seen more clearly from the summary of results presented below.

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<sup>21</sup> Haug (2003) states that a common result, when evaluating "young" reforms, is that the reforms are not implemented as expected nor do they achieve the results expected. This result he describes as a "ritual", in many cases this is the general pattern rather than an exception and what can normally be expected.

<sup>22</sup> See e.g. Sarason, S.B. (1990) *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers; Tyack, D. & Cuban, L. (1995) *Tinkering toward Utopia. A century of public school reform*. London: Harvard University Press.

<sup>23</sup> Scriven, M. (1996). Types of evaluation and types of evaluators. *Evaluation Practice*, 17, 151–161.

## Results

### 3. Implementation and reception of the curriculum

The evaluation shows that the curriculum has been given *a positive reception* by administrative management, heads of pre-schools and pre-school staff. This is unusual if we compare the reception given to the curricula reforms in the school area. The fact that the pre-school, which by tradition has had a low status and no curriculum, has been incorporated into a new system which has higher status, has led to a positive change for the professionals. The evaluation also shows that the curriculum has fulfilled many different functions, but has only had a marginal effect on municipal decisions concerning frames and resources. The curriculum has been most important in terms of providing confirmation of the pre-school's ways of working and raising its status, but it has also been of importance in providing support to staff in their pedagogical work. An important pre-requisite for implementation of a reform, namely that it has *widespread* support – was thus fulfilled in this case. The curriculum has had a "mental" impact and has been taken seriously by all the groups consulted in the evaluation.

The evaluation shows that in large urban areas and large cities more resources were allocated for *implementation* of the curriculum than in other municipalities. One possible explanation for these differences may be that in larger municipalities, there are substantially more resources available for competence development.

The responses to the questionnaire directed to municipalities show that there are great similarities between the municipalities' own steering documents and the curriculum for the pre-school. When the municipalities describe the areas given priority in their school plans or similar documents, in the first instance they refer to issues concerning fundamental values, the influence of the child and co-operation with parents. Different aspects concerning the child's development and learning are also given priority in many municipalities. The municipalities have primarily given priority to areas regarded as important for both the pre-school and school, whilst areas which are based on the traditions and special characteristics of the pre-school, e.g. the child's social development and play, are not emphasised to the same extent in municipal steering documents.

The similarity between what the municipalities have given prominence to in their own steering documents and the goal areas of the curriculum may be an indication that the curriculum has had a crucial effect at the municipal level, in terms of identifying certain areas for pre-school development and development of competence.

## 4. The organisation, steering and management of the pre-school

The evaluation shows that the intentions of the reform of bringing about a closer linkage between the pre-school and school have had a major impact in terms of its organisation and management. In 93 percent of municipalities, the pre-school and the school are organised by a joint board/administration and 87 percent of the municipalities have joint municipal steering documents. One third of the pre-schools covered in the case studies were led by head teachers who also had management responsibility for the school.

The case studies indicate that the intentions of the reform to develop "continuity" in the education system by bringing the pre-school and school closer together, has had an impact in the majority of municipalities in the case study, and not just in terms of management and organisation. In some municipalities, the pre-school's role of preparing children for school has increased. The closer links between the pre-school and school are not in the first instance about concrete forms of cooperation between them at the local level. Co-ordination at a more overall level has also been achieved by municipalities steering the pre-school and school through joint plans and goals, quality reports and other types of written documents.

The municipalities have implemented far-reaching decentralisation of responsibility and decision-making in a number of central areas. Questions concerning group size, measures for children in need of special support, time for staff when not working with children, and measures for competence development are most often decided at the local level<sup>24</sup>, within the economic frames given. Decisions are more often made at the local level in larger cities than in other municipalities. One exception is decisions on measures for children in need of special support, where decision-making in larger cities tends to be more centralised.

Local activity reports often serve as a basis for the municipal management's knowledge concerning quality in pre-schools. In half of the municipalities, centrally initiated evaluations of the pre-school were carried out. Even though municipal heads of education use a number of different channels, it is mainly through dialogue with heads of pre-schools that they keep themselves informed about quality in the pre-school. Heads of pre-schools thus have a key

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<sup>24</sup> The local level refers to the school management area, the economic unit or the pre-school.

role in providing the administration with knowledge on how the pre-school should be developed. In those cases where heads of pre-schools do not have sufficient knowledge or where communication between the administration and heads of pre-schools does not function, there is a "gap" between the levels. This makes it more difficult for the municipality to obtain relevant information and be able to manage and develop the pre-school.

In connection with decentralisation, heads of pre-schools have played a key role in developing and creating conditions for implementing the curriculum. In the case studies, the majority of pre-school heads describe themselves as facing a split-work situation where they have to live up to different demands and expectations, both from the administration and the pre-schools. The working situation of the heads of pre-schools should be seen against a background where management resources have decreased at the local level and where they take greater responsibility for larger units. A relatively common way of managing the situation is to delegate certain tasks to the staff, which may have the consequence of reducing the time the staff have available for working with the children.

Overall, there are major variations between municipalities and pre-schools concerning opportunities to exercise pedagogical leadership. Approximately one third of the pre-school cases studied were satisfied with the pedagogical leadership, a somewhat smaller proportion were dissatisfied, and in other pre-schools, there were diverging views. In those cases where pedagogical leadership for different reasons does not function, the implementation of the intentions of the curriculum becomes an issue for the individual work team and dependent on the competence, skills and interests of individual staff members. This means that the links between the state, the municipalities and the pre-schools do not function as intended. In other cases, where the links function and where municipal management and heads of pre-schools are the driving forces and have succeeded in creating more favourable conditions for the staff in terms of structural conditions and/or time and opportunities to carry out a professional dialogue and build a common platform, the pre-schools have been able to implement their task with greater success.

## 5. Structural conditions of the pre-school

In the evaluation, structural quality has been examined by focusing on factors such as *size of groups of children and their composition, access to trained staff and stand-ins and also the lay-out of the premises.*

The National Agency for Education in a recently published study stated that group sizes in the pre-school increased substantially during the 90s, but have subsequently stabilised at a historically high level over the last four years.<sup>25</sup> In the current evaluation, the municipal questionnaire shows that the average group size for younger children (1–3 years old) is 14.6, for groups with older children (3–5 years old) 19.7 and for mixed age groups 18.4. There are, however, major differences between municipalities, but especially between pre-schools in the same municipality. As an example, it can be mentioned that group size for younger children may vary between 10–22 children and in groups of older children between 15–25. Similar variations exist in pre-schools covered in the case studies. According to the municipal questionnaire, there is also a tendency for group size to be larger in large urban areas and larger cities.

In approximately one third of the municipalities, there are policy decisions concerning norms for group size, but in these municipalities the groups are no smaller than in those municipalities lacking such norms. This could indicate that the ceiling has been set so high that in practice they have not had a major impact on the number of children per group.

According to the municipal questionnaire, decisions on the size of groups are often made at a local level, and this is especially common in larger cities. Irrespective of whether the decision is made locally or at the municipal level, financial resources and priorities are the main factors determining group size. Factors such as the child's age, parental demand and the size of the premises and their lay-out are also of some importance. All these factors can contribute to explaining the large variations between and within municipalities concerning group size. Factors such as the pre-school's catchment area, pedagogical goals/ambitions and the competence of the staff in the view of those responsible for management have been of less importance when making decisions on group sizes. Despite the fact that pre-schools work under different conditions, it is mainly financial constraints which steer decisions on group size and local conditions are seldom taken into account.

Structural conditions are described in varying degrees as a problem in the case study interviews. The size of the groups not only has pedagogical conse-

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<sup>25</sup> Skolverket (2003) *Gruppstorlekar och personaltätthet i förskola, förskoleklass och fritidshem*. Stockholm: National Agency for Education

quences, but is also of importance for the working environment of the staff. Different conditions for pre-schools for managing large groups reinforces the importance of a dialogue between different levels – municipal management, heads of pre-schools and pre-school staff – when making decisions about what are “appropriate group sizes”. The National Agency for Education has earlier drawn attention to the fact that effective communication and dialogue between the management and the professionals concerning frames and conditions for the work is crucial in a decentralised system.<sup>26</sup>

*Access to qualified staff* is an important prerequisite for implementation of the curriculum, even though the term “competence” can cover a wider range than purely formal education. The National Agency for Education’s follow-up data<sup>27</sup> shows that there are great differences between municipalities and pre-schools concerning their capacity to recruit qualified staff. The case studies indicate that the situation is most difficult in sparsely populated areas and low resource areas in large cities. The fact that pre-schools with worse conditions in other respects, also experience greater difficulties in recruiting qualified staff, can lead to increasing differences between pre-schools concerning their ability to fulfil the intentions of the curriculum.

Responsibility for *arranging stand-in teachers* is generally decentralised to the pre-schools themselves. There are certain differences between pre-schools in their access to stand-in teachers and how short-term staff absenteeism is managed. Many pre-schools do not bring in stand-in teachers, primarily to save money.

The staff provide different descriptions of how well *the premises* can be used. Often, efforts are made to use premises flexibly and the internal environment is reorganised in order to stimulate the child’s sense of exploration and discovery or what works best when working with the child. Sometimes, it is apparent that the premises are not appropriate to current group sizes, but the large groups have also created a greater awareness of how premises can be used in the best way.

In overall terms, the evaluation shows that the reform and the increased demands imposed by the curriculum on the pre-school has not had any major impact on the structural conditions of the pre-school. There is much to indicate that the reform in this respect has been faced with *less than perfect pre-conditions* for effective implementation.

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<sup>26</sup> Skolverket (2003) *Gruppstorlekar och personaltäthet i förskola, förskoleklass och fritidshem*. Stockholm: National Agency for Education.

<sup>27</sup> Skolverket (2003) *Barnomsorg, skola och vuxenutbildning. Jämförelsetal för huvudmän, del 1, 2003*. Stockholm: National Agency for Education; p. 16.

## 6. Tools for implementing the curriculum

Implementation of the intentions of the curriculum is largely a professional responsibility. A number of "tools" used in carrying out the task have been studied in the evaluation, such as how municipalities and pre-schools work with *planning, pedagogical documentation, joint reflection, evaluation and competence development*. These are important in contributing to building up a common platform for the work of the staff, creating a shared understanding of the task and developing effective work teams. These tools are also crucial for the staff to be able to adapt the pre-school to local conditions and the needs and preconditions of their own groups of children.

*Planning time* or the time when staff are not dealing with children varies between municipalities and pre-schools. Even though there are municipal guidelines setting aside a certain number of hours for planning, the staff do not always have access to this time. The curriculum, the municipal school plan and the local work plan are often the basis for planning. Time for individual planning tends to increase and today there are also moves towards a more flexible view of planning in the pre-school than hitherto.

*Use of documentation* has become more common in the pre-school after the introduction of the curriculum. This applies generally, but particularly in larger urban areas and larger cities. Documentation is also an area of priority for competence development in more than half of the municipalities. The most common form of documentation deals with different ways of monitoring the individual child's development, e.g. through files/portfolios, observations, regular note-taking and development plans. Documentation is most often used to show parents how they the work, but seldom has the nature of pedagogical documentation – as emphasised by the curriculum – where the staff together reflect over what is being documented in order to develop the activity.

The opportunities for *joint reflection* are of great importance in creating opportunities to implement the intentions of the curriculum and build up a shared platform around the work. The case studies show that the opportunities for joint reflection vary. Often it is up to the individual work team to create scope for reflection, but there are also active heads of pre-schools who have succeeded in creating conditions for the staff to continuously reflect on their work. It appears to be somewhat more difficult to create opportunities for reflection where there are large groups of children or in low resource areas since children in these areas as a rule require more time and attention.

*Evaluations* are one way for those with management responsibility in the municipalities to keep themselves informed about the development of quality in pre-schools. Slightly more than half of all municipalities have taken initia-

tives to develop their own evaluations in relation to the curriculum. In the majority of the municipalities in the case studies, user surveys in the form of questionnaires have been directed to parents. The majority of municipalities in the case studies also impose demands that pre-schools carry out their own evaluations, i.e. in relation to the goals of the school plan and as a basis for quality reports. At the pre-school level, evaluation takes place continuously through dialogues amongst the staff, often in relation to planning or on the basis of different goals in the school plan, the local work plan or the curriculum. Different types of more standardised evaluation methods are also being increasingly used. Approximately half the pre-schools in the sample involve parents in this process, but only a few involve children in their evaluations, as is in fact prescribed by the curriculum. Most common is that the evaluations focus on activities and how they should be developed, but there are also examples where pre-schools evaluate children's performance in relation to goals to be attained, which the pre-schools have themselves formulated, which is in contravention of the curriculum.

Implementation of the curriculum requires ongoing, *competence development* of the staff and long-term work in order to create a shared understanding of the task. The majority of municipalities have in recent years given priority to competence development concerning implementation of the curriculum and different areas in the curriculum. The responsibility for competence development is often decentralised to the pre-school level where decisions are often made locally, but within predetermined financial frames. Pre-school heads are to varying degrees the driving force concerning competence development. Today priority is often given to competence development based on the activity or the needs of the work team rather than individual needs for in-service training. Due to economic factors and a lack of stand-ins, it may be difficult to train the whole work team together, even though this is most desirable for development purposes.

In order to implement the intentions of the curriculum, the staff must have time and opportunity to plan together, evaluate, document and reflect on their work. Implementation also requires ongoing competence development. According to the evaluation, a development process has been initiated within these areas, but there are also relatively great differences between different municipalities and pre-schools concerning time and conditions for introducing a professional dialogue concerning their activities. One cause of these differences may be that those responsible for management and pre-school heads have succeeded to varying degrees in creating the necessary conditions and time for the staff to develop the work.

## 7. The tasks of the pre-school

The evaluation illuminates some central aspects on how the pre-school interprets and carries out its task: *the view of the task, opportunities to adapt the activity based on each child's needs and conditions, how the pre-school satisfies children in need of special support* and also how the pre-school functions in providing support for the family.

The pre-school has a long tradition of viewing the child's development as a whole, and also that children learn the whole time in all the contexts they encounter, and not just in specially selected situations. The evaluation shows that there are often elements of continuity in *how the task of the pre-school is viewed* and in many interviews, emphasis is put on the interrelationship between care, nurturing and learning, and how they reinforce each other. The staff in the pre-school are thus largely mediators of the "educare concept" i.e. that pedagogy and care are united in daily practice, as is also set out in the curriculum.

But at the same time, the results indicate that a shift in perspective has taken place after the reform. In one third of the case study interviews, descriptions were given of how the pre-school task has changed, and its focus has shifted towards learning. The demands on the pre-school have also increased. Currently there is an awareness of the pedagogical task of the pre-school and its importance for lifelong learning. At the same time, it is apparent from the interviews that learning is defined in different ways. Some argue in support of a new view of learning, where the pre-school more than hitherto, should be based on the child's own initiatives and interests. In other interviews, emphasis is placed on what the child should learn before starting school. In some interviews, the special characteristics of the pre-school were emphasised – its approach to learning differs from that of the school – and concern was sometimes expressed that the pre-school might increasingly resemble the school.

The opportunities for pre-schools *to adapt their work to each child's individual needs, conditions and interests* varies. More than half those interviewed consider that the pre-school has good opportunities to achieve this. Often, the potential for achieving this is related to relatively small groups of children or that pre-schools are located in stable areas and have homogeneous groups of children. In one third of the interviews, difficulties were described, as mainly arising from large group size and a lack of time. The staff have developed different strategies to be able to "see" each child and acquire knowledge of the child's needs, i.e. allocating responsibility for different children, and it is also common that children are divided into smaller groups during certain parts of

the day. In the interviews, there were also many indications that the pre-school is working in a more individualised way as compared with earlier. For instance, it is common that pre-schools set up individual development plans and that the staff monitor the individual child's development through portfolios or other forms of documentation.

The pre-school has a special responsibility for *children in need of special support*. Results indicate that the proportion of children defined as being in need of special support has increased in many municipalities, especially in large urban areas. There also appears to be a connection between larger groups of children and an increasing proportion of children in need of special support. In the majority of municipalities where the size of the group has increased in recent years, the proportion of children in need of support has also increased. In many municipalities, resources are considered to be insufficient – this is particularly the case in large cities. Here there are noticeably great variations between different municipalities. But there are also differences between different pre-schools within the same municipality. At pre-schools located in low resource areas, a higher proportion of children are defined as being in need of support.

One reason why the proportion of children in need of special support has increased may well be that the preconditions for providing good overall quality have deteriorated, especially as a result of larger groups of children and fewer staff. Another possible explanation is that the conditions under which some children grow up have become worse and that the need for support has thus increased. Yet another explanation may be that the curriculum for the pre-school imposes higher demands on the child's individual development and learning compared with earlier, and that the individual child's development is also observed and more closely monitored. One consequence may be that the "range of normality" shrinks and that more children fall outside this and are regarded as being in need of special support. Here it is worth drawing attention to a growing imbalance where there is an increasingly large proportion of children in need of support and insufficient resources.

The pre-school is described in the curriculum as providing important *support for families* in their responsibility for the child's "upbringing, development and growth". The majority of pre-school heads and staff describe in positive terms that the pre-school functions as a support and that relations between the pre-school and home is crucial for the work of the pre-school. Support can, however, differ in many ways. Sometimes, it is emphasised that the pre-school has a more important role to play by mediating its view of the child and describing how it works with children. In this respect, it is possible

to talk about a transfer of norms from the pre-school to the family. In other cases, the pre-school and home have a joint responsibility and it is important to have this joint view and shared norms. At the same time, a recurring theme in the interviews was that parents have the main responsibility for their children and that the staff are not to usurp this responsibility.

In a third of the interviews with heads of pre-schools and staff, frustration was expressed to the effect that the pre-school has to take excessive responsibility and that the staff and parents have different norms for upbringing of children. The catchment area of the pre-school is of great importance in terms of how effectively co-operation functions between staff and parents. In low resource areas, where the task in many respects is more difficult to implement, the staff are more dissatisfied. In areas with plentiful resources, co-operation with parents is more often described in positive terms. There is a clear and relatively uncomplicated division of responsibility between the home and pre-school, as they often have a shared view of the child and how possible problems can be solved.

Overall, the results show that pre-schools have different opportunities to carry out their task in a satisfactory way. Factors such as size of child groups and the catchment area of the pre-school can explain a large part of these differences. Pre-schools in stable areas as a rule face better conditions for adapting their activities to the individual needs of children, to satisfy children in need of support, and to work together in a good way with parents. These results can be viewed in the context of the explanations provided in the research on the shortcomings of the reform. In this context, it can be seen that certain preschools face *inadequate conditions* to carry out their task.

## 8. The goals of the pre-school

The pre-school's incorporation into a goal and result oriented education system has had an impact on views concerning goal attainment in the pre-school and how this can be measured and assessed. At the municipal level, the idea of goal steering has been well accepted and attempts have been made in evaluations and quality reports to make pre-school activities transparent and assess goal attainment. Formulating goals which are specific to the pre-school and evaluating these is not without problems. In the majority of municipalities, the pre-school and school are treated jointly in the school plan and quality reporting. In documents, emphasis is put on what is regarded as shared in terms of their tasks and goals without discussing the problem that the pre-school and the school have partially different types of goals. This means that the boundary between goals to strive for and goals to attain becomes more ambiguous and less transparent. Sometimes, the consequence is that the goals of the school become the norm even when assessing the pre-school. One out of 10 municipalities have formulated goals to be attained by the pre-school in the school plan, a practice which is in direct contravention of the intentions of the curriculum.

But there are also municipalities which formulate more specific goals based on the goals to strive for as formulated in the curriculum of the pre-school, where goal attainment is more systematically assessed in relation to the child's response to activities, in terms of the child's security, enjoyment and fun. This is a way of involving children in assessing the pre-school's goal attainment, without assessing their performance.

In local work plans, the goals of both the school plan and the curriculum are transformed into practice in different ways. In some cases the work plans contain a mixture of both goals to strive for and goals to attain, which indicates that there are difficulties in distinguishing between the two types of goals. Evaluating attainment of goals to strive for by observing and documenting individual children occurs frequently in the pre-schools studied. In certain cases, the development of the child becomes an indicator of the quality of the pre-school, which is a dubious practice since the curriculum states that the individual child's results are not to be evaluated in the pre-school. There are also examples of pre-schools which in contravention of the curriculum, formulate their own goals to be attained, and use this as a basis for assessing the child's performance. A more detailed examination of the local work plans of pre-schools shows that 5 of 28 plans (in 3 out of 10 municipalities) contain different forms of goals to be attained, as well as examples of approaches taken for measuring goal attainment.

The results show that assessment of goal attainment is also carried out in relation to individual development plans where the goals for the individual child are formulated. In half of the municipalities, demands are imposed that pre-schools should draw up individual development plans for each child, but there are also many examples where the pre-school on its own initiative has developed such plans. One study states that individual development plans have become increasingly common in the pre-school since the introduction of the curriculum, despite the fact that no such requirements are laid down in the curriculum. The introduction of the curriculum appears to have been a starting point for such work since the staff feel that the demands on the pre-school and documentation of its activities has increased.<sup>28</sup>

In different plans and documents, municipalities and pre-schools describe their goals and goal attainment. Heads of pre-schools, and particularly staff, also describe in the interviews goal attainment in terms other than in relation to plans. They focus more on whether the activity as a whole is good for children and whether parents are satisfied. The staff often have a complex view of goal attainment, make an assessment of the activity as a whole, and have an acute awareness of when children are feeling good, when they are enjoying themselves and having fun, and when parents have confidence in the pre-school and are satisfied with it. In the assessment of goal attainment, descriptions are given of factors which are closely related to attitudes and relations between the child – staff – parents. These factors are closely related to the tasks of the pre-school and the goals to strive for as described in the curriculum.

In approximately one third of the interviews, goal attainment is assessed by different kinds of local evaluations. The differences between the analysis of the written plans and the interviews indicate that there are different "rationalities" or ways of thinking about the assessment of goal attainment. These may be contradictory, as well as exist parallel at a pre-school, in a work team or in one and the same individual.

The evaluation shows that the pre-school is in a period of transition where an earlier tradition – based on assessments of how the pre-school is developing as a whole – confronts new requirements to make results transparent and more clearly assess goal attainment in relation to specific goals and goal areas. In this context, the assessment of the child's development more often becomes a starting point for evaluating the quality of the pre-school.

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<sup>28</sup> Elfström, I. (2003) *Studie om individuella utvecklingsplaner*. D-uppsats i pedagogik, Lärarhögskolan i Stockholm. Manuscript in preparation.

The curriculum sets out the goals and/or guidelines for the pre-school in five different areas. In the evaluation, heads of pre-schools and staff have themselves *assessed their own activities* in relation to the goals to strive for in each of these areas.

*Fundamental values* (norms and values) is the area given priority in most municipal school plans and it is also the area in the curriculum where most pre-schools consider they have made the greatest progress. The traditions of the pre-school are based on this area, which may be an explanation as to why so many recognise their own way of working in the descriptions given in the curriculum. At the same time, we can see that different interpretations are given to the term "norms and values". Some emphasise the importance of creating stability in the group and developing rules for the children's interaction, others give prominence to staff attitudes towards the children and parents, which should embody respect and awareness. The large group sizes may have meant that norms and values have to be taken into account for pre-schooling to function effectively. Gender equality is one aspect of fundamental values which was hardly mentioned during the interviews.

*Development and learning* is also an area given great importance, both in municipal school plans and those of pre-schools. There are different ways of looking at the child's learning; not only a more flexible way of thinking in terms of how the pre-school should be organised to satisfy the child's curiosity and interests, but also a view that the child must learn certain things as preparation for school. Language and language development is the single area given highest priority in school plans, as well as in pre-schools in the case studies. On the other hand, there are relatively few who referred to the importance of play in learning.<sup>29</sup> As regards development and learning, there is a difference in that pre-schools in large urban areas and large cities consider that they have come further than pre-schools in smaller municipalities. One possible explanation for these differences may be that large municipalities have more resources and have been able to invest more in competence development in the area.

*The child's influence* is an area given priority in municipal school plans, but in this area pre-schools appear to have experienced greater difficulty in living up to the intentions of the curriculum. The case studies show that there are different ways of looking at or defining the influence of the child. Some argue for more formal influence (in connection with meetings, votes etc), others give

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<sup>29</sup> The early development of language and the importance of play for the child's development and learning are two areas which were emphasised in the directives to the Commissions on Child care and the School: see SOU 1997:157, Bilaga 2, p. 196.

prominence to informal factors, such the staff's ability to ensure that the opinions and views of each child are respected. The difficulties faced in enabling children to exercise greater influence are in the interviews related to large group sizes, which means that pre-school activities must be more structured, and that it is more difficult for children to exercise influence the younger they are.

*Pre-school and home:* Co-operation with parents functions effectively in most cases and parents are described as an asset, sometimes, however, this is not entirely free of problems. Often, it works better in high resource areas where parents are well educated and involved. Sometimes, emphasis is put on formal aspects of co-operation, and sometimes informal contact and the importance of mutual confidence are stressed.

*Cooperation between the pre-school class, leisure-time centre and school:* These issues are not given the same high priority in school plans and pre-schools themselves also consider that they have not progressed as far as in other areas.

Pre-schools' own assessments are that they have made varying progress in their work in different areas of the curriculum. The evaluation indicates that some parts of the curriculum have had a greater impact than others, but it also appears that the staff have made different interpretations of central concepts in the curriculum, such as e.g. norms and values, learning and influence. The evaluation indicates that the curriculum has had a greater impact or been better received in areas which are linked to the traditions of the pre-school, but even in the area of development and learning, the majority consider that real progress has been made in this direction. On the other hand, the curriculum has had less impact in some areas which earlier were not given such strong emphasis in the pre-school, namely the child's influence and issues concerning gender equality. The results indicate the need for deeper reflection and competence development in a number of areas.

## 9. An equivalent pre-school?

In summarising the results of the evaluation, we have shown that there are variations between municipalities, and especially between pre-schools within the same municipality. The question is how these variations should be assessed and evaluated. Variations in ways of interpreting and carrying out the task is a natural consequence of a large and complex system, built on local freedom and professional responsibility. Such variations may be beneficial if they arise from conscious adaptation to local needs and conditions, as well as to the recognition that children are different. In a goal steered system, differences in how pre-schooling is organised is regarded as entirely normal and desirable. On the other hand, variations may be a source of problems if they are caused by municipalities and pre-schools facing different conditions for carrying out their task and adapting pre-schooling to the different needs and preconditions of children. According to the curriculum, the pre-school shall:

”irrespective of where it is located, work in order to attain the goals of the pedagogical activity /.../ Account should be taken of the varying conditions and needs of children. This means that the pre-school cannot be organised in the same way everywhere, and that the resources of the pre-school are not to be distributed equally.<sup>30</sup>”

Variations exist between municipalities and pre-schools concerning all the quality aspects studied in the evaluation – i.e. quality of structure, process and results. When these qualitative aspects are linked to each other, we can see some correlation in a number of important respects.

The evaluation shows that pre-schools have different opportunities to implement their tasks, depending on the child's preconditions and needs, the nature of the catchment area and socio-economic background of parents. A comparison between pre-schools in high and low resource areas shows that there is a correlation between certain structural factors (especially opportunities for recruiting trained staff), *process factors* (e.g. time available for planning and joint reflection) and *results* (e.g. co-operation between the pre-school and the home, as well as opportunities to satisfy children in need of special support). On all these points, pre-schools in high resource areas enjoy better conditions and generally succeed in implementing their task with greater success than pre-schools in low resource areas. However, in the case studies, we

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<sup>30</sup> Curriculum for the pre-school. Lpfö 98, p. 8.

have observed a few exceptions where pre-schools in low resource areas have been successful in breaking the dominant pattern or where pre-schools in high resource areas have wrestled with problems e.g. arising from large group sizes.

The catchment areas of pre-schools or the social context is thus a factor of great importance in shaping the opportunities to implement the task in a satisfactory way. At the same time, this is a factor which has been given little importance when municipalities make decisions concerning group sizes. Irrespective of whether the decision is made locally or at the municipal level, financial resources and priorities are the main factors determining group sizes. As the evaluation shows, decisions concerning pre-schools are decentralised in a number of important issues, at the same time as the financial frames are pre-determined. The reform of the pre-school and the increasing demands imposed on the pre-school have not affected structural factors to any great extent. Responsibility for implementing the goals and intentions of the curriculum thus rests with the professionals – heads of pre-schools and staff – and their ability to push forward development with largely unchanged resources and preconditions.

In a decentralised organisation, there is a risk that pre-schools facing worse conditions do not receive sufficient support to carry out their tasks. The evaluation shows that lack of support in terms of resources and management appears to affect primarily pre-schools in low resource catchment areas.<sup>31</sup> Although pre-schools work under different conditions, municipalities take little account of this when allocating resources. This is in conflict with the instructions in the curriculum that resources "are not to be distributed equally".

The evaluation shows that the preconditions for the reform to achieve an impact vary. At some pre-schools, the positive aspects of the reform are emphasised and they describe how increased demands have led to development of their work. Others single out larger group sizes and worse conditions as making implementation of the task more difficult. The results indicate that the changes as a whole have led to greater differences in quality between pre-schools.

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<sup>31</sup> C.f. Bjurek, H., Gustafsson, B., Kjulin, U., & Kärrby, G. (1992) *Effektivitet och kvalitet i barnomsorgen*. Rapport nr 1992:07. Institutionen för pedagogik, Göteborgs universitet. In this study, a connection was found between costs and quality in pre-schools located in problem areas. In these areas, more staff were needed to attain pedagogical quality compared with middle-class areas where quality was independent of staff-child ratios.

The introduction of the curriculum has, amongst other things, aimed at creating pre-schools of equivalent quality. Seen in relation to the intentions of the curriculum and based on an equivalence perspective, the National Agency for Education considers that some of the variations shown by the evaluation are cause for concern.

The National Agency for Education regards it as crucial that the municipalities review their resource allocation models. In their allocation of resources, municipalities should to a greater extent take account of the different preconditions facing pre-schools. It is also important that the professionals' knowledge of local conditions will be increasingly taken into account when making decisions on frames and resources for pre-schools.

## 10. Pre-school in transition

The reform aimed at bringing about changes in a number of important respects, at the same time as the pre-school should maintain and develop its unique characteristics. These changes concern i.a. clarifying the pedagogical role of the pre-school and strengthening its relationship with different parts of the education system. As a result of the reform, the pre-school has become a part of a goal-steered education system. The introduction of the curriculum, which is a binding ordinance, means there is stronger state steering, a clearer pedagogical task and more specifically formulated goals compared with the pedagogical programme which earlier functioned as the steering document for the pre-school. Greater decentralisation of responsibility and decision-making to pre-schools and work teams during the 1990s has meant that the professionals have been given greater responsibility for implementing the task of the pre-school. Parallel with the reform, there have also been changes in the structural conditions facing the pre-school, which imposes higher demands on the professionalism of the staff and their ability to work with large groups of children.

At the same time, the reform attempts to safeguard and maintain the Swedish pre-school model, its traditions and special characteristics. The distinctive feature of the Swedish pre-school was highlighted in a report from the OECD, where pre-schooling was compared across 12 different countries. The report holds up the Swedish pre-school as a model, in terms of both scope and accessibility, as well as its underlying view of the child. The view of the OECD group was that in Sweden childhood has a value in itself and is not regarded purely as a preparation for adult life. This expresses the approach taken by the Swedish pre-school which neither measures nor assesses the child's performance. The Swedish pre-school is also described as flexible, full of variation and providing great respect for the child.<sup>32</sup>

The intention of the reform has not been to abandon the fundamental principles of the family policy tasks of the pre-school. In terms of content, attempts have also been made to maintain continuity since the pre-school's curriculum is largely built on the pedagogical traditions of the pre-school.<sup>33</sup> The reform thus contained elements of both continuity and change.

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<sup>32</sup> OECD (2001) *Starting Strong. Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD.

<sup>33</sup> Bill. 1997/98:93. *Curriculum for the pre-school*.

The evaluation shows that the pre-school is in a *period of transition* encompassing both established traditions and new requirements. In certain respects, continuity can be seen in working methods, and in other respects we can see changes. These patterns reveal a close parallel to Larry Cuban's findings from studies on curricular reform in American schools.<sup>34</sup> In the studies he finds two groups at opposite ends of the spectrum: those who implement the changes in the curriculum and those who do not. The latter group is the largest. He also notes that there is an intermediate group which he calls "hybrids" i.e. those who implement part of what is new and combine this with the old and established. In our evaluation, a similar type of intermediate group appears to be the largest, indicating that the reform has had a relatively strong impact.

The process of change initiated after the reform is in certain respects in line with the intentions of the curriculum. In relatively many pre-schools, there is greater awareness of the task and how it can be implemented. There are also indications of greater flexibility in planning and use of premises, as well as greater efforts to base work on the child's own initiatives and interests, and enhance their involvement. Work on documentation has also become more common in the pre-school in recent years. The view of competence development has also changed – from having been steered by individual in-service needs earlier. Today, however, there is a tendency to give priority to competence development based on the needs of the pre-school or the overall needs of the staff.

But the evaluation also shows changes in other respects. Earlier research shows that reforms often lead to a development with results that are different from those intended. One reason for this may be that there are internal differences and lack of clarity in a reform.<sup>35</sup> The National Agency for Education wishes to give prominence to three important aspects where a shift in perspective has taken place after the reform and which the Agency regards as problematic. These should be the subject of further examination and more detailed discussion at all levels of the system.

- One comprehensive change is the incorporation of the pre-school into a goal and result steered education system. The evaluation indicates that the pre-school and school have only made marginal changes in developing co-operation forms at the local level. On the other hand, both municipalities

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<sup>34</sup> Cuban, L. (1993) *How Teachers Taught. Constancy and Change in American Classrooms 1880–1990*. Second Edition. New York: Teachers College Press.

<sup>35</sup> Haug, P. (2003) *Om kvalitet i förskolan. Forskning om och utvärdering av förskolan 1998–2001*. Forskning i fokus, nr 8. Stockholm: National Agency for Education.

and pre-schools have faced increased demands to describe goals and activities in school plans, local work plans and quality reports. Incorporation into the education system has also had an impact on the view of goal attainment in the pre-school and how this is measured and assessed. Evaluation has become an important steering instrument, since the areas which are evaluated can have an effect on how the pre-school is organised and what content should be focused on.<sup>36</sup> The evaluation shows that assessing goal attainment in relation to goals to strive for is not without problems. Sometimes the distinction between goals to strive for and goals to attain is blurred. In the evaluation, there are also examples where municipalities and pre-schools formulate in school plans and local work plans their own goals to be attained in terms of what the child should be able to perform at a certain age.

In the interviews, heads of pre-schools, and particularly staff, also describe goal attainment in terms other than in relation to plans. Here there is continuity in relation to the traditions of the pre-school where evaluation is often made by means of dialogues and on the basis of a more complex view of goal attainment.<sup>37</sup> The evaluation shows that the pre-school is in a period of transition where an earlier tradition – based on assessments of how the pre-school is developing as a whole – confronts new requirements to make its results transparent and more clearly assess goal attainment in relation to specific goals and goal areas. In this context, assessments of the child's development in different areas increasingly become a starting point for evaluating the quality of the pre-school.

The National Agency for Education considers that there are some problematic elements in current developments. Evaluating the individual child's performance in relation to goals to attain is in conflict with the intentions of the curriculum and the reform. It is thus important that the differences between goals to attain and goals to strive for are clarified and discussed at all levels of responsibility in the system. It is also important to develop evaluation models which take into account the goals to strive for.

<sup>36</sup> Pettersson, S. & Wallin, E. (1995) Method of assessment. I Rombach, B. & Sahlin-Andersson, K. (red) *Från sanningssökande till styrmedel. Moderna utvärderingar i offentlig sektor*. Stockholm: Nerenius & Santérus Förlag.

<sup>37</sup> Karlsson, O. (2000) Praktiskbaserad utvärdering i förskola och fritidshem. *Utbildning och demokrati. Tidskrift för didaktik och utbildningspolitik*. Volym 9, nr 2, 2000, p. 87–106.

- The evaluation shows that *the child's individual development* is increasingly focused on in the pre-school, sometimes with the school as a model. It is common that the individual child's development is mapped, observed and documented. One example of this is that individual development plans have become increasingly common in the pre-school in recent years.<sup>38</sup> In half the municipalities studied, demands for individual development plans were imposed and many pre-schools have also introduced such plans on their own initiative. The incorporation of the pre-school into the education system appears to have been a starting point for such work, despite the fact that the curriculum for the pre-school does not lay down any requirements for individual plans. According to documents issued by the Ministry and the Government, such requirements are only to be imposed on the compulsory school.

In one sense the curriculum imposes increased demands that the pre-school should work in a more individualised way. The goals stipulate that the pre-school should strive to ensure that each child develops in relation to the goals set up, at the same time as the goals lay down the direction of the work of the pre-school. In this respect the pre-school is in a process of transition. By tradition the pre-school has focused on how children develop in groups and in interaction with their surroundings. In earlier evaluations of the pre-school, focus has not been directed to how the individual child develops in different respects, but rather on the conditions that the pre-school provides for the child's all-round development.

Greater individualisation may have good effects if the needs of individual children, their initial conditions and interests become more visible and if the staff use this knowledge to adapt pre-schooling based on the premise that children are different. At the same time, there is also a risk that development plans (or other types of mapping), despite the fact that the original intentions were different, will in practice increasingly focus on the child's shortcomings and become an instrument of normalisation, where the individual child is assessed on the basis of what a child should be expected to accomplish at a specific age. The evaluation also shows how mapping the child's development has become linked to greater demands for evaluation, and also that this is sometimes used to assess the individual child's skills and performance. In the evaluation, it is also apparent that the proportion of children

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<sup>38</sup> C.f. Elfström, I. (2003) *Studie om individuella utvecklingsplaner*. D-uppsats i pedagogik, Lärarhögskolan i Stockholm. Manuscript in preparation.

in need of support has increased, and this may well be an effect of the increasing tendency to monitor the child's development. Identifying the child's needs for support at an early age is important, but in many municipalities insufficient resources are available for children with special needs.

The National Agency for Education can in this respect see a shift in perspective, as it has become increasingly common to identify the child's individual development in different areas. Here there is a risk of focusing excessively on the individual child's performance, where no account is taken of different conditions in pre-schooling, nor how children function in a social and pedagogical context. The National Agency for Education considers that it is also important to take into account how young children may experience being assessed at an early stage in their life. Since such a development is not in line with the intentions of the reform, it is important to observe and monitor such trends, not least with regard to the role of individual development plans in the pre-school.

- In accordance with the intentions of the reform, the pedagogical task of the pre-school should be strengthened, at the same time as the pre-school should maintain and develop its distinctive characteristics. The evaluation shows that views of the pre-school's task contain elements of continuity, seen in relation to the traditions of the pre-school. Above all, the staff emphasise that care, nurturing and learning are inter-connected and presuppose each other. But results also show that the pre-school is in a process of transition, where the focal point of the task has shifted towards learning and where the pre-school is increasingly looked at from a "usefulness" perspective. By making the pre-school a part of the education system, attention is focused on its importance on the child's later performance in school more than before, not least at the municipal management level. Many consider that the importance of the child's early learning has been strengthened, but different meanings are attributed to the concept of learning. The view of learning may be based on the special characteristics of the pre-school and earlier traditions, where development and learning take place in informal contexts and where the interests of the child and his/her own initiatives are the starting point. Another approach is based on a more formal view of learning, where the child should acquire certain predefined knowledge and skills as preparation for school.

The results of the evaluation show that the pre-school's incorporation into the education system has created from a professional perspective "benefits" in that the pre-school gains higher status and increased legitimacy. This could be one explanation for the relatively great impact of the reform and the fact that it has received such positive acceptance.

Based on a child's perspective, the benefits may be more uncertain, and be dependent on the direction in which the pre-school develops. In a compilation of international research, experiences from different countries with different forms of pre-schooling and different ages for starting school are compared. Amongst other things, it appears that formal learning at an early stage – where there is little scope for the child to explore and use his/her own initiative – may have a negative effect on the child's self-esteem and motivation to learn and negatively impact the child's own learning over a longer time perspective. The research indicates the risks involved in children experiencing failure and inadequacy at an early stage in their life.<sup>39</sup> With such a development, the reform may undermine its very purpose – namely that the pre-school should develop the child's belief in his/her own skills and promote learning from a lifelong perspective.

The National Agency for Education considers that the child's learning has been given greater importance in the pre-school after the reform. Such a development is in line with the intentions of the reform to strengthen the pedagogical task of the pre-school.

However, the National Agency for Education considers that excessive emphasis placed on formal learning at an early stage can have negative consequences and be in conflict with the overall goals of the curriculum. In the pre-school, care, nurturing and learning are regarded as inter-related parts of a whole, and the task covers developing the child's desire and curiosity and to promote the all-round development of the child. It is thus important to have a more meaningful dialogue between those responsible for management functions and the professionals concerning what the terms "development" and "learning" mean for children between the ages of 1–5 in the pre-school. Such a discussion would contribute to stimulating the pedagogical development of the pre-school in the future.

<sup>39</sup> Sharp, C. (2002) *School Starting Age: European Policy and Recent Research*. London: National Foundation for Educational Research

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This summary presents the first national evaluation of the pre-school after the reform of 1998, when the pre-school received its own curriculum and became the first step for children into the overall education system. The aim of the evaluation is to examine how the pre-school has developed in different respects after the reform, and also to provide a progress report on the consequences of the reform. The evaluation also indicates the important choices confronting the pre-school in its future development.

The evaluation takes a wide-ranging approach and builds on three important sub-studies: a meta analysis of research and evaluations of the pre-school, a questionnaire survey directed to the municipal heads of education in all municipalities, as well as case studies based on a sample of municipalities and pre-schools.