



## Preschool Class for 6-year-olds in Sweden: A Bridge between Early Childhood and Compulsory School

*Since the 1990s, Sweden has been carrying out reforms to develop a truly integrated education system encompassing early childhood, primary and secondary education.<sup>1</sup> Under one reform, in 1998, six-year-olds were separated from preschool and placed within the compulsory school<sup>2</sup> system in the form of the preschool class. To learn about the reasons for the separation, an interview was arranged with Professor Inge Johansson of the Stockholm Institute of Education. The interview was conducted by Yoshie Kaga of UNESCO Paris, who prepared the following excerpts.*

*But first, a profile of early childhood in Sweden: The Ministry of Education is responsible for preschool activities (ages 1-5).<sup>3</sup> Participation in preschool activities is voluntary and fee-paying. Fees are regulated, being waived for children from low-income families and capped for all families at about 9% of real costs. About 80% of children in the age group participate in preschool activities, mostly in preschools (about 90%).<sup>4</sup> Most preschools are provided by municipalities, with about 5% run by private bodies. The preschool class caters for 6-year-olds and is free. It is voluntary but part of the compulsory school system. About 96% of 6-year-olds attend preschool classes. Children ages 7-16 are in compulsory school. Children ages 6-9 typically attend leisure time centres<sup>5</sup> in addition to the preschool class and compulsory school.*

**Kaga:** Before 1998, children ages 1-6 participated in preschool activities and entered compulsory school at age 7. Why were the six-year-olds separated from preschool and placed within the compulsory school system?

**Johansson:** At the time, there was a debate about whether to lower the school entry age from 7 to 6 years. Advocates for lowering the entry age argued that starting compulsory school at 7 was rather late and that Swedish children should be able to begin school at 6 as in neighbouring countries.

**K:** Were there any opposing views?

<sup>1</sup> One major reform was the transfer of government responsibility for childcare (i.e. preschool activities for children ages 1-6 and school-age childcare for children ages 7-12) in 1996 from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education and Science. See Choi, 2002, Integrating early childhood into education: The case of Sweden, *UNESCO Policy Brief No. 3*, May 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Any mention of compulsory school in this Brief refers to the primary level.

<sup>3</sup> Children under age 1 are usually looked after at home by parents who benefit from 480 days of paid parental leave.

<sup>4</sup> Preschool activities are also provided in family daycare homes (where children are looked after in a childminder's home) and open preschools (which provide part-time activities for at-home parents and children).

<sup>5</sup> Leisure time centres provide after-school and holiday childcare.

**J:** Opponents claimed that lowering the entry age would mean taking away a part of childhood – considered in our country as a golden time of life – and feared that schooling at 6 would have a negative impact on children.

**K:** The preschool class was a compromise measure: it did not involve a formal lowering of the entry age, but included six-year-olds in the school system without subjecting them to compulsory schooling.

**J:** That's right. In the early 1990s, Sweden experienced an economic crisis and needed to rationalise its public services. Preschool, which is a whole-day public service, was found to be expensive for the government compared with compulsory school, which has shorter operating hours. So there was also an economic incentive to place 6-year-olds in the compulsory school system.

**K:** I see. So the preschool class was introduced as a way to reconcile the differing positions regarding the school entry age and its pedagogical consequences as well as to respond to the particular economic situation at the time.

**J:** Correct.

**K:** Now that six-year-olds are placed in the preschool class within the school system, are their activities expected to become more school-like?

**J:** The preschool class is to use pedagogical approaches drawn from both preschool and school practices, keeping the child's holistic development as its overall aim. It is conceived as a bridge between the two distinct cultures, i.e., preschool and compulsory school, balancing their integration in an equal manner and enabling children to make a smooth transition from one educational stage to the next.

**K:** What key measures were taken to ensure that the preschool class truly becomes the bridge?

**J:** First, the continuity between preschools, preschool classes and compulsory schools is encouraged by the national preschool curriculum Lpfö 98 (2001), and the national school curriculum Lpo 94 (1998), which guides preschool classes, compulsory schools and leisure time centres. These curricula are based on a common set of fundamental values, learning and knowledge. They also emphasise the importance of cooperation among preschools, preschool classes, compulsory schools and leisure time centres in favour of children's all-round development and continuity in learning experience.

**K:** Could you describe more concretely the form that cooperation takes between the different establishments?

**J:** It is mainly through teamwork among preschool teachers, schoolteachers and leisure time pedagogues.<sup>6</sup> In the preschool class, for example, a team of these three types of professionals evaluate their work and make a specific plan for each child. They are responsible for

<sup>6</sup> Leisure time pedagogues work primarily in leisure time centres.

advising the rest of the team based on their specialisations, and use the team to share, elaborate and refine pedagogical work.

**K:** Is balanced cooperation between preschool teachers, schoolteachers and leisure time pedagogues possible, given their different specialisations?

**J:** Yes. The secret is in our new teacher training. In Sweden, there was a reform of the teacher training system in 2001, which unified the training and qualifications of preschool teachers, schoolteachers and leisure time pedagogues into a single scheme.<sup>7</sup>

**K:** These professionals now follow the same training and qualification framework?

**J:** Yes. They all have at least three and a half years of training.<sup>8</sup> The first year is dedicated to studying a common core module, which includes knowledge important for all teachers regardless of their eventual specialisation.<sup>9</sup>

**K:** So a unified training and qualification scheme ensures that the professionals with different institutional backgrounds have a common understanding of pedagogies appropriate for children at different levels of development?

**J:** Yes. It also gives them a shared professional identity. This encourages balanced teamwork among them.

**K:** How is the child's day different depending on whether he or she is in preschool, preschool class or compulsory school?

**J:** Between ages 1-5, children spend the whole day in preschool. They work at their own rhythms, and have ample opportunities to engage in free play, thematic projects and outdoor activities. At age 6, they go to the preschool class in the morning only and participate in more structured activities offering basic skills training (e.g. reading and arithmetic). In the afternoon, they typically go to leisure time centres that offer free, play-based and flexible activities. After age 7, in compulsory school, children are increasingly subject to structured learning activities. In the early grades, children are in school for 5 hours per day, and spend the rest of the day in leisure time centres.

**K:** There is a gradual progression in the children's learning experience from preschool to compulsory school, then. To foster a smooth transition, did the reform involve any measures to make compulsory school more like preschool and preschool more like school?

**J:** Besides the curricula and teacher training, there were no formal measures taken in this regard. However, it may be worth noting that, in announcing the integration, the then prime minister Göran Persson stated that preschool should influence at least the first years of compulsory school.

**K:** So he gave his political endorsement to importing early childhood pedagogy to compulsory schools.

**J:** Yes. And efforts to implement this are evident. However, a recent evaluation of the education reforms has

shown that school codes are more prominent in the preschool class than those of the preschool. Examples include more subject- and skills-oriented teaching; expectations regarding outcomes; traditional classroom organisation, and methods that do not cater for the six-year-old's need for physical activities (as opposed to pedagogical work), stressing play, art and experimentation, organised flexibly around each child's individual pace and interests.

**K:** This phenomenon is not unique to Sweden. Other countries attempting to link preschool and compulsory school at the systemic level face similar problems. Do you think that, in the case of Sweden, this was due to an intrinsic imbalance between preschool and school cultures, or because measures aiming to prevent "schoolification" did not fully work?

**J:** The former is correct. Think about the compulsory school system in Sweden. It has been around for the last 164 years, and its development has been intimately connected with the country's major societal changes. Preschool, on the other hand, has existed for 60 years. So it is understandable that compulsory school has a dominant place in today's society, which necessarily affects the processes and outcomes of reforms, such as the reform in 1998.

**K:** What can be done to redress this imbalance?

**J:** There should be conscious efforts to support the younger and weaker preschool culture so that it does not get marginalised by the dominant compulsory school culture in the unified system.

**K:** What are some lessons you would highlight from the Swedish experience?

**J:** First, our system relies heavily on professional competency. Teamwork requires professionals who have their own competencies to contribute and who can work skilfully and flexibly as constructive team members. Second, simultaneous changes in the curricula and in teacher training greatly facilitated the process of aligning the education content with the reform objectives and strengthened continuity between different services for children.

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<sup>7</sup> For further information on Sweden's teacher education, see *Children in Europe*, September 2003.

<sup>8</sup> For those who plan to work in the later years of compulsory school (i.e., ages 14-16) or with older children (i.e., ages 16-19), the training lasts four years.

<sup>9</sup> This knowledge comprises both childhood (child and youth development, pedagogy, special needs) and interdisciplinary studies (e.g., philosophy, ethics, psychology).

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