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Quality evaluations with Environment Rating Scales-3 in Denmark and Sweden

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3. Early Childhood Research

Title of the symposium: Quality evaluations with Environment Rating Scales-3 in Denmark and Sweden.

Keywords: Nordic preschool, early childhood, quality, ECERS-3,

Chair: Pia Williams, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

Knowledge about how quality can be improved within early childhood education to allow all children to have the best start in life, is an imperative and global issue. Research recognises that variations in the preschool quality, contributes to unequal conditions for children's wellbeing, development and learning (Sammons, Toth & Sylva, 2015). Teacher competence is one aspect impacting on preschool quality, where content knowledge, didactical approaches, learning orientation and attitudes are crucial, as well as ethical and socio- emotional skills. Another aspect is, how preschools can enhance a more inclusive strategy to prevent children from falling behind. Early intervention through preschool is therefore important to allow positive changes in children's lives life paths (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2010).

Regardless of the methods used by researchers to evaluate preschool activities, it is crucial to relate quality to the fundamental values of society and curriculum goals. Based on such an approach, the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-3) (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 2014), is a valuable method to evaluate the preschool quality, not only providing knowledge about the quality of preschools in general, but also affording data of which areas and quality aspects that are of high and low quality, which indicate quality variations and inequalities in preschools. ECERS (Harms & Clifford, 1980; Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998, 2014), is an internationally recognized instrument used for research and cross-cultural comparisons of preschool quality. Together with translated national adaptations, ECERS has been used as an evaluating instrument in various studies, in different parts of the world for comparative purposes and for investigations of the relationship between process quality and the various conditions of early childhood education provision.

ECERS-3 have been used in Norway and Sweden (Baustad, 2012; Bjørnstad & Os, 2018; Sheridan et al., 2009, 2018) and in research and development projects in Denmark (Næsby, 2018; Næsby, Medom & Bering, 2017). ECERS-3, consists of 35 items that are organised into six subscales, that guide observers to relevant areas within the early childhood learning environment. The subscales are: space and furnishings, personal care routines, language and literacy, learning activities, interaction and programme structure. Data is collected by trained and certified observers in a 3-hour observation with a prescribed scoring sheet.

The aim with this symposium is to highlight ongoing research about a Nordic view of quality evaluations. Researchers from Denmark and Sweden will present findings from their use of the Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS-3) in studies on quality in Nordic preschools. Similarities and differences about preschool quality will be discussed, grounded in empirical examples of what characterises high and low quality in the Nordic preschool context. The presentations will also discuss cultural adaptations for the scale, and the future of quality evaluation in the Nordic region, to consider in what way using the ECERS-3 instruments affects the understanding of quality, and how graphical representations can be used to analyse data from the observations with the scales. The outcomes of the research presented in this symposium, can contribute to an international understanding about quality in early childhood education, improvements in pedagogical practice and development of the preschool teacher education programs.

1. Torben Næsby, Professionshøjskolen UCN, Denmark:

The quality of inclusion in Danish preschools

We know that preschool quality is important for disadvantaged children (Bauchmüller et al., 2011). Findings from the British Effective Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education Project (EPPSE) show that high-quality preschool attendance makes a difference and prevents disadvantaged children (e.g. from lower socio-economic groups) from falling behind (Taggart et al., 2015, p. 17). High-quality preschool sustains children's developmental possibilities and enhances school readiness, whereas low-quality preschool attendance, according to Taggart et al. (2015), does not reduce the consequences of disadvantage (e.g. children who had a less stimulating home learning environment or who were from families where parents had poor or no formal qualifications (Taggart et al., 2015 p.7). The role of preschool attendance is crucial for disadvantaged children. However, even if high-quality preschool sustains children's developmental possibilities and "enhances later attainment and progress in primary school", "preschool cannot eliminate the adverse effects of disadvantage, but it can ameliorate these" (Taggart et al., 2015, p. 16). Given these findings, low-quality preschool maintains inequality in our societies and fails to reduce the impact of social heritage such as growing up in poverty. This could lead to exclusion from learning and development opportunities in the learning environment offered by preschool. The ECERS-3 was chosen for this study because it focuses on children's perspectives and builds on and aligns with the UN children's convention. We also sought to explore the degree to which the ECERS-3 aligns with recent adjustments in the Danish national curriculum (Ministry for Children and Social Affairs, 2018). Mapping the ECERS-3 to the Danish curriculum allows us to define and evaluate preschool quality in Denmark (Medom & Næsby, 2018). Observations using the ECERS-3 were conducted in 88 preschools in four municipalities in Denmark from the spring of 2017 to the spring of 2018. Data were collected from three rural municipalities; and from a greater city. The municipalities were invited to participate in the research project. In each preschool, classrooms with 16-24 children aged 3-5 years were observed once for three hours (119 observations). The observations were performed simultaneously by two certified observers. The observers were trained based on the author's recommendations. Administering the observations and scoring (stop-go scoring) was conducted as prescribed in the ECERS-3 materials (Harms et al., 2015: 14). This presentation focus on the qualitative data from observations in high-quality preschools describing best practice in terms of what the preschools do to sustain disadvantaged children's learning. The collected data were analysed from an inclusive perspective using the inclusion matrix (Næsby & Qvortrup, 2014). To which extent a child is included in a specific activity was revealed by analysing practice through indicators expressing degrees of psychical, social and mental inclusion. The findings reported in this presentation needs to be consolidated in further research, e.g. considering the need to make some culturally specific adjustment and even to conduct a research project within a national sample. However, the findings suggest further reflections on how Danish preschools could or should enhance a more inclusive strategy to prevent children from falling behind.

2. Elisabeth Mellgren, Pia Williams, Jonna Larsson & Sonja Sheridan University of Gothenburg, Department of Education, Communication and Learning, Sweden:

Preschool teacher competence – a key quality aspect in teaching

High quality preschools with well-educated teachers have the potential to improve learning, equity and equality for children from diverse backgrounds. Teacher competence is one main aspect impacting on preschool quality, where content knowledge, didactical approaches, learning orientation and attitudes are crucial, as well as ethical and socio-emotional skills. In high quality preschools, communication, collaboration and creativity are combined in the pedagogical approach and closely linked to the competence and professionalism of the teacher. In preschools evaluated as being of high quality, the learning environment is rich in the provision of challenges and learning opportunities. Preschool teachers focus on children's interests, experience and knowledge-formation in relation to the overall goals for preschool and show children respect and care (Sheridan, 2001, 2009; Sylva et al., 2010). How

to evaluate early childhood quality however, can be a complex issue. One approach is the use of the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS), an observational scale of the learning environment (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 2014).

In this presentation, the aim is to analyse teaching in preschool. The study is based on quality evaluations with the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-3), with a specific focus on language and literacy, learning activities and interaction. The theoretical framework consists of interactionist and ecological theories that involve individuals and the environment constructively in a reciprocal and continuous interaction (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Bruner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1986). Together, these theoretical perspectives contribute to an understanding of the relationships between policy issues, educational goals and preschool teachers' competence in organising and creating conditions for children's learning. Based on these theories, teaching in preschool is in this text defined as communicative, interactive and relational and needs to be related to the societal context (Sheridan & Williams, 2018). Quality evaluations have been conducted in 153 Swedish preschools using ECERS-3. A qualitative analysis is applied, including Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory and analysis from pedagogical quality (Sheridan, 2009). The study follows the Swedish research council guidelines and ethical rules in social science research. Ethical aspects of the research were taken into consideration, including in particular requirements for confidentiality, consent, information and autonomy, along with the emphasis that participation in the study was voluntary. The results visualize a low quality of learning activities that require adult involvement, interaction and communication with the children in terms of teaching. Thus, preschool teachers' competences form a key aspect for the quality of teaching. More knowledge is needed to raise the quality of teaching, which benefits the children and contributes to enhance the competence among preschool teachers.

3. Panagiota Nasiopoulou, PhD student, University of Gothenburg, Department of Education, Communication and Learning, Sweden.

Organizing children in subgroups – a quality aspect in early childhood education

The purpose of this paper is to explore preschool teachers' considerations on factors of importance affecting their decisions in organizing children in subgroups in Swedish preschool. Organizing children in subgroups, commonly described as a preschool teacher-managed approach, is an important aspect of preschool classroom organization, related to preschool teachers' professional competence, to intentionally structure the preschool day in order to provide rich learning environments and meet children's needs. While the research has shown that working in subgroups throughout the day is associated with high quality practices (Slot et al., 2016, Sheridan et al., 2014) there is limited research, both nationally and internationally, on grouping practices in preschool. Even more there is no detailed investigation on factors that may influence preschool teachers' decisions on group arrangements made in preschool. This research gap, coupled with the increased demands for more knowledge-oriented preschools and the large number of children enrolled in preschool, necessitates a closer investigation on grouping practices. This study is grounded on interactionist perspectives (Bergman, Magnusson & El Khouri, 2002; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1986), in which the individual functions develops in a dynamic and reciprocal interaction with the environment. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986) lays the foundation for the theoretical framework of the study in understanding the complexity of preschool teachers' practices. Based on these theoretical standpoints, the study hypothesizes that preschool teachers' practice of organizing children in subgroups is embedded in and shaped through dynamic interactions with all actors and levels of the entire preschool system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1986; Urban & Dalli, 2012). The sample consists of 698 preschool teachers from different preschools in 46 municipalities in Sweden who completed an online questionnaire. By applying Confirmatory Factor Analysis technique (CFA), this study analyses the sample's responses on a set of manifest indicators selected to capture the complexity of preschool teachers' everyday working context. These indicators are related to three broad contextual dimensions; child group composition, preschool teachers' relational and organizational environment. The CFA results revealed a three-factor model where two residual but distinct factors were nested under one general factor, namely a) an

interrelational factor consisted of indicators related to preschool teachers' relationships with children, parents, co-workers and the head of preschool and b) a *structural* factor consisted of indicators related to preschool's structural aspects as for example staff to child ratio, preschool teachers' working environment as well as preschool's physical ecology. The results support the complexity of organizing children in subgroups as a practice in preschool which can be considered partly as a negotiated collectively practice and partly as closely connected to the complexities of preschool classroom's actual situations. As the research supports the benefits of working in subgroups in preschool, the results from this study can be useful to enhance quality in early childhood education programs, to prepare preschool teachers on how to develop effective classroom organization strategies.