

Quality education in the flexible preschool. Implications for children and teachers with large work teams, large groups of children and open-space environments

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the 1970s, quality early childhood education and care (preschool) has been a national priority in Sweden. Over the years, policy changes such as the marketisation of the welfare system with increased state regulation and a focus on cost-effectiveness and performativity have resulted in modifications to the services offered. Because of its potential impact on children's learning, wellbeing and development, the preschool environment—as reflected in its spatial design and pedagogical organisation—is considered an important quality indicator. Since the late 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, there has been a tendency towards flexible organisation, with 40–50 young children and a team of 6–8 staff members working together and sharing educational spaces. Taking these reforms as the point of departure, this article examines the rationale for the policy changes and considers their implications for children, teachers and the quality of the preschool education. Data sources include policy documents as well as contemporary research. Findings indicate that policy reforms with shifting pedagogical organisation seem to be proposed and introduced without robust research evidence of the implications for children and teachers.

Keywords

quality education; pedagogical and social organisation; group size; open-space environments; goal achievement; children's learning and wellbeing

Introduction

Children in Sweden have a legal right to early childhood education (preschool education) (*Skollagen*, 2010:800, §§ 4–7). Most attend preschool between the ages of 1 and 5 (78.6% of children 1–3 years; 95.3% of children 4–5 years; Skolverket, 2020a), and many spend long hours at the preschool every day. Children’s childhood is, to a large extent, created in the preschool environment (Halldén, 2007). Qualified teachers¹, the physical environment and its spatial design, and pedagogical organisation, including group size and group composition, have been identified as important factors contributing to children’s wellbeing, development and learning (Skolinspektionen, 2018; Williams, Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2014). Several studies have illustrated how the preschool environment either promotes or restricts children’s learning, development and wellbeing (e.g., Bergström, 2013; Folkman, 2017; Markström, 2005; Nordin-Hultman, 2004). Ultimately, it is the education provider that must ensure that the preschool offers a good and safe environment with an appropriate group size and composition adapted to children’s age (*Skollagen*, 2010:800; Skolverket, 2019). Although the curriculum makes several references to the learning environment, it does not specify what constitutes a good environment and refers to it only in generic terms: ‘The environment in the preschool should inspire and challenge children to broaden their abilities’ (Skolverket, 2019, p. 7) and ‘the work team should promote a good, accessible environment for care, play, movement, development and learning’ (p. 16).

Since the early 1990s, external and internal influences have resulted in shifts and modifications to the services being offered at both national and local levels. One of these changes is related to the marketisation of the welfare system, including preschool, which led to a focus on cost-effectiveness, increased state regulation and quality control. Previous management by planning was replaced by management by evaluation (Vetenskapsrådet, 2012). Another change concerns pedagogical organisation, the physical environment and, consequently, the number of children and staff constituting a preschool. Since the late 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, some education providers have moved away from an organisation of preschools wherein 15–18 children and three staff members constituted one group with its own space. Instead, a flexible organisation was introduced comprising 40–50 young children and large work teams (*storarbetslag*) with 6–8 professionals who work together and share the educational spaces.

Currently, approximately 9% of all preschool groups have 22 or more children (Skolverket, 2020a). However, the percentage is uncertain, since the reporting system has changed, and it is difficult to compare changes over time. Unlike before, when group size referred to the group of children in the various preschool departments (*avdelning*) from 2019, group size now refers to the group that the children form for part of the day in the preschool (Skolverket, 2020b, p. 8). Additionally, since 2015, municipalities can apply for state grants (*Förordning om statsbidrag för mindre barngrupper i förskolan*, 2015:404) to decrease group size and increase quality and goal achievement in the preschool. The reported group size may therefore reflect only the small group even if the preschool practices a flexible organisation. These changes give rise to the following questions:

- What are the rationales behind the policy changes regarding the pedagogical organisation and environment?
- What are the implications of such changes for children and teachers and for the overall quality of the education?

In an attempt to answer these questions, contemporary research, existing literature about quality and curriculum policy will be reviewed to contextualise preschools in Sweden. Subsequently, the rationale for adopting a large work team approach will be explored, followed by an analysis of its implications for children and teachers.

Method

Located within a descriptive paradigm—informed by education policy and critical education frameworks (Ball, 2006) and drawing on international and national policy documents as well as research—this study employed a document analysis approach to examine policy changes since the early 1970s regarding shifting pedagogical organisation and increased state regulation and control. Based on knowledge of the field and familiarity with key research and policy, documents were systematically and rigorously selected with reference to their relevance for the development of and changes in the organisation of preschool education and included:

- the European Union quality framework (European Union, 2014). This policy document provided quality indicators for early childhood education and care (ECEC) and a point of reference for its development in Sweden
- national policy documents, namely government reports and documents regarding the development of and changes in Swedish preschool organisation
- the Education Act
- Curriculum for the Preschool, Lpfö 18 (Skolverket, 2019)

Research documents, mainly from 1990 to 2019, focusing on the pedagogical organisation of the preschool and the importance of the preschool environment for children's learning, development and wellbeing were selected.

A thorough reading and analysis of policy documents and meta-analysis of research documents were undertaken to examine what led to changes in education policy regarding preschool and the implications of those changes for children, teachers and for the overall quality of education.

Although this study was based solely on secondary data, ethical consideration was given with respect to ensuring a fair representation of literature from a wide range of sources. The Swedish ethical guidelines for research were adhered to (Uppsala universitet, 2021).

The Swedish context: Policies on group size, group composition and quality education

Since the beginning of the 1970s, ECEC has been a national priority in Sweden, as women were entering the labour market in large numbers. There was a need for an ECEC system to provide a good and safe environment that catered for children while their parents worked or studied.

In 1968, the Swedish Government appointed a National Commission on Child Care, Barnstugeutredningen, to propose goals and guidelines for the future development of the Swedish ECEC system. Following a proposition from the national commission in 1975 (Statens Offentliga Utredningar, 1975/76:92), the first Preschool Act, *Förskolelagen*, was passed, and the modern preschool was born with specified content areas and a focus on communication and interaction. Grounded in social policy and closely linked with social

progress in Swedish society (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999), this new system promoted centre-based settings that integrated care and education. The Ministry of Health and Social Affairs was the governing body. These settings offered full-time provision for separate age groups consisting of 1- to 3-year olds in one group and 4- to 6-year olds in another (Statens Offentliga Utredningar, 1972; Tallberg Broman, 1995). The recommended group size was 10–12 children and four members of staff in the younger age group and 15 children with three members of staff for the older age group.

The purpose of the preschool system was expressed in two distinct aims:

- to make it possible for parents to combine parenthood with employment or studies
- to support and encourage children's development and learning and help them grow up under conditions that are conducive to their wellbeing. (Skolverket, 2000, p. 3).

Together with the paid parental leave program and child allowances, ECEC became a cornerstone in the publicly funded family support system (Dahlberg et al., 1999; Martin Korpi, 2006), and large-scale investment in preschools across the country was launched. Funded by government grants and complemented with parental fees, municipalities were responsible for the expansion and organisation of the preschools.

In 1974, the government appointed the Family Support Inquiry (Familjestödsutredningen, 1978), which emphasised the competence of the staff working with 1- to 3-year olds in preschool in relation to the quality of the services. Rather than preschool teachers, the majority of the staff working with the youngest children were childcare assistants, and the focus was largely on care. To improve the quality of the education offered to the youngest group, integrated age groups were introduced, allowing 1- to 6-year-old children to be in the same group, with preschool teachers supporting their overall development and learning. Additionally, there were economic gains for the providers, since the group size increased.

In 1975, the National Board of Health and Welfare issued guidelines about the functions, dimensions (9.5 square metres per child) and positions of different rooms in the preschool and included rooms for lively and quiet activities (Socialstyrelsen, 1975). There was no mention of 'the importance of the design for social relations' (Berg, 1987, p. 16). The design and pedagogical organisation of a preschool building had implications for the quality of the education provided, especially in regard to how well the aims could be achieved (de Jong, 2010; Seland, 2009). Additional guidelines were issued in 1989, again focusing mainly on functions, dimensions and equipment (Socialstyrelsen, 1989). Since these were recommendations rather than binding regulations, and the previous norm of 9.5 square metres per child was abandoned (Martin Korpi, 2006), architects and municipal building planners had some degree of freedom when it came to interpreting the recommendations, which led to an increased variation in the design and outdoor and indoor environments of the preschools (de Jong, 2010).

As suggested by the National Commission on Child Care (Statens Offentliga Utredningar, 1972), a common design for preschool buildings included a large room shared among different groups of children, referred to as a 'play hall' (*lekhall*), and activity rooms designated for each age group, such as a room for painting, a home corner and so on. The shared room was designed to encourage play and interaction among the different groups of children and their teachers but did not always function as intended (Statens Offentliga Utredningar, 1972). Despite good intentions, the play hall design caused some problems: planning activities for both a play hall and small activity rooms became too complicated,

and the noise level in the play halls was too high (de Jong, 2010). Over time, the play hall was only sparsely used, and eventually, shared play halls were no longer included in preschool design.

The expansion of the ECEC system in the early 1970s was necessary to meet the needs of the labour market (Kärrby, 2000). In subsequent years, the number of births and women in the labour force increased, leading to a steep request for preschool places. Following the Childcare Act of 1995, ensuring full coverage of preschool places became a priority for the government, which led to increased pressure on municipalities to provide places for children without undue delay (meaning within 4 months from application). In addition to guaranteeing a preschool place for children, the Childcare Act of 1995 discussed quality criteria: that is, group size and composition, premises, environment and teacher education (Martin Korpi, 2006).

In the early 1990s, the general financial crisis led to a reduction in funding for preschools and, in combination with the pressure to provide a place for all children, necessitated an increase in the group size. By the end of the 1990s, a common group size was 20 or more children and, in some cases, up to 26 children, which was unheard of before 1990 (Martin Korpi, 2006). Both parents and teachers expressed concerns that having large groups of children would have negative implications for the quality of the education.

An important shift occurred in 1996, when responsibility for preschools was transferred from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education and Research, and the child's right to quality early childhood education was acknowledged—it was no longer only a matter of labour market policy. In 1998, the first national curriculum for the preschool was issued, and preschool became part of a unified education system covering ages from 1–19 years². The curriculum has since been revised four times: in 2006, 2010, 2016 and, most recently, 2018, when the learning dimension was enhanced and clarified (Skolverket, 2019). According to Vallberg Roth (2015), politicians were the driving force behind the change, rather than practicing preschool teachers: 'the enhanced educational mission particularly came about to increase goal achievement at school (related to the PISA [Programme for International Student Assessment] ranking) and strengthen lifelong learning (OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] policy)' (p. 19).

Performativity and quality discourse

Through marketisation reform in the welfare system in Sweden from the early 1990s, with increased state regulation and a focus on goal achievement and cost-effectiveness (Karlsson, 2017; Lindgren & Söderlind, 2019), pedagogical discourse changed. Keywords such as 'quality control', 'flexibility' and 'freedom of choice' became part of the preschool discourse and concepts like 'customer' sometimes replaced 'parent'. In line with this change, municipalities started to use so-called customer investigations, referring to questionnaires that were sent to parents to investigate 'customer satisfaction' with the preschool provision (Åsén & Vallberg Roth, 2012). In the early 1990s, so-called independent (*fristående*) preschools³ were established, which, according to Löfdahl and Perez Prieto (2009), 'thereby also [contributed] to a competitive childcare market' (p. 261). In 2008, a new national agency, the National School Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen), responsible for monitoring quality in all ECEC services and exercising external inspections, was established. Previous management by detailed planning of daily activities in the preschool was replaced by management by evaluation (Vetenskapsrådet, 2012). According

to this new discourse, and in the absence of other means of regulations, some forms of standardisation were needed to safeguard high and even quality across Sweden. Even though the quality concept has been and is still being debated (e.g., Dahlberg et al., 1999), there seems to be a shared understanding that it is possible to agree on criteria that will support and scaffold children's learning, wellbeing and development in ECEC services (e.g., European Union, 2014; Sheridan, 2007, 2009; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2010). These criteria concern both process quality—such as quality of relationships, safety and security—and structural quality—such as group sizes, adult-child ratios, group composition, teacher qualifications and space.

The Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolinspektionen, 2018; Skolverket, 2017) discusses quality in terms of how well and to what degree the objectives set out in curricular frameworks are reached. Different practices for the assessment of goal achievement in the preschool were enacted both nationally and locally (Vetenskapsrådet, 2012). One example is a self-assessment tool, BRUK (*Bedömning, reflektion, utvärdering och kvalitet*; Assessment, Reflection, Evaluation and Quality), which was developed by the National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2010) for use in evaluating and ensuring high quality in preschools regarding goal achievement of the curriculum.

Performativity culture (Ball, 2003), with increased requirements for documentation and evaluation for goal achievement, was reflected in the curriculum:

Preschool teachers are responsible for each child's development and learning being continuously and systematically followed, documented and analysed so that it is possible to evaluate how the preschool provides opportunities for children to develop and learn in accordance with the goals of the curriculum. (Skolverket, 2019, p. 19)

The focus on documentation had implications for teachers' everyday work with children. Many preschool teachers complained that the required documentation took time away from their actual work with children and that they had to 'focus on what fits the [evaluation] template' (Löfdahl & Perez Prieto, 2009, p. 266). Vallberg Roth (2015) doubts whether increased documentation really ensures high quality for both children and teachers.

Shifting pedagogical organisation: Large work teams, open spaces and large groups of children

In addition to the changed governing system, with increased demands on documentation and quality assurance, other changes have taken place in the past decades. These concern pedagogical organisation: group size and composition, size of work teams and the use of the environment. One change was the influence of the so-called Reggio Emilia philosophy and the 'pedagogy of listening' discourse since the early 1990s, which, in many ways, became a norm for everyday preschool practice. Reggio Emilia-inspired preschools organise the environment with large, open common spaces, called 'piazzas', available for all children, complemented by studios and smaller rooms for designated activities (Folkman, 2017). The physical environment is acknowledged as crucial to children's learning and development and is considered to be the third educator (Dahlberg & Åsén, 2018). Inspired by the Reggio Emilia philosophy, the indoor environment was redesigned and reorganised in many preschools across Sweden. Group composition and group size often changed from age-integrated to age-separated groups of children. In some

preschools, the staff were organised into large work teams. Despite the fact that the Reggio Emilia pedagogy has had an impact on preschool pedagogy and that preschool teachers, as well as education providers—initially, even government representatives (Martin Korpi, 2006)—were and are regularly visiting Reggio Emilia, there does not seem to have been any thorough and robust follow-up or evaluation of the implications of this new preschool pedagogy (Folkman, 2017).

The flexible organisation, with 6–8 teachers in a large work team and 40–50 children in one group, exemplified a similar organisational change. Unlike the Reggio Emilia-inspired preschools, this change was not linked to any particular pedagogical profile. Well established in Norway (Seland, 2009), the flexible approach seems to have gained popularity in Sweden as well. While the rationale for introducing Reggio Emilia pedagogy assumed that it would contribute to high quality, the introduction of flexible organisation appears to promote benefits at the structural level, such as staff flexibility. Studies by Vassenden, Thygesen, Brosvik, Alvestad and Abrahamsen (2011) and Seland (2009) indicate that it is easier to recruit well-educated staff for work in flexible preschools. Large work teams are less vulnerable to leaves of absence, since staff members can substitute for each other, which could ultimately lead to economic gains.

Flexibility and freedom of choice versus goal achievement

There are both potential benefits and challenges for children and teachers with flexible organisation. In a study by Melker (2014), preschool teachers identified several benefits for children with a large-group organisation. By increasing the number of people in the workforce, the schedule could easily change and adapt to the needs of any particular group of children. Large, open spaces could also provide opportunities to create a rich educational environment for children and thereby expand their choice of activities.

However, the desired flexibility and freedom of choice for children in a complex organisation, regarding both space and relations, can be lost in rigid structural planning. Seland (2009), in her study on flexible preschools in Norway, found that, to ensure that the education offered supports and challenges children's learning and development, a very strict structure was required. She describes what she calls 'institutional order' (Seland, 2009, p. 260): that is, managing the chaos that can occur when there are many children together. Institutional order was created by teachers organising everyday life in repeated patterns, meaning dividing children into smaller groups and directing them towards different activities to keep them busy, preferably calm 'soundless' activities such as drawing, playing games or playing with Lego. In her study on children's everyday life in an open-space preschool, Folkman (2017) spoke to children about their experiences. According to the children, the teachers decided everything and did not listen to them. Consequently, and contrary to the intentions of flexible organisation, children's choices and influence—the consideration/acknowledgement of which is an important goal in the curriculum—became limited. Furthermore, the increasing demands of documentation puts a lot of pressure on teachers. The spatial complexity of large groups of children in many different rooms makes it difficult for teachers to supervise and ensure that all children in the group get the stimulation and care they need and to which they are entitled in line with curriculum goals. The risk is that the children become objects for the teachers' organisation and mediation, instead of being subjects in their own learning process (Ehrström, 2013; Folkman, 2018; Renwick & McCawley, 1995; Seland, 2011; Skalická, Belsky, Stenseng & Wichstrom, 2015; Williams et al., 2016). Additionally, large groups and open centres with low-quality

interaction between children and teachers may negatively affect children's language acquisition (Brandlistuen et al., 2015) as well as their behaviour (Skalická et al., 2015).

A large and complex group organisation takes a lot of planning, and increases administration and bureaucracy at the expense of the time spent with the children (Melker, 2014; Seland, 2009, 2011). The design of rooms also matters in that they communicate expectations of how children should behave and what they can and cannot do in the room. The communicative functions of rooms are emphasised by the Reggio Emilia pedagogy. Rinaldi (2006) claimed that 'the physical space can be defined as language, which speaks according to precise cultural conceptions and deep biological roots' (p. 82). Findings from Seland's (2009) study indicate that, by designing rooms and making materials available to children, the environment can help to support children's learning and development even though, as mentioned, the design of a room is never enough to manage children if the group size is large enough.

The anticipated flexibility in this organisation relies on qualified staff and a spatial design adapted to large groups of children, which is not always the case. In Sweden, the retention and recruitment of qualified teachers is a significant challenge for preschool education (Skolverket, 2020c), which flexible organisation was hoped to manage. Further, contrary to the developments in Norway, the reorganisation rarely includes new buildings specifically designed to accommodate large groups of children. Continuous communication among the work team and time for planning are key factors for the functioning of the organisation. Moreover, for an organisation to function well, it also requires a person who truly believes in the idea of flexible preschools and is passionate about realising the idea (Melker, 2014).

Children's relationships and wellbeing

The implications of group size for children's wellbeing has been a recurring topic in public debate and a worry for parents and teachers (Pramling Samuelsson, Sheridan, Williams & Nasiopoulou, 2014). Parents are concerned that having large groups of children may have negative implications for the children. In the 1970s, the recommended group size was 15 children to three practitioners in age-integrated groups and 10–12 children to four practitioners in toddler groups. According to statistics from October 2019, the average group size was approximately 15 children per group, with a ratio of 5.2 children per teacher. However, variation of group size across the country is large and can range from under 15 to over 28 children in one group and, as mentioned, sometimes as many as 40–50 children in the group (Skolverket, 2020a). As a response to the public debate and critique about group size in 2015, the government introduced earmarked state grants to lower group size (*Förordning om statsbidrag*, 2015:404), and in 2016, new recommendations about group size were issued: 6–12 children for ages 1–3 years, and 9–15 children for ages 4–5 years. Since these are recommendations, education providers do not have to adhere to them. Furthermore, there are no recommendations about the adult-to-child ratio, which is an important factor when it comes to working towards the goals in the curriculum.

One argument for a flexible organisation with large work teams and large groups of children is that children's activities are mostly organised in small groups. However, a study by Sheridan, Williams and Pramling Samuelsson (2016) showed that children are only organised in small groups for between half an hour and no more than 2 hours a day, and this occurs mainly in the morning. For the rest of the time, children are in a large group trying to relate to other children and teachers, and finding friends to play with.

A further consideration that needs to be made with large groups of children concerns the number of relationships that each child is expected to develop and manage. Findings from research indicate that being in large groups also has disadvantages for children's overall wellbeing. Broberg, Hagström and Broberg (2012) pointed to the importance of taking children's attachment to other children and staff into consideration. In that respect, very young children are particularly vulnerable; they need close emotional relationships. According to Broberg et al. (2012) the very young child will first 'attach to one of the pedagogues in the preschool' (p. 72) with the possibility of also attaching to other staff members. The physical presence of the adult is important for the young child but not sufficient; it is also about responsiveness to the child's needs (Skolinspektionen, 2016). With a large group of children, this may not be possible (Folkman, 2018). Furthermore, in a flexible organisation with large work teams and where all children are grouped together in one big group, the individual child has to relate to a potentially very large number of other children and adults, and this may cause stress. Seland (2011, p. 103) used mathematical calculation to demonstrate the link between group size and the number of possible relationships in a preschool group. In a group of nine children, there are 36 possible relationships in the group; within a group of 18 children, there are 152 possible relationships. A group of 40 children can create up to 780 possible relationships in the group. Although children do not form relationships with everyone, individual children and preschool teachers are still affected by all these possible relationships even if they are not directly involved in them, especially if the group composition changes during the course of the day. Skalická et al. (2015) suggested that 'open-group centers involving a changing mix of children and caregivers across various rooms could undermine teacher-child relationship stability' (p. 956).

In a study on parents' views on the implications of large, open-space centres for children's wellbeing, parents seemed to prefer small, regular settings over large, open-space centres. Parents were concerned that children were left unattended as a consequence of the large number of other children and adults an individual child had to relate to, the high staff turnover in the centres and the fact that children spent the majority of the time in the large, open spaces left to decide for themselves what to do and where to be. This had implications for the child's wellbeing, safety and security (Bråten, Hovdenak, Haakestad & Sønsterutbråten, 2015).

While findings from an overview of international studies from preschool and school (Asplund Carlsson, Pramling Samuelsson & Kärrby, 2001) indicated that smaller groups of children with fewer preschool teachers are better from a quality perspective, Bråten et al. (2015) argued that it is not the group size, or the size of the physical space or of the institution itself that determines the setting's education quality. Rather, quality depends on a number of interacting structural and processual factors such as organisation, leadership, ownership, competence of the staff and ways of working, which, taken together, affect quality.

Bråten et al. (2015) further reported that preschool teachers in their study described how, over time, they changed their open-space centre to a more traditional organisation; the architect's vision of an open space where 54 children could choose freely what they wanted to do and where they wanted to be in the building did not match the vision of the teachers. According to the teachers, children primarily needed relationships with and attention from adults rather than toys and freedom to move around.

Discussion

Since the early 1970s, quality early childhood education has been, and still is, high on the agenda for policymakers in Sweden. A large majority of all children between the ages of 1 and 5 years attend preschool, and many spend long hours in the setting every day. A preschool environment's spatial design, pedagogical organisation, adult-to-child ratio, group size and teacher qualifications are important quality indicators with implications for children's learning, development and wellbeing, as well as for teachers' working conditions.

Over the years, a number of policy reforms have taken place. Preschool education has undergone major changes and moved from a social and labour market policy in the 1970s to an education policy in the late 1990s (Kärrby, 2000; Martin Korpi, 2006). The intention of the latter was to ensure high quality and equal preschool education for all children, focusing on both care and education. The pressure on municipalities to provide preschool places for all children (Martin Korpi, 2006), together with the cut in funding in the early 1990, and the focus on cost-effectiveness, performativity and quality control in preschool (Lindgren & Söderlind, 2019), led to increased group sizes. In an attempt to respond to the critique from parents and teachers about group sizes in preschool (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2014), which had been a recurring topic for decades, measures were taken to decrease group size; in some municipalities, a changed pedagogical organisation was introduced, with large work teams and flexible group compositions in open-space settings. This change was introduced seemingly without research or follow-up on how the reform would affect children and teachers.

Even if this organisation would lead to children spending some of the time in the large group, it was hoped that children would still spend most of the day in small groups. However, as findings from a study on group size indicated (Sheridan et al., 2014), children were only organised in small groups between half an hour and no more than 2 hours a day, mainly in the morning.

Another rationale for the change may be the increased flexibility that large work teams involve. Given the extensive shortage of qualified preschool teachers in Sweden (Skolverket, 2020c), large work teams provide flexibility in that teachers can substitute for each other. Further, research has indicated that it is easier to recruit well-educated staff to these flexible preschools (Vassenden et al., 2011). Ultimately, this may also lead to economic gains for the education provider, which benefits the existing market-oriented context wherein cost-effectiveness and flexibility are promoted (Ball, 2003, 2006).

So, what are the implications of the reforms for children and teachers? In our analyses, we found that a number of studies (e.g., Bergström, 2013; Folkman, 2017) illustrated the importance of the environment for children's development, learning and wellbeing, and for the overall quality of the education provided. According to the curriculum (Skolverket, 2019), there should be a strong focus on dialogue and communication in preschool education, and in this respect, the quality of the relationships between children and between children and teachers are key factors. Both Seland (2009) and Melker (2014) argued that, with large groups of children, it is difficult for teachers to ensure that each child gets the attention or challenging and stimulating dialogues to which they are entitled. That is one of the reasons why parents in the study by Bråten et al. (2015) preferred small settings. They also worried about the lack of security and safety for children and how that affects their wellbeing.

The lack of quality relationships is also a concern (Broberg et al., 2012; Folkman, 2018). With a flexible group composition, the number of potential relationships within the group is very large, which, especially for the youngest children, can lead to lack of attachment, with negative implications (Broberg et al. 2012; Seland, 2011).

While there are challenges for teachers with a flexible preschool organisation, there are also opportunities for collegial learning, in that large work teams most likely have a variety of competences that can challenge and stimulate the everyday work. Furthermore, the opportunity to substitute for each other may put less pressure on the individual teacher.

However, this kind of complex organisation takes a lot of planning to make it work and increases administration and bureaucracy at the expense of time spent with children. Furthermore, performativity culture, with requirements on evaluation and documentation of goal achievement, puts pressure on staff. Both Löfdahl and Perez Prieto (2009) and Ball (2003) discuss how performativity culture affects teachers' everyday work and how they adapt their documentation to evaluation templates.

From an international perspective, the group size in Swedish preschools is small. Many countries have much larger groups of children, sometimes with only one teacher. In contrast, the Swedish educare model more closely focuses on the child as an individual, as well as the child and their relationships and dynamics within a group of very young children of different ages. Consideration of these factors together with the long days children can spend in preschool may be contributing to concerns about the number of children in such setting.

Conclusion

Research has indicated that group size does matter for the overall quality of the education. Having a large group of children with access to an open-space environment and a large work team has implications for children's learning, development and wellbeing, and for teachers' working conditions. It would appear that some education reforms have been proposed or even introduced without due consideration to those who are directly affected. Teachers who are expected to implement reforms and change their practice are the ones who can shed light on how the changes could affect children's lives in the preschool. Rigorous research and follow-up on the implications of organisational changes for teachers' working conditions is imperative, especially where change will affect children's learning, wellbeing and safety. Such research is necessary prior to widespread implementation.

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¹ Preschool teachers have a university degree of 3.5 years duration. To receive qualified teacher status, they must apply to the National Agency for Education for a certificate.

² The statutory age of admission to school was lowered from 7 to 6 years in August 2018.

³ Independent preschools can be organised and run by private for-profit enterprises, non-profit organisations, parents or staff cooperatives. They receive the same public funding as the municipal preschools and must adhere to the goals in the national curriculum. In 2019, about 17.6% of all children were registered in an independent preschool.

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