We have a vision

*A visualization of the visions and pedagogic work in a Gambian pre-school*
Abstract
The aim of this study is to visualize the pre-school pedagogy in The Gambia and to discuss the Gambian pre-schools ideal view on pedagogy compared to the Swedish tradition. Through an ethnographically inspired study conducted at a Gambian pre-school called SBEC bilingual international school, where I used Interviews and observations as a method to gather my empirical data, I sought answers to my overall questions which was: Which are the pre-schools main visions and values? What is the Gambian society’s view on pre-school education? And what is emphasized in the classroom work? In my results I found that the vision of the pre-school was designed to give something back to the Gambian society and have an impact on the country’s future. I also found that the schools vison had a large impact on the kind of work that went on in the classrooms. The view on the pre-schools in the society varied a bit depending on which perspective that was used. Those who were active in the world of education had a different view on the importance of pre-school education than for example the government in the country. In my discussion I compare my results in relation to the Swedish pre-school tradition and among other things I found that the two countries traditions regarding pre-schools had a common factor in the focus on nurturing the children but differed quite a bit when it came to their view on the pedagogic activities and how they were implemented.

Key words
Pre-school education, The Gambia, classroom environment, pedagogic work, pre-school traditions

Abstrakt

Nyckelord
Förskoleutbildning, Gambia, pedagogiskt arbete, förskoletraditioner, klassrumsmiljö
Content

Abstract_________________________________________________________ i

1 Introduction ______________________________________________________ 1
   1.1 Education in development countries _______________________________ 1
   1.2 The Gambia ____________________________________________________ 1

2 Background ______________________________________________________ 1
   2.1 SBEC bilingual international school ________________________________ 1
   2.2 The pre-schools purpose________________________________________ 2
   2.3 The Swedish equivalent________________________________________ 3

3 Aim and research questions ________________________________________ 4
   3.1 Aim ____________________________________________________________ 4
   3.2 Questions ______________________________________________________ 4

4 Previous research _________________________________________________ 5
   4.1 What does the schools pedagogic work look like?_____________________ 5
   4.2 What form does the schools vision and goals take inside the pre-schools
      classrooms?______________________________________________________ 5
   4.3 What is the situation in the classrooms?____________________________ 6

5 Method __________________________________________________________ 7
   5.1 Interviews______________________________________________________ 8
   5.2 Observations____________________________________________________ 8
   5.3 Data analysis ____________________________________________________ 8
   5.4 Method discussion ______________________________________________ 9

6 Results and analysis ______________________________________________ 11
   6.1 Visions _________________________________________________________ 11
   6.2 Ambitions and education _________________________________________ 12
   6.3 Basic values ____________________________________________________ 13
   6.4 Government views ______________________________________________ 14
   6.5 The Gambian society´s view ______________________________________ 15
   6.6 SBEC international schools view __________________________________ 16
   6.7 Nurturing and activities in the classroom____________________________ 17

7 Discussion ________________________________________________________ 23
   7.1 A vision to create change _________________________________________ 23
   7.2 The pre-school educations progress__________________________________ 23
   7.3 The main focuses of the classroom activities _________________________ 24
   7.4 Conclusions ____________________________________________________ 26

References ________________________________________________________ 27

Appendices ________________________________________________________ I

   Interview with the head of the pre-school teacher program at the Gambia college: ___ I
   Interview with the head of the nursery school/the director at SBEC: _____________ I
1 Introduction

1.1 Education in development countries
In the world today (UNICEF 2016) 38% of all children who attend primary school leave without mastering the skills of reading, writing or doing simple arithmetic. Since 2011 the number of children in the world who do not attend school has grown. Among those who do attend primary school there is a large percentage who drop out before they are finished or when it is time to move on to lower secondary school (a.a.). The Sub-Saharan region (Nwaru 2014) on the African continent has been challenged with very low literacy rates and there are critical problems with access to education and the educations quality. The region has a high pupil to teacher ratio and proportionally there is a high number of out-of-school children. The number of children who are not completing their primary school education were the largest in the world according to UNESCO in 2008 (a.a.). Among all of the children in the world, who do not attend primary school, half of them live in the Sub-Saharan part of Africa. Some of these children never even enter a classroom (UNICEF 2016).

There were new policies developed (Pagano 1999) with regard to early childhood development in a large part of western Africa during the 1990’s. The policies had a holistic view on children’s development and as a result there were different programs put in place. Though the programs varied, depending on which country they were implemented in, there was one common knowledge. That the children are considered important, that the community is responsible for the children. And that goals, with a focus on social and human values, should be strived for by both the parents and the community (a.a.).

1.2 The Gambia
One of those countries is The Gambia (Drammeh 2012) which, with an area of 11 300 square kilometer, which makes it the smallest one on the African mainland. Before The Gambia became independent, in 1965, the country was a British colony. As a result of that a lot of the traditions found in the British school system can also be found in the Gambian school system. Beside the English language, which is the official spoken language in the Gambia and therefore also the language that is used I the schools, there is also the usage of school uniforms and the more formal type of education which starts at an early age (a.a.).

The early childhood education in the Gambia (the Education international ECE Task Force, 2010) was initiated in the 1980’s by private stakeholders and in present day a majority of the pre-schools and daycares are still privately owned. These private pre-schools often include a yearly fee which means that access is limited to families who can afford to pay for their children’s early education. The enrolment rate for preprimary education is only 23% (a.a.).

2 Background

2.1 SBEC bilingual international school
In the far west of The Gambia, in the more densely populated part of the country, there is a privately owned school called Shiloh Bilingual Education Centre International School or SBEC bilingual international school. In the continuation of this essay I will
refer to the school when it is mentioned as SBEC. The school functions from day care and preschool through primary school to high school. SBEC was started in 2001 by a couple who felt it was time to give something back to the Gambian society. Their goal was, and still is, to create world leaders and world changers who can fit in anywhere in the world. The school is bilingual, as it is indicated in the name, and this is a big part of their educational profile where both the English and French language is used in the classrooms from the day care and up through the classes. The motivation behind this profile is that The Gambia, on all its borders, is surrounded by Senegal, a country with French as its official language, and if the children are going to be the future leaders of The Gambia they need to know both English and French. Another piece of their vision to create world leaders is that they want to give every individual a chance to develop in to their best self and find out in what area they are talented in and nurture that. The school plans to achieve this through discipline and promoting honesty with an individually oriented education. The pupils who attend SBEC are local Gambians as well as children with other nationalities whose parents are in the Gambia because of various reasons. The school had, in 2010, a yearly fee of 30000 dalasi or 1200 $. This is considered a high amount according to Gambian norms.

During the final semester of my pre-schoolteacher education I went to The Gambia for two months with the support of a Minor Field Study scholarship that is financed by a Swedish state agency called SIDA. During my time in the Gambia I frequently visited SBECs pre-school and took part in their daily activities. I have chosen to examine SBECs preschool. The reason for this is that I work as a pre-school teacher myself and I find it very interesting to learn more about the role that the pre-school has within SBECs school education. What form does the schools vision and goals take inside the pre-schools classrooms? What does the schools pedagogic work look like? What is the situation in the classrooms?

2.2 The pre-schools purpose

The “Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage” (Department for education 2014) [United Kingdom], which was published by the British government, emphasizes the importance of children being ready for school the year that they turn five. This is stressed with for example specific knowledge goals. Even though it is clear that the pre-school is considered an important place for child development it is plain to see that the main purpose of the institution is to serve the schools and to make sure that their future pupils are at a certain level and ready to start their primary education. Despite this goal that all children should have reached the same level in time for primary school there is also written that all children are unique and develop at a different pace and that the development and learning opportunities should be planned to fit every individual child (a.a.). With this in mind is it safe to say that the individual child is important and encouraged to be unique at his or hers own pace as long as the goals, in the year they turn five, are reached. To what extent are the children given space to develop in their own pace?

From reading the framework (Department for education 2014) I can also draw the conclusion that, as well as assisting primary schools with pupils who are ready, the pre-schools are also viewed as an environment where children should acquire knowledge and skills that will enable them to fully benefit and take advantage of future opportunities throughout their lives. The way that the approach to learning is described implicates that there is a childcentred and individualistic view towards learning among the youngest children. There is a lot of focus on learning through play and following the
interests of the children. The activities are mostly led by children while the teachers are there to gently guide and inspire learning. When the children get older the activities are supposed to become more and more led by the teacher to prepare the children for primary school which means that the focus changes slightly from individualistic to more group oriented (a.a.).

2.3 The Swedish equivalent

In the national curriculum for pre-schools in Sweden (Lpfö 98, rev 16) [Swedish national curriculum 1998, revised 2016] it is said that the purpose of the pre-school is to promote the development and learning of every child and lay the foundation for a lifelong desire to learn. The pre-school should also convey a respect for human rights and the basic democratic values that the Swedish society is built upon. The right to be respected whoever you are regardless of sex, age, religious or other believes, social background, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disabilities is highly emphasized in the curriculum and these values are expected to be passed on to the children by the pre-schoolteachers. The curriculum also highlights the importance of playing and how this is used in a conscience way to expand the childrens development and that learning should characterize all pre-school activities. In a Swedish pre-school the children should interact with adults who sees every child’s unique possibilities and who are involved with equal interest towards the group as well as the individual children. To ensure the quality of the pedagogical work the curriculum includes targets for the pedagogical activities in the pre-schools. The targets are not for the children to achieve but for the pre-schools pedagogical activities to strive towards so that every child has an equal opportunity to develop and learn (a.a.).

This study have the possibility to give people, active in the context of education and otherwise interested, insight into pre-school education in a developing country such as The Gambia. This could be interesting both to people in Sweden, because of the comparison to the Swedish pre-schools, and to people in other countries. But also to people in the Gambia to see how their pre-schools educational system could be viewed by someone who is not native to The Gambia. This was interesting to me personally because of my pre-schoolteacher education and my interest in the Gambian culture in general as well as their pre-school education more particullary.
3 Aim and research questions

3.1 Aim
The aim of this study is to visualize the pedagogic work in a Gambian pre-school and to discuss the Gambian pre-schools ideal view on pedagogy compared to the Swedish pre-school tradition.

3.2 Questions
Which are the pre-schools main visions and values?
What is the Gambian society’s view on pre-school education?
What is emphasized in the classroom work?

In this study I sought to answer these questions through an ethnographically inspired study where I used interviews and observations to gather information about the pre-school and the Gambian society’s attitude towards pre-school education. Later on in the study I will present the result of this and through analyzing these results I will try to answer the questions above.
4 Previous research

4.1 What does the schools pedagogic work look like?
According to research done among a large amount of English pre-schools in the early 00’s (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva 2004), where they looked at different factors such as environment, pedagogic strategies, parental involvement and how they affect the development of children, it was determined that there is no one specific pedagogy that is more effective than others. What was more important was the combination between teacher lead group activities and playtime where the children are free to choose activities by themselves but the space for instructive elements is still there. Furthermore they found that where there was the most positive cognitive development there was a mutual involvement in the learning process from both teacher and child (a.a.).

In the early days of Swedish pre-schools pedagogical development (Orlenius 2001) there was a strong influence from Friedrich Fröbel, a German educator whose ideas is to large part responsible for the kind of pedagogically centered pre-schools that Sweden and many other countries have today. The idea was to create an environment where the children could, through care and nurture, develop much like a plant. Within that environment the child’s nature, which was considered essentially good, should thrive and develop naturally. One emphasized the importance of the children being free to play and activate themselves independently. The teacher should lead the children by being a good role model and much like a gardener carefully tend to and nurture the ones in their charge, always with the child’s development in mind. When they children played the teacher could sometimes have a leading role but most of the time they should only supervise and be careful not to control too much (a.a.). The view that playing and being playful is an important part of the pedagogic activity in pre-schools (Skolverket 1998) [Swedish national agency for education] is still current within the national curriculum in Sweden. When children play it is their way of conquering the surrounding environment and make sense of it. Children explore their world and try to understand themselves by playing. Playing is a way for children to find out their interests, abilities and develop socially, intellectually, emotionally and motorically (a.a.).

4.2 What form does the schools vision and goals take inside the preschools classrooms?
In African cultures (Bame Nsamenang 2008) identity development is centered on the many instead of the individual. It emphasizes the shared and the social parts of forming a child’s identity rather than the individual and unique aspects of the same process. Traditionally children would learn through engaging in chores and interacting socially from an early age where they are able to learn, observe and understand from family members, other adults as well as peers, what and how they do things. This sets African cultures apart from European/ western cultures where the care of the children is viewed as task concerning only adults (a.a.). Children, in Sub-Saharan Africa (Bame Nsamenang 2008), are being viewed as peers that has an important role to play in the caring and identity forming of other children they live in a culture where they actively participate which promotes them being aware, responsible, motivated and engaged. This gives children the opportunity to be regarded as young citizens, when it is appropriate, and the chance to fulfil the roles they deserve in those situations. As a consequence of this you can make the conclusion that an engaged and participating youth will grow up to be engaged and participating adults who will be in a position to influence their communities and because of that their future as well (a.a.).
4.3 What is the situation in the classrooms?

According to a study done in Canada (Henning & Kirova 2012), where the classrooms are becoming more and more culturally diverse, the teachers whose students come from different linguistic backgrounds are pressed to create a classroom environment that meets all the children’s needs. It is important to have a learning environment that respects and contains the different perspectives that the students bring with them. All children have a different world of norms and traditions with them in their experience, a sort of “cultural backpack”. When a child has moved to a new country and has a different first language from the one spoken in their school, or is multilingual, this adds to the content of their “backpack” which is then brought in to the world of the classroom. In order for the teachers to help their students become confident learners they should consider that they can help them navigate between the world of their cultural background and the world that is their classroom environment.

For example, the teacher can incorporate the students’ different cultures in the classroom through the usage of their languages and artefacts such as everyday items from their home culture (a.a.).

In Sweden the pedagogical environment (Skolverket 1998), or classroom, is considered a large part of what affects a child’s learning situation. You would find that in most Swedish pre-schools the environment resembles more a home like situation and less the stereotypical classroom with the children’s desks neatly in a row. It is believed that for the activity in the pre-schools to be conducted in the direction of the national curriculum goals it is important to create a learning environment that inspires to many different kinds of activities. The environment should also inspire the children to explore and make discoveries. For that reason it is very important that the teachers are aware of the possibilities that are open to them in their learning environment and how significant this can be for the activities they do with the children (a.a.).
5 Method

In this essay I wanted to explore SBEC international school and their pre-school more particularly. As a student in the pre-schoolteacher program I wanted to focus on what the schools pedagogic work looked like and what the situation was like in classrooms. The reason I chose to do my study at SBEC international school was that a friend, I made during previous traveling in Senegal and The Gambia, had a contact at this particular school and was able to introduce us so that we could connect. This school had a very clear idea about what goals and dreams they wanted not only the school itself as an institution to strive towards but also what they wanted their students to achieve by the time that they finish their education there. This made me curious about how this affects the situation in the classrooms in a more concrete way. Does it affect the way the pre-schoolteachers relate to the children in their classroom? Does it make them view the children in a special way?

In order to investigate these different questions I made a partially ethnographic study (Johansson & Svedner 2010) during my time in the school, this can also be called a field study. The reason it is only partially an ethnographic study is because in a typical study of this sort the time period would be longer in the cultural context that the researcher has chosen to study. In this case the cultural context is the classroom environment at this particular pre-school. As a research method the ethnographical method was originally applied when someone visited foreign cultures and wanted to understand on a deeper level. The researcher would use this method to be able to describe and understand the culture as comprehensively as possible during a long period of time (a.a.). As it is, the original purpose of this method suited the context of my research very well. Although I had made travels to the West African region before, both to The Gambia and its surrounding neighbor Senegal, this is still a culture that is far from the Swedish culture that I am familiar with and this was the first time I spent as long a time period as two months there. Not only is it, in my experience, a different culture in general but in the context of the school it differentiates as well.

In a field study, or in another name an ethnographic study (Elvstrand, Högberg & Nordvall 2015), the primary way of gathering information is participant observation. The researcher will participate and observe people in their everyday activities over a longer period of time so see what kind of activity there is, listen to what is said and ask questions. This kind of study is suitable for the kind social context such as a classroom. Although the primary information-gathering technique is through observation this method allows for a wide variety of options such as interviews and conversations with individuals who are involved in the context that is being studied or are in other ways relevant (a.a.).

When gathering my empirical data I focused on two methods, classroom observations and interviews. The reason I chose these two methods was that I wanted to see what the day to day activities in the classrooms contained which could be achieved with observations in the classrooms. I also wanted to find out more about the school, its visions, the pedagogical situation and the teachers who worked there so it felt natural to do that in one on one interviews with a few of the employees at the school. In order to find out more about The Gambia’s attitude towards pre-schools and pre-schoolteachers education in general I went and visited the Gambia collage to interview the head of the
pre-schoolteacher program. The methods I chose for collecting information was qualitative and not quantitative, this was suitable since I focused on one pre-school and within this pre-school I focused on interviewing a handful of individuals instead of for example sending out a short questionnaire to many different pre-schools which would have been a more quantitative method. The director of the school, as well as each individual that I interviewed, was in accordance with research ethical principles (Vetenskapsrådet 2017) [Swedish Research Council] informed about the purpose of the study before their participation. They were also informed that the interviews were based on their willing participation and that any question they did not want to answer was optional and they did not have answer them (a.a.).

5.1 Interviews
I used a qualitative method (Johansson & Svedner 2010) for my interviews and that meant that I had prepared questions to use as a starting point but depending what the interviewee answered the follow up questions would be different which made them more semi-structured. It also meant that the questions I started with would variate depending on who I as was interviewing and which questions I considered to be most relevant for that particular interview. Unlike a questionnaire or a structured interview with more permanent questions, and sometimes different response options, a qualitative interview allows the interviewee to answer more freely. It also allows the interviewer to follow the interviewee instead of the other way around and opens up for a more deep and exhaustive interview (a.a.).
The interviews were conducted one on one with the individuals that I interviewed in a closed room, either the individuals office space or a classroom. From outside the room you could hear chatter from either children or students and noise from ongoing activities. I conducted my interviews with the help of a digital Dictaphone as my recording device. I started from prepared questions and depending on the answers I got from the person that I interviewed there were some questions added during the course of the interview and some that either did not get answered or that got answered through another question. I conducted three interviews, which I refer to later as Interview –No.1, -No. 2 and –No.3. Number 1 was with the head of the pre-schoolteacher program at Gambia collar. Number two was with the director and also owner of SBEC and number three was with the head of the pre-school at SBEC.

5.2 Observations
I made my observations in the classrooms by making notes with a pencil and a notebook. The observations where both participatory and non-participatory, during the non-participatory parts I observed while sitting on a chair in the corner of the room. Each day that I went to the school to make observations, and participate in their daily activities, I visited different classrooms in the pre-school. When making my observations I had two areas in mind that I focused on especially. One was their pedagogic activities, what they looked like and what they wanted to teach the children. The second area of focus was nurture. What kind of nurturing where the children getting in the classroom and what kind of values did the teachers want to pass on to the children through that nurture.

5.3 Data analysis
When analyzing my empirical data (Dahlgren & Johansson 2015) I took inspiration from the fenemographic model for analyzing. This method was primarily developed to analyze data from single individuals and is suited to describe and analyze the way that
people think about and understand phenomena in their environment. The way that the method works is that you work with your empirical data in different stages. I started by transcribing my recorded interviews and familiarizing myself with all of my transcripts and classroom observations. After that I began my analyze of the material, which is the second step in the fenemographic model and it is called condensation. I did this by highlighting the more significant statements in the material and gathering them in one place. During this process I noticed similarities and differences between the statements which helped me find themes to sort them by (a.a.). When I was sorting out the different themes I kept the three essential questions for this study in mind: What form does the schools vision and goals take inside the pre-schools classrooms? What does the schools pedagogic work look like? What is the situation in the classrooms? The different themes each got a name and a color which helped me visualize them. This contained the last five steps of the fenemographic method which in my case did not occur in steps but in a more continuous flow. When the steps are used separate according to the fenemographic method it happens in the following order: Comparison, Grouping, Articulate the categories, Name the categories and the Contrastive phase which is when you examine the statements and decide whether or not they fit in to one or more of the categories that you have chosen. If the case is the latter then you might consider to merge the categories so they are more exclusive in how the statements fit in. this usually helps you to essentially boil down a larger number of categories or themes in to fewer more comprehensive ones (a.a.). Later on I progressed to also sorting the themes in to subcategories which helped me recognize when the statements essentially addressed the same phenomenon.

5.4 Method discussion

There was a few factors that could have affected the way that the result of my interviews and observations turned out. There is always various degrees of a language barrier when you conduct an interview in a language that is not your first. In this case English is my second language and the not my interviewees´ only language either. In The Gambia you often learn one or several of the local languages that stem from old tribe languages before you start to learn English. This could have affected both the way that the interviewee understood my questions and the way that I interpreted that answers that I got in return. There is also a risk of unintentionally asking leading questions during the interview. In retrospect I would have wanted to ask the teachers questions in conjunction with the observations I did in the classrooms to find out more about the pedagogical intentions behind their activities. Perhaps through an interview with the teacher at the end of each day of observations I could have gotten a more comprehensive idea of what the teachers thoughts behind their classroom activities where. That way I could have better attempted to see the differences and similarities between the teachers´ pedagogical thinking and how this coincides with the schools official view on this subject. In connection with this I would also ha liked to spend more time in the classrooms and return at least once to each of them. I think that this would have given both the teachers and the children a chance to be more at ease with me being there and myself a chance to see if what I saw the first visit was affected by me being there or a normal rendering of what a day in their classroom looks like. Unfortunately my time at SBEC was shortened by two national holidays, one of them was Tabaski which is a Muslim holiday also known as Eid-al-adha outside The Gambia and Senegal and is usually celebrated two or three days. The second one was Christmas which is a Christian holiday and it was in connection to this that the school had their longer Christmas vacation, this resulted in me losing about two weeks at the end of my stay.
Another aspect that I would have wanted to have more information on is the opinion of the society and one way of getting one facet of the many could have been to interview some of the parents of the children at SBEC. If I could have asked them why they chose SBEC and how they view their children’s pre-school education then I might have been given more information from another point of view then the school itself and as a consequence of that a better understanding to how the school is viewed from outside. Although I understand that the parents of children at SBEC do not represent the whole of the Gambian society, only small part of it. It still could have given me another aspect to the school, their activity and visions and how this is perceived by others.
6 Results and analysis

6.1 Visions

When I was working with my empirical data it became clear to me that the people who I was in contact with, who are involved with the early childhood education in The Gambia, all have big dreams as to where the education for young children are heading and what this will mean for the Gambian society. The college in The Gambia strives towards making the education for the pre-school teachers as high a quality as possible so that that in turn will create a high quality education for the children. Which is made clear by the head of the pre-school teacher program:

And our dream is to make early years one of the best starting point for children in their education in the development of a child (Interview No. 1).

The founders of SBEC international school started the school as a way to give back to society

But then we want to invest in the education of the children because if you want a sustainable development and future for this country you’ve got invest in education. (Interview No. 2).

They also had a clear vision when they started of what they wanted the education at their school to accomplish.

We have a vision and our vision is to be the leading international school in shaping world changers, right? We want to be the leading international school in shaping world changers. (Interview No. 2)

They have big dreams for the children who attend their pre-school, and later on their primary school, and what they hope that their future will have instore for them.

We are not trying to create leaders for Africa or we are not just trying to create leaders for Gambia, we are trying to create leaders that can fit into the entire world. (Interview No. 2).

This does not only speak to what their vision is for the children who attend SBEC but also to what the school as an institution can do for The Gambia as a country through the products of an education at their school.

We wanna see products of SBEC international school coming out as presidents, as doctors, as ministers, as farmers. (Interview No. 2).

In conclusion, the school wants to give the children who attend their school a versatile education that prepares them for whatever future they choose. Even if there is a wish that the school will open a world of opportunities for the children this could also mean that there is a sense of obligation put on the children to make the most of these opportunities and move themselves as well as their country in to the future.

The moment you come to enter the school it says that the school’s trying to build world changers, children that will be able to move with all the changes of the time, you know that is the, not children that’s.. That is versatile, if something is blue tomorrow they’ll be able to go with the blue, if it is yellow they’ll be able to go with it. Not to be children that are trained for just one thing, they are trained in different ways to meet different type of challenges that they will come across you know in like difficulties, easy times, hard times. And then with in them they will show, they’ll develop it later, they will really know what they want and go for it, they are sure of what they want and they go for it. (Interview No. 3)
On the other hand the fact that the idea of the children becoming world leaders and world changers is being instilled from the very beginning of their education at SBEC could mean that the children are being filled with a confidence that actually makes it possible for them to go out in the world and thrive.

To be able to fulfill these big visions that they have for their school they have to be driven by an ambition to succeed and this takes many forms both in the way that the schools education is formed and the way that way that the teachers view their students.

6.2 Ambitions and education

In order to make their visions a reality it takes a lot of ambition and SBEC have a lot of that for their school as an institution.

We said we didn’t just want any school, we wanted a high quality school where you can train people and they’ll go and they can fit in to any part of the world. (Interview No. 2).

When they speak of high quality it refers to every aspect of the school. Not in the least every child’s experience as they acquire their education there.

You know we wanna give every child an equal opportunity. We want to create an environment where kids love to come to school, they wake up in the morning and they look forward to coming to school. (Interview No. 2)

They way that they try to achieve an environment where every child has an equal opportunity to succeed is by giving the children an opportunity to be independent

Ok, we have, or want to have, a child centered teaching environment. An environment where a child has the freedom to do the right thing, an environment where a child has the freedom to do what he or she lust to do. (Interview No. 2)

One way to interpret this is that they not only have the freedom to do the right thing but there is an expectation from the school that the children will do the right thing and become the kind of students that they wish to have in their classrooms. The headmistress of school expressed a clear description of what kind of behavior they wish the students to have in the school.

One of the most important values is the value of honesty you know. We believe honesty is you know the strength behind every successful person. You know once you’re honest you become someone with potential to be a leader in the future alright. (Interview No. 2)

One way too look at this is that the school wants the children to have honesty as a part of their basic character before they even can become someone with the potential to become a leader. Another characteristics that the headmistress talk about as very highly valued is discipline.

One way we take honesty out of the way discipline is the next and we want highly disciplined students. (Interview No. 2)

Her reasoning behind this could be interpreted in the way that this, as well as honesty, is a characteristic that should be a part of your characters foundation in order to be successful with your education in SBEC.

But if you have discipline whatever you are you will become very successful. So honesty and high level of discipline are things that we would want our kids to have. (Interview No. 2)
One aspect of this is that the characteristics that the school values can be seen as traits that are more connected to a person’s personality than traits that can be taught by a teacher. Even though these are characteristics can be nurtured by the teachers in the classrooms the students will inevitably have more or less aptitude for these traits. One can then question what happens to the students who does not excel in these areas? Will they still be free do what they luster to do in the classroom if they do not do it within the norms that the school values?

We believe that every child is unique, there’s something special about every child and that is what we want to nurture. (Interview No. 2)

One way to look at this is that they clearly have the ambition to make the school environment a place where every child can develop in to unique personalities that excels within the school and in the future.

We strongly believe each of them has something special to offer to the world and we need to identify what is special in those children and nurture that. (Interview No. 2)

But does the schools strong values allow for total uniqueness? Or does this come in to conflict with their ambition to have a classroom that consists of disciplined and honest students?

Another aspect of this is the obligation that this puts on the students to fit in to the norm of what the school views as a good student. They are not only required to meet the targets that is set for them academically but they are also expected to develop characteristics within their personality to fit in the school environment.

### 6.3 Basic values

Other than having honesty and discipline as part of their foundation the school also believes that the children need to have a strong connection their culture to be able to move in to the future and succeed.

Yes because we have to remember that we are in the Gambia and the start point of Gambia, the culture of Gambia the start point is from here. (Interview No. 3)

This can be seen as the school adding another layer to the foundation that they feel that the students should have. The school emphasizes the importance of knowing where you are from and knowing where your starting point is. They show this in activities they have at the school. During the time period I spent at the school they had a special day where the students showcased their different cultures through musical performance and various foods.

Yeah the cultural trade, we even have something that we call cultural period were people show, they showcase the different cultures we have because it’s so important that they don’t lose their culture. We teach them all this but they need to know I come from here, this is my start point, starting point but I want to go this way, this way, this way but at the end of the day I come from here always. That is the base of what our education is made of, of the culture of our society, it’s based on what the society is, it’s Gambians, Wolof, Foulou and these are the values of that culture, Mandinka whatever. Because if we don’t do that then we will not get anywhere, the child will lose him or herself, the child have to know him or herself and from there you start (Interview No. 3)

It is mentioned that the motivation behind this type of activity is so the students do not loose who they are. That the foundation of the schools education is based in culture of their own society.
One way to view this is that even though the school brings in foreign influences through their use of the British- and French curriculums they still value what their own country’s culture can contribute to a high quality education. The British- and French aspects together with Gambian tradition makes SBEC stand apart from the other schools in the Gambia.

We didn’t want to inherit anybody’s school, we wanted to start our own school so that we could put the values that we want to have in that school. (Interview No. 2)

One could interpret this as a wish to make their contribution to the Gambian society but not being willing to compromise their vision. This could be a sign that the founders behind SBEC had seen something that they felt that the existing schools in The Gambia were missing and felt that they could help change through creating their own school from scratch. One way that they differ from the other local schools is through the implementation of the French language in all of the grades from the pre-school and up.

Because these future leaders, there’s nothing say they’ll just stick to the Gambia, they can travel to other parts of the world so that’s the reason why we took the two major languages, English and French and we started them from day one. (Interview No. 2)

The motivation behind this seems to be to give the students another brick in their foundation that can help them in their future endeavours. More importantly it seems to help them become good future leaders which may make you wonder if this is a path the school assumes could be used in a way that points more to the kind personality that it takes to be a leader. But if that would be the case, should it be part of a schools role to try and change their students’ personality?

6.4 Government views

The individuals that I have interviewed seemed to be in agreement about the importance of pre-schools and their potential impact on The Gambia’s educational system. But is the Gambian government also in agreement on this subject?

Yes so college now is in charge, the government doesn’t sponsor this program as it sponsors other programs in the college, the primary teacher certification and certificate are sponsored by government. But this one government is not in to early years fully cause their not financing it, their role usually is to supervise, evolve it and make sure that the standards are kept and financially their not in to it. (Interview No. 1)

The education for pre-school teachers started at Gambia College with help from UNICEF in the late 1970’s and was after that financed by the college itself. One could interpret the fact that the government does not financially support the education for pre-school teachers as them not being in full support of pre-school education in their country. Is the pre-school education not as highly valued as the primary school education? You could make that assumption due to the fact that the government does sponsor the education for primary school teachers. On the other hand perhaps this is the process that many other countries have gone through where the perspective on pre-schools gradually change from a convenient place to have your children while you are at work to an institution where a child learns and develop in a pedagogic environment.
No they don’t support financially, it’s more monitoring and supervision. But recently or in our last policy they included early years there. The earliest years was now incorporated in the Gambian education policy. (Interview No. 1)

This could point to a change in the government attitude and to them gradually catching up to those active within the educational system. This same process of change seem to be going on in the rest of the Gambian society slowly but surely.

6.5 The Gambian society’s view

So it seems that the Gambian society in general also have had some catching up to do when it comes to viewing pre-schools as important a stage in their children’s education.

People tend to think no no no that’s, like you said, a dumping ground you know I’m going to work I just need someone to take care of my child for me. (Interview No. 2)

One could wonder if it is the quality of pedagogic activities in pre-schools that has contributed to this kind of opinion or if it is based in a prejudiced mind-set among a culture that has not traditionally used this sort of early child care?

That is why we’re trying to get our Gambian parents, because it’s not generally a Gambian culture to send somebody 3 years, 18 months to school. So we’re trying to get them to understand that it’s not just they’re coming here to hang around but they are learning something there are certain things in their developmental stage that we are trying to tap on at this age, expand on, develop. (Interview No. 2)

Traditionally, in The Gambia, young children have accompanied their mothers during the day or they have been left in the care of older children or grandparents. But due to mothers working longer time periods away from the home as a way to help support the family and a growing awareness of the importance of an early start in children’s education among parents, the demand for early childhood programs became higher (Pagano 1999). So even though the need for early child care have previously been met by the immediate family and relatives a changing society has created a need for a different kind of early child care system and this has developed in to the pre-schools that exist today. Perhaps this is where the possible prejudices stem from and why it is taking a bit of time for the society’s view on pre-schools to change.

So a lot of people are beginning to understand but it’s going to take a while before you get Gambians to get to that. (Interview No. 2)

SBEC is trying hard to promote the importance of a pre-school education and the local parents seem to slowly be coming around. But it is still mostly the non-Gambian parents who choose to put their children in SBECs pre-school.

We have quite a number of them who are not Gambians. Particularly for the small small small ones you generally have more of none Gambians coming in then the Gambians. But when you get to the higher levels we have more Gambians coming in. (Interview No. 2)

The head of the pre-school teacher program does on the other hand see a big difference in the attitude towards early childhood education compared to how it has been before in the Gambian culture.
Now everybody wants to send his or her child to the nursery school. And you can see how much, nursery schools are very expensive like SBEC that you went to is a very, it’s one of the, it’s for very well to do people and you can see the kind of service that they offer. So every kind wants to send their child there if they can afford the money to have possibility cause they want their child to get started so that they will be able to excel in the lower of education. So they’re really regard you know early years as something very very important. (Interview No. 1)

This could mean that the head of the pre-schoolteacher program is viewing the development of the society’s attitude from a wider perspective and therefore see a bigger change. It might also be the fact that he takes the financial aspect in to consideration and that that makes a difference. Could it be that the society’s interest might statistically be much higher if everybody could afford to put their children in a school like SBEC? SBEC as a school does not reflect what pre-schools look like in The Gambia in general. And if SBEC represent the kind of school that Gambian parents want to put their children in has it then become a question of class distinctions whether or not your child will get the kind of early childhood education that you want them to have?

You’ve quite a number of parents who are very involved but you have parents that never actually come to the school they just pay fee, but that will happen in any institution that you go to. Some parents who are generally not interested they’re too busy to take care of their children. But most of our parents are very interested, in their kids’ education, they pass by, they phone the school to find out what’s happening. And if the child goes on with something they’ll call the school to find out. (Interview No. 2)

So while there are those in the Gambian society who cannot afford to give their children the early childhood education that they want there are those who can afford it but you could question whether or not they appreciate the opportunity that their children are getting. You could interpret it as the parents, because of financial struggle not being an issue, seeing the school as something obvious and not a privilege. This could mean that they see the school as a place to simply house their children while they are at work. Is it the quality of the education that made them choose this particular school or is it just the fact that they can afford it?

On the other hand you could also interpret it as the parents being so confident in the ability of the school that they do not need to worry about their children’s welfare there or if they are getting a good education or not. Their so called lack of interest could be that they are so comfortable with the school that they expect nothing less then what the school promises to deliver.

6.6 SBEC international schools view

We strongly believe that the nursery school is the foundation for a strong educational background. (Interview No. 2)

SBEC seem to have recognized the importance of a good early childhood education for a successful course through the rest of life’s learning.

So we wanna give our children an opportunity to get in to university, finish their university education and start life at a very you know young age. (Interview No. 2)

This could be seen as SBEC wanting their students to go through a good pre-school education in order to build a strong foundation for their future learning and that this is necessary to move forward on your educational path and reach your potential.
This could be interpreted as SBEC having a strong confidence in regard towards their pre-school operation and the way that their teachers execute the pedagogical activities in the classrooms.

Although in Sweden there is no structure like the structure here where children write early but here in Africa it’s different you know, things are more, shall I say it’s more formal education. Here you learn to play but you start to work very early at the same time, like in Sweden you learn to play for a long time when you get to primary one is when start learn a bit of writing which sounds you start to read and all that. Basically it’s the same but maybe with the background people are trying to do more for their children so that they get it earlier then in a society where it’s there just to take it, here you have to struggle to get it so you start very early. (Interview No. 3)

This might be seen as the school placing their, as they say, more formal pre-school education in a higher regard than the Swedish one which they perceive as children spending their time simply playing. You could say that it is a positive thing that they believe in their own system and how they feel that their students get the most out of their education. But you could also interpret this as them being a bit uncritical when it comes to their own pedagogic system.

This type of formal education on the other hand might stem from traditions going back to the times when The Gambia was colonized by Great Britain which have a similar sort of formal education. One could then ask how much of SBECs pedagogical style have been created from the country’s traditions and how much is a conscience choice from their side?

On the other hand maybe they do not think that Sweden has completely the wrong idea?

We want to have lesser books and then more play but at the end of the day they achieve the same standards. So hopefully when next you come to the Gambia you’ll see more of that. (Interview No. 2)

You could interpret this as the school viewing the involving of more play in their classrooms as a good idea in theory but that they have not figured out just yet how to turn this into reality and still meet the targets that they have set for their pedagogic activity. You could think that the idea of change is the first step towards making it happen and this makes me wonder if they actually made their idea a reality in their classrooms.

We develop on the best part of our experiences. The thing that we felt were not necessary like the beating of students are things that we’re saying no to here. Because you know, we believe in trying to teach the children to stop the things that are wrong without having to beat them. So that are parts that we’ve removed and the good ones like discipline we’ve maintained because that is very important, that is very important. (Interview No. 2)

This could mean that the creators of the school at least has tried to take the parts of their own school experience that they felt was negative left them behind as well as keeping the traditions that they felt where working. In removing corporal punishment from their school you could view this as them choosing to nurture their students in a different way then what their own experience teaches them do. This would in that case be a conscience choice to break traditions and find a different way to achieve the same goal. How you nurture the students, together with the upbringing they get at home, has a large impact on what kind of community citizen they become in the future.

6.7 Nurturing and activities in the classroom

In this part of the study´s result I will answer my third question at issue about SBECs pre-school which was: What is emphasized in the classroom work? SBEC has a clear
view of what kind of students they want the children who attend their school to develop in to.

Students who would know how to deal with adults, students who respect where they belong, students who respect who they deal with be it older people or their peers or whatever. (Interview No. 2)

You could view this as the school placing the way that their students conduct themselves in high esteem and that showing respect towards others is highly valued. The students are also expected to respect where they belong, this could mean that they are supposed to recognize where the school draws the line for what they view as impertinence and then you as a student should not step over that line. To have students who respect the people around them is a goal all teachers should have and it seems to fit in nicely with the other values that SBEC wants their students to have with them as a foundation. But SBEC also have a vision to see their students coming out in to the world as leaders capable of changing the things they see a need to change. One could then ask if a person “who respects where they belong” (Interview No. 2) would be able to change their own situation if they saw the need to do that? To make changes in a society or the world even I think it is necessary to see beyond how the society itself thinks things should be and look at what you yourself or others think needs to change. If everybody stays in their so called place then I think nothing will change. On the other hand the school could refer to respecting where you belong in a classroom context. If that is the case then it can be in reference to the relationship between a student and a teacher or the similar relationship between a child and his or hers elder. One can hope that in SBEC this is a relationship with mutual respect that gives room for the exchange of ideas, questions and all sorts of discussions which can help the students be independent and question the world around them. This is hopefully not a relationship which means that the student is expected to except the information given to him or her without ever questioning it.

The creators of SBEC has drawn from their own experience in the Gambian school system and made the changes they thought was needed to improve it.

We were kind of timid, we were scared because it was not in our culture for a small child to stand and talk where the adults are. But now when you look at SBEC international school the students they stand and make presentation they’re not scared of the crowd, they stand and talk in public. (Interview No. 2)

This could be seen as a step in the right direction if you have a vision to create future leaders. You might interpret this as the creators of the school identifying something in the culture of their school experience and deciding that this is not something that would be conducive to achieving the goals that they had set for their school and then taking a step towards changing this so that their students would have a different experience. A person who is not afraid to talk in front of others has gained a skill that will be useful if he or she has as an ambition to be a leader.

When it comes to nurturing the kind of behaviour the school wants their students to develop this takes many different forms inside the pre-schools classrooms. During my time at SBEC I observed a variety of times when the teachers gathered the children on floor in a circle to talk about different subjects.

When I arrived in the morning they were talking about how to enter a home. First knock, then greet, wait to be offered a seat and then to say thank you. (Observation 2010.11.18)
This can be seen as the teachers giving the children a chance to learn how to be polite. At another occasion they talked about, among other things, how to address someone who works for their family.

They talked about the family and how to address “the help” and that it is important to say thank you and so on. The also used roleplay where the children took part. (Observation 2010.11.10)

This seems to coincide well with the schools aspiration to have students who respect the people around them. You could interpret this as the school teaching the children the small rituals that a society has which is considered good behaviour. And in doing this the school is giving the children a chance to develop the sort social skills that is needed to easily take part of their own society.

Another time I observed a teaching moment which addressed the subject of family.

They read a bit more at the same time as they talked about the family and that the dad is the head of the family. (Observation 2010.11.09)

This could mean that the father in a Gambian family is seen as the one who is in charge and in other words the leader of the family. If this is the case then this could point to huge cultural difference between Swedish- and Gambian pre-schools in regard to the sort of child perspective that is customary. In the Swedish pre-schools the work towards gender equality is an ongoing topic that is considered important and reflects the ongoing work on the same topic in the Swedish society as well. This could make you wonder if the schools vision to have their students become leaders is in regard to girls as well as boys or if that only applies to the latter. If a girl is taught from a young age that the father is the head of the family and that as a consequence of this that her mother is not her father’s equal how will this affect her? How is she supposed to picture herself as a leader if she does not consider herself an equal to the boys in her environment?

A part from these moments when the children are gathered for these sort of teaching moments I noticed different kinds of nurturing going on in all parts of the activities during the day. One form of student nurturing was through various reprimands.

And then it was time for breakfast and as usual almost all the children had brought crisps and cookies. The teachers are as usual quite firm with statement such as “I don’t want to see any bits on the floor, I don’t like it”. (Observation 2010.12.01)

This could be seen as the teachers appreciates when the children keep things neat and tidy. I saw more than one sign of this.

I noticed statements such as “Are you a baby?” when a child had not coloured within the lines. Despite these kinds of statements the child is instructed how to do it instead in a kind way and told “Look how nice it will be when do it this way instead”. (Observation 2010.12.13)

This could give you a mixed impression due to the somewhat degrading use of the word baby which is shortly thereafter followed by a much more positive word of praise. It could be interpreted as the teacher referring to that a baby would not be able to colour within the line but I still perceive it as a degrading comment for a child to hear from their teacher.

Besides having things neat and tidy the teachers also seemed to appreciate certain level of order in the classroom.

When the room became to bustling the children had to sit with closed eyes and hold on to their own ears for three minutes. (Observation 2010.12.01)
I saw another example of a teacher trying to keep a calm teaching environment.

The teachers sometimes threaten that if you make to much noise you will not be allowed to go out and play. (Observation 2010.12.01)

This could be perceived as a somewhat strict way of dealing with children and I do not agree with a lot of the things I saw. But I do understand the importance of having a fixed set of rules when you are dealing many children at same time to create a pleasant learning environment for all involved.

One of the teachers explained to me that she is strict towards the children because she wants build a good foundation. If the foundation is not good it might crack later on. She says that she is doing it because she wants the best for the children and that it makes it easier for both teachers and children in the end. When she says strict she means that when there is a lesson there is a lesson and when it is playtime it is playtime. And if the children do not focus during the lesson and do not finish then she will take them to the side during movie time and have them finish then instead. She thinks then that they will learn to finish when there is a lesson so that they don’t have to miss out on the movie. (Observation 2010.11.22)

You could view this as the teachers having a clear reasoning behind why they have the strict rules that they have. You could also draw the conclusion that this, as the teacher said, makes it easier for the children because if the rules are clear then they know exactly what is expected of them.

The children seem to take instructions very well and do things on their own. They got instructions to go and wash their hands, they then went and dried their hands on a towel in the classroom and finally they went to collect their backpack and sat down in their assigned seat because it was time for breakfast, all on their own. When they were finished eating they returned their plate and went to wash their hands again. (Observation 2010.11.29)

This could also result in the children becoming very independent. But it could also put pressure on the children to always meet the expectations of the teachers and keep the balance between being independent and behave the way you are supposed to behave. The teachers are just as clear when they reprimand the children as they are when they give them encouragement.

When the children does something good here one claps your hands for the child. Auntie Michelle also asks the child who´ss done well to come and give her a high five. (Observation 2010.12.01)

You could see this as two sides of the same coin, clarity when it comes to reprimand and clarity when it comes to praise. As long as this is given to the children in somewhat of an equal amount then there could be a balance to it. This could on the other hand make you wonder about the type of praise the children are getting. Is the praise only with regard to what they achieve?

To what I can recall I did not observe a large amount of conflicts but one of the ones I did witness was child biting another child.

When a boy bit another boy the teacher told him to bite him back whilst she was standing there and then the conflict was resolved. (Observation 2010.12.01)

This could be perceived as teacher using sort of an eye for an eye method which means that whatever someone has done to you, you should do to them. This could lead to the child who bit the other child to learn that there are consequences to bad behaviour. But
what happens to the child that was bitten? Does he not learn that he should solve violence with violence? Is this how you want children to learn how to handle conflicts?

Intertwined with the nurturing elements in the classroom there is a lot of pedagogic activities going on that are more related to learning. The time during the day is more or less divided in lessons where they handle different subjects.

They’re going to work in some sort of workbook. They all turn to the same page, read the instructions together and do the assignments orally together. There is a specific teacher in charge of the lesson. She, as most of the teachers here, uses a lot of repetition during the lessons (Observation 2010.11.22)

The use of repetition as a way of learning seems to be a common tactic amongst the preschool teachers at SBEC. I even got to experience when I got introduced to the children.

I tell them that my name is Sofia, then the teacher says “What is her name?”. Auntie and the children answer “Sofia”. The teacher repeats once more “What is her name?”. Auntie and the children repeats once more “Sofia”. This is a method often used here. (Observation 2010.12.01)

The term “Auntie” is what the children call their teachers. For example I was called “Auntie Sofia” during the time a spent in the school. This is something that I interpret as a way of teaching the children to be respectfull towards your teacher and also your elders.

One that sets the SBEC School and preschool apart from many other is their bilingual approach. This means that children are introduced to both English and French through lesson from the very beginning when they start at SBEC. These lesson varies in content depending of what age they are oriented towards. The youngest children start by being introduced to French in an easy way.

They listen to songs, they listen to small small stories. Not long ones but just stories that you can make up, a boy and a girl, they meet with their mother, you know, things that will make children listen and know this is not the English I hear, this is not my language you know and they develop the interest. (Interview No. 3)

One lesson example of this is the usage of movies during the French lessons.

Now it’s time for French. The French teacher comes in and starts a movie (it’s story about bears), they watch it for half an hour and then the French is finished. (Observation 2010.11.22)

You could interpret this as the teacher using the movie as an opportunity for the children to hear the French language. To hear the language together with the visual aid of the movie might help the children to concretize what it is that they are hearing. One could wonder if the teacher intended to revisit this movie and follow it by talking about with the children to help them reflect and understand or if starting a movie was an easy way to pass the time in the lesson. As the children grow the French lessons advance with them.

And they do picture talk, all in French, it is one one word, they still do it, from the day care all the way and then as they go it’s advanced you know, and you do advanced French, but that is suitable for that age. Any lesson that is taught in English, you have to teach it in French, that is how it works. (Interview No. 3)

An example of a little bit more advanced French lesson in the pre-school.
After their breakfast they had French for little while, with numbers and phrases like “my name is”, “my mother’s/fathers name is” and so on. (Observation 2010.11.18)

One could think that the idea is for the children to slowly be introduced to the French language and then as the get a little bit older they are suppose practice their skills through the more traditional learning of phrases.
Even though they spend a lot of their lesson time using workbooks it is not always an individual activity.

Now it’s time to write in some sort of math books. They do the assignments together “how many figures are there?” draw a line between the figures and the right number, write the number in the box and paint the box in the same colour as the number. (Observation 2010.12.01)

Another type of math activity was more physical.

Now they’re counting from 1 to 50 whilst clapping, jumping and so on. Probably to feel the rhythm when they count. They developed this in to a competition where they got an amount to jump and if they jumped to many they were out, until there was only one left (the winner got a piece of candy).
After that they counted in tens and those who were successful got a sticker as a reward. Then they counted every other number, 2, 4, 6, 8 and so on. (Observation 2010.11.29)

In between the lessons they had breaks outside, both organized and unorganized.

After that they were outside for a while, first some organized and then some free time to play and after that it was time for lunch. (Observation 2010.11.18)

Another example of a break could be something like this.

Now they’re outside playing by the swings after running two laps around the football field. (Observation 2010.12.01)

These examples could be viewed to resemble the type of recess that children get in primary schools. The teachers also use physical activities inside the classroom as a short break between lessons.

Then they went back to the classroom and had some gymnastic exercises like jumping up and down, stretching towards the ceiling and standing on your toes and so on. (Observation 2010.11.18)

You could view this as a chance for the children to develop their motor skills but on the other hand it can be viewed as a way for the teachers to help the children with their day of lessons.
And with the ambition that the school has in mind to reach their goals together with the lesson-like pedagogic activities one could question if SBECs pre-school is more similar to a pre-school or a scaled down version of a primary school?
7 Discussion

In this part of my research I will use the aim of this study and the overall questions which was introduced in the introduction as a foundation from which I will discuss the result that the analysis of my empirical data gave me. Furthermore I will introduce the Swedish pre-school tradition as an aspect of the discussion and make comparisons between the information my results have given me about the pre-school tradition in The Gambia. In what way does the traditions differ from each other and in what ways are they similar?

7.1 A vision to create change

When I interpret my results I view the schools vision as one of their biggest motivation for the work that they do in their school. The founders of the school saw the creation of the school as a possibility to give something back to the Gambian community. They recognized that in order to be able to make a difference and create a change they needed to start at the foundation with a good education for the future citizens of the Gambian society. They want their students to become leaders that can change things in The Gambia and in the world. This is to me a fine ambition but it makes me wonder how that kind of pressure affect the children when they, from the very beginning in a life of learning, are told that they are supposed to become leaders who can make changes. This differs from the Swedish national curriculum (Lpfö 98 rev 16) where it is emphasized that there are no targets that the children are supposed to reach but only targets for the pedagogic activities to strive towards. Furthermore the curriculum states that the pre-school should be a place where children get foundation for a lifelong desire to learn and develop. This speaks to a pre-school that wants to lay the foundation for the children go and be the best that they can be but without any specific future obligations to fulfil in order to be good products of their school.

A way that SBEC desire to create leaders coincides with the Swedish curriculum is that to become a leader you need to have strong self-esteem which is something that you could say that SBEC promotes by their ambition and in the Swedish curriculum the subject of self-esteem is approach by saying that the pre-school should strive towards giving every child a chance to develop their own identity and to feel comfortable with it. It also says that the pre-school should strive towards giving every child a chance to develop an independence and a sense of trust towards their own ability (a.a.).

One reason that the curriculum in Sweden is could seems broader and less specific when compared to the vision of SBEC is that the Swedish curriculum is a national curriculum that applies to all pre-schools I Sweden. SBEC on the other hand is one school that has a specific vision that they want work towards and they can therefor tailor the way that they feel that they can achieve this.

7.2 The pre-school educations progress

One could say from looking at the results of my empirical study that the attitude of the Gambian society is slowly leaning toward recognizing the importance of a good pre-school education. Although the government does not sponsor the pre-school teacher program at the Gambia college financially they had recently included the early childhood education as a part of their national education policy which can be seen as a step in the right direction. But, as I mentioned in the introduction, the enrolment rate for pre-schools in The Gambia was only 23% in the year 2010 (the Education international ECE Task Force, 2010). You could speculate in the different possible reasons for such a low percentage. One reason could be that the majority of the pre-schools in The Gambia
are privately owned and most of these have some sort of a yearly fee that needs to be paid in order to enrol your child there and this does not always include the cost for the school uniform (a.a.). This means that not all children have an equal opportunity to get an early childhood education. Another aspect to consider is that traditionally in The Gambia (Pagano 1999) the children has either accompanied their mothers or been taken care of by the surrounding family and there has not been a need for early child care outside of that. And even though the awareness of the importance of an early start in learning through early childhood education has grown, traditions has a great impact on our culture and the way it evolves (a.a.). SBEC also recognizes that it is not within the local parents’ tradition to enrol their children at an early age but they see them slowly progressing towards that.

In Sweden (Orlenius 2001) the idea of pre-schools being a place learning and development came to life as early the beginning of the 1900’s but this type of institutions was in general aimed towards children who had mothers that did not work which more than not meant that they belonged to the upper- or middle-class of the society. The government did not take responsibility for these institutions instead they were often privately owned or funded by charity. It was not until the 1960’s that the government took responsibility for the pre-schools in Sweden when the demand for early childcare drastically increased when more woman needed to enter the labour market due to the society not having enough labour (a.a.).

So one way to view it is that pre-schools both in Sweden and in The Gambia have been in a process of development, and still are, with regard to their role in society. There are some similarities that occur to me and one is that what has decided if a child will have the opportunity to get an early childhood education in the early days of the pre-school could be viewed as a class issue. Another similarity is the seaming lack of support from government in the early days of the pre-schools. A point where it differs is when it comes to the period of time in history when this development occurred. And one reason for this happening later in The Gambia (Drammeh 2012) could be the fact that they did not gain independence as a country until 1965 after being colonized by Great Britain since 1783 (a.a.). It is possible that this has affected the educational development of the country.

In order to get a more holistic view on how The Gambian society views pre-schools and the early childhood education I could have added more aspects to my empirical data. One aspect could have been to include the parents who have their children enrolled in SBECs pre-school regarding their view on early childhood education in general and their experience at SBEC in particular. Another aspect could have been to also include the opinions from more people who are not connected to SBEC.

7.3 The main focuses of the classroom activities

When analysing my empirical data with regard to the activities in the classroom I found information that could be interpreted as there being two main focuses in the pedagogic activities. The first one I recognized was the activities that could be interpreted as emphasizing a nurturing side of the teachers’ pedagogic strategy. When I made my observations in the different classrooms in SBECs pre-school there were many situations that I viewed as oriented towards showing the children how their supposed to behave in relation to other people in their life. In pedagogic gatherings the children, for example, was shown how to enter somebody’s home and how to behave in this particular situation. The way I view it the underlying meaning in the pedagogic gathering often was the subject of respect. To show respect towards the people in your surrounding and an especially towards your elders. This coincides well with what the director of the school told me about them wanting “students who respect who they deal
with be it older people or their piers or whatever” (Interview No. 2) which could be viewed as a way that the schools vision for how their students should behave are being taught practically in the classrooms. Another way that could see the nurturing side of the teachers pedagogic strategies is through the way that they expect the children to behave when their at the pre-school. So you could say that the children are being taught how to behave both in the context of a classroom and in the world outside of their school. The teachers showed the children if they met the expectation of how they should behave through what could be viewed as praise and corrections. An example of what could be viewed as praise to promote what is considered good behaviour is when the teacher gave a child a high five after the child answered correctly, another is when the teachers clap their hands when the children do an assignment right. An example of what could be viewed as correcting what is considered bad behaviour is when one of the teachers felt that there was too much noise in the classroom had the children sit at their desks with their eyes closed and hands holding their own ears for three minutes. Traditionally in the Gambia (Bame Nsamenang 2008) the nurturing of a child’s behaviour would have been done at home through interactions with elders, piers and other persons in their community (a.a.). One way to view this is that the concept of childrens behavior being nurtured in a pre-school environment by adults teaching is far from what has been the tradition in the country.

The Swedish pre-schools (Lpfö 98, rev 16) also has a large focus on nurture but differs by focusing on the teachers being role models in the daily activities and through this making it possible for the children the see how we as fellow human beings should act towards one another. By conducting the daily activities on a democratic foundation the teachers should work towards clarifying for the children the basic values of the Swedish society (a.a.).

The second of the two, as I interpreted it, main focuses of the pedagogic activities in the classroom was skill training when it came to learning language skills and mathematics. Language skills includes reading, writing and speaking both the English and the French language. When the classroom activities focused on this sort of skill training my observations gave me reason to believe that a majority of these activities are happening with children seated at their school desks working with workbooks or other materials. In general, the environment in the Swedish pre-schools (Skolverket 1998)[National Agency for Education] tend to strive away from the traditional classroom environment with school desks for the children to do activities at. Instead the environment tend to resemble a more home inspired space with different play areas, tables and chairs for the dining situation and activities such as drawing and solving puzzles (a.a.). This can be explained by the more play oriented tradition that has existed in Swedish pre-school since the early 1900’s (Orlenius 2001). The fact that the pre-schools in Sweden (Lpfö 98, rev 16) are more focused on play does not mean that that focus does not include developing language- and mathematic- skills. The Swedish philosophy is that children learn and develop through playing or in a playful manner (a.a.). You could view this as the Swedish- and SBECs- pre-schools actually working towards similar goals but that they are differing in fundamental ways when it comes to what pedagogical tactics their using and how they choose to build their learning environments.

But much like the Swedish play oriented activities could be explained by the pre-school traditions in Sweden it is also possible that SBECs more formal shape (Drammeh 2012) in their activities and in their classrooms can be explained by the school tradition that the Gambia has possibly inherited from the British school system that is also has a more formal shape (a.a.).
7.4 Conclusions
To summarize, the Swedish pre-school tradition and SBECs pre-school both have a lot of similarities and differences. The Gambian society’s view on pre-schools could be interpreted to be going through a similar progress as the Swedish society once did towards gaining the full support of the government. The creators of SBEC strongly believed in the impact that they could make on both the Gambian society and the world by building a strong school with high quality education. They set up to do this by working towards the vision they had of creating future leaders who can be comfortable enough in and outside the Gambia to make changes. One of the ways, that I interpreted, that they want to achieve this is by giving the students a strong foundation in a pre-school that focuses on nurturing the children and giving them the necessary skills to become the kind of student that they want to have in their school.
A way to move forward with this study could be to follow up the results after some years and see how the schools evolved. How has the attitude of the Gambian society changed? You could perhaps discover how the children in the pre-school has developed and are now coping as students in the school. Another possibility could be to make a comparison in a different pre-school.
References


Department for education [United Kingdom] (2014). Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage. Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five.


Appendices

Interview with the head of the pre-school teacher program at the Gambia college:

- What is your role here at the university?
- What is your experience?
- How does the nursery teacher program look and what is its content?
- What philosophy on teaching does this program have?
- How long has the program existed?
- What kind of teaching values does this program want to give the teachers who attend it?
- How do you want the teachers, who have attended this program, to view their students?
- What kind of teachers do you want to create?
- How do you feel this country views the nursery schools and nursery school teachers as a profession?
- What are your future dreams for this program and the profession?
- Do you have the national curriculum in mind during the education in this program?
- What do you feel that the program need to develop more?
- What do you feel is the programs strengths?
- What do you think of the nursery schools here in The Gambia in general and the quality of their education?
- Do they reflect well on what the teacher program is trying to achieve?

Interview with the head of the nursery school/the director at SBEC:

- How long has the school existed?
- Did you start with the nursery school?
- What was the initial idea when you started the school?
- How do you view the students here?
- What kind of teaching environment do you want the children to have?
- How is the nursery school viewed here?
- What are your dreams for the future with the school?
- How much does it cost for a child to attend the school?
- What kind of education does the teachers have here at SBEC?
- What kind of qualities do you look for in your teachers?
- What makes SBEC stand out from other pre-schools in The Gambia?
- Do you work according to a curriculum?
- Do the children have targets they have to achieve?
- Does the teachers talk about how to meet the targets?
- What is the most important values you want to give the children?
- Is there anything that I have not asked that you would like to tell me about the pre-school?