Transition from pre-school to school: Emphasizing early literacy

The education of the child shall be directed to…
the development of the child’s personality,
talents and mental and physical abilities
to their fullest potential.

CHAPTER 5. A SEAMLESS TRANSITION OR AN OASIS TO REST IN?
The Children’s Pictures of the Swedish Pre-School Class

by Helena Ackesjö

5.1 Abstract

In Sweden, children’s transition from pre-school to compulsory school is made through the pre-school class. This study aims to highlight this Swedish transition zone through the eyes of the children. What is being focused on in the pre-school class from the children’s point of view? The children have been painting pictures of their days in the pre-school class. The focus of analysis is what the children chose to highlight as central in the pedagogic practice. The pictures are therefore seen as communicative narratives. Through the pictures the children represent and communicate their experiences of the world.

Ten pre-school classes participated in the study, and a total of 172 pictures were analyzed. Over half of the pictures showed playing children and included (free) play both indoors and outdoors, pictures that describe the pre-school class as an “oasis to rest in” between pre-school and school. Yet another extensive category was outlined, that showed different types of learning and education foremost in activities like circle time. The result shows that the pictures reflect the pre-school class as a playful child-centred educational practice at the crossroads between pre-school and compulsory school. My conclusion is that the pre-school class may be just a seamless transition from pre-school to compulsory school, with both “formal” schooling and playful learning.

In Sweden, children’s transition from pre-school to compulsory school is made through the pre-school class. This study aims to highlight this Swedish “transition zone”, that is the pedagogic practice in pre-school class, through the eyes of the children. The starting point of this study is drawn from my licentiate
thesis, which explores the teacher’s identities in the pre-school class (Ackesjö, 2010). The results showed that the teachers in pre-school class wanted to shelter this pedagogic practice from influences from compulsory school. They were also eager to mark some sort of differences between pre-school, pre-school class and compulsory school. These extracts show how this was made:

Helena: What do you do in pre-school class that the teachers in pre-school don’t?
Lena: Well, we work harder with the children’s social skills, because they [teachers in pre-school] are so focused on the children’s acquisitions of knowledge. And it feels as if it should be the other way around, that maybe we should work more with children’s learning... But our work is more to practice the social skills, to practice the children’s endurance... of course there should be knowledge acquisitions also and we do some letters and so.... But it feels as the demands, the demands on the children are higher in pre-school I think.

Helena: So, the pre-school class becomes a pause, an intermission...?
Laila: Yes...
Lena: The knowledge acquisitions is all that is in focus in pre-school nowadays, it feels as if it has become low status to say that care is included in the work.

Regina: The school has its schedule—“Today we are going to do Swedish assignments!” In the pre-school class, we also plan like this, “today it’s Wednesday and I’m going to work on the children’s language skills”. Though, we work with the Swedish language every day, but with more focus on Wednesdays. Then this happens, like for me today; when we were done we had been working with mathematics instead. We have this freedom! To be able to choose! We can allow us to follow the children’s turns during the day.
Rosita: Maybe the teachers in school can’t do that. I think that is a big difference. We have a bigger opportunity to be flexible.

Lena: And I think we have the whole progress of the children in mind, teachers in school have more focus on learning and we know that the whole person is important for children to be able to go a step further.

(Extracts from Ackesjö, script)

It seems as if these teachers wanted to mark differences in contents between pre-school class and pre-school (“The knowledge acquisitions is all that is in focus in pre-school nowadays”) and differences in methods (“We have a bigger opportunity to be flexible”) between pre-school class and compulsory school.

In Sweden, a discussion about the pre-school class is escalating, with focus on learning and assessments. While the government wants to make learning and knowledge acquisitions in pre-school class more visible, the teachers seem to be more eager to make the transition from pre-school to compulsory school via the pre-school class rather stress-free for the children, with a lot of free play in focus (Ackesjö, 2010). The question is how the children experience the activities in the pre-school class? My intent of this study is to give a brief view of the children’s perceptions of the pre-school class activities. What is focused on in the pre-school class from the children’s point of view?
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Previous research and evaluations of the Swedish pre-school class (e.g. Munkhammar, 2001; Davids-
son, 2002; Swedish Agency for School Improvement, 2004; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2006; Karlsson, Melander, Prieto, & Sahlström, 2006; Ackesjö, 2010) is conducted by interviewing teachers, 
by observing the teachers and children in pre-school class activities, or by highlighting the differences 
and similarities between different types of school forms. In contrast to that approach, only a few studies 
have been carried out where children in pre-school class have had their say, and then always in relation 
to other contexts or school forms. This constructs a gap of knowledge. Children’s voices, their experi-
ences about the activities in pre-school class seen as a transition zone between pre-school and school, 
need to be heard. In this article I present the children’s view of what content they feel they are offered in 
pre-school class. The focus of analysis is what the children chose to highlight as central in the pedagogic 
practice.

5.2 The Swedish pre-school class—a new arena?

The pre-school class is an activity that has been created through an educational reform in the late 1990s 
with the purpose of constructing a bridge between pre-school and compulsory education. The two insti-
tutions together would create a “new pedagogy” that would be fruitful for the activities of a pre-school 
class (Swedish Agency for School Improvement, 2004). The pre-school class is included in the curriculum 
for the compulsory school with the exception that it doesn’t have to achieve the goals in the curriculum. 
This means that pre-school class only has goals to strive for, as in pre-school. The reform stated that 
the activities in a pre-school class shouldn’t be school activities, but also not mere pre-school activities. 
Therefore, one could say that a new arena has arisen between pre-school and primary school (Swedish 
Agency for School Improvement, 2006). In my licentiate thesis (Ackesjö, 2010), I study teachers’ iden-
tities in pre-school class and I theoretically place the pre-school class at the crossroad of pre-school and 
school. I use the term borderland to enhance “the place in between” pre-school and compulsory school. 
In this borderland teachers should create a meaningful and effective pedagogic practice.

According to the Swedish Agency for School Improvement (2004; 2006) the pre-school class ought to 
be seen as an important transition zone, in which the children should be given opportunities to prepare 
for meeting with the compulsory schools’ demands on skills and knowledge, in a playful way. This is 
even more enhanced by the government’s construction of the pre-school class as a voluntarily pedagogic 
activity for the six year old children. In other Nordic countries, the activities for the six year old children 
have been managed in different ways. By the educational reform in Norway 1997, Germeten (2002) states 
that the six year old children were moved from the voluntary pre-school to compulsory school, from a 
voluntary arena of free play to an arena with discipline and control. In Denmark, the same movement 
was made 2009 as the activities for the six year old children became a part of the Danish compulsory 
school.

5.3 Theoretical and methodical framework

In the study, childhood sociologies are used as a theoretical framework, which means that I see the 
children as actors in their own life. The child is seen as an individual who collectively and actively 
built his/her own culture and relationships. Children are active participants, they should be listened 
to and have a major place in the community (James, 1997; Lee, 2001; Halliden, 2007). Corsaro (2005)
suggests that we should leave the perception of children as marginalized, and instead see them as active and participating in both children’s and adult’s cultures. This would give us methodologically a good foundation in research that will focus on and highlight the children’s everyday lives.

For a long time children have been positioned as passive in research, in that they have not been given opportunity to contribute with stories from their positions (Veale, 2005). Even if we listen to children, adults have a tradition not to hear them (Roberts, 2002). The children in this study are seen as active and participatory, and not merely as passive recipients of adult actions. To be able to, via the children’s eyes, highlight the content in pre-school class, the children have been painting pictures of their days in the pre-school class. The starting point has been that children communicate what is important to them in their social and cultural practice. The children also commented on the pictures verbally to clarify the content. The children’s comments together with the pictures, construct the empiric foundation for this summary of the children’s views of the pre-school class.

Children and teachers in ten pre-school classes participated in the study. The teachers conducted the data collection in their own classes, following a given manual (enclosed in appendix A.1). The manual was constructed to ensure that all teachers would present the task in a similar manner to the children, and also to enable comparison of the pictures. The children painted pictures in the winter and early spring of the year in which they participated in pre-school class. This timing meant that the children had a good experience of the activities because they had been participating in pre-school class for 6–9 months. A total of 172 pictures were included in the study and the pictures were analyzed by studying the content of what children are presenting. (Some of the pictures and the children’s comments are enclosed in appendix B.1)

The pictures might give us contextual clues about the pre-school class, clues of how children perceive the activities as well as clues about the structure of the pre-school class. Connections are here made to James and Prout (1997); by studying children’s pictures of the pedagogical activities, knowledge can be gained about the structure and children’s action in activities, and how children’s actions are challenging the structure and how the structure prevents or allows the child’s action.

The pictures in this study are seen as communicative narratives. The use of children’s pictures as communication is inspired by Kress (1997). The six year old children in the pre-school class have not yet received “formal” reading and writing education, and many of the children have not yet conquered the written language. Image-building is a medium close to the children’s experience of the world, and through the pictures we can, according to Kress (Kress, 1997), reach the children’s meaning making. According to Kress (1997), the pictures are included in the concept of literacy. Through the pictures the children represent and communicate their experiences of the world. The visual aspect of literacy, children’s pictures, is an understated and relatively un-researched area. The images are one media the children use to communicate their experiences and to make their voices heard. The concept of literacy needs therefore to be expanded, to contain all sorts of media competence, more competences than just writing (Kress, 1997). In this study I use Barton’s (1994) definition of literacy which states that literacy is a way of symbolically defining the world. It’s a part of our ways of thinking, and it’s a goal to communicate something to others.

The pictures could also be seen as literacy events, according to Heath (1999). Even if Marsh (2004) means that we cannot talk about children as pre-readers or pre-writers, since they are already in the middle of this learning process from birth, I think that the concept of pre-writers can be a way to delimit the children in pre-school/pre-school class from children in compulsory school. In this study the information
the children communicate to us is seen as pre-writing in my definition; written communication prior to the children’s mastering of the formal written language. This means that I see children as literate even if they do not have conquered the written language, since they communicate their stories through their pictures.

Nevertheless, we have to challenge this method of research. The children’s pictures cannot be seen as some kind of “truth” that can be generalized. My aim is to briefly summarize the pictures, which can give us clues of how the children are experiencing the pre-school class. First, we have to bear in mind that the children may have drawn some sort of “wishful pictures”; pictures which may represent activities they wish were a part of the pre-school class. Second, the children’s comments to their pictures were written down by the teachers. We do not know how this was made, and if the teachers altered the children’s comments in any way. Third, my way of dividing the pictures into categories can be discussed. Other researchers may conduct this categorization in other ways. My categories can be, and have been, discussed, challenged and revised by other researchers.

5.4 Findings

The analysis generated five categories. Each category shows different images of the activities in the pre-school class. In this empirical section, I will give a summary of the variation in the children’s pictures. The outlined categories are

- Play indoors and outdoors
- Education in several subjects and themes, indoors and outdoors
- Circle time
- Collaboration with other grades
- School routines (no activities, only descriptions of routines)

Over half of the pictures show playing children and include (free) play both indoors and outdoors. Another extensive category is outlined from the pictures that show different types of learning and education; in circle time or in education of different subjects such as Swedish, mathematics, environmental issues, sports etc. In the following, the analysis will be focused on the three first and most extensive categories; play, education and circle time. (For examples of pictures and comments, see appendix B.1)

Play indoors and outdoors

Within the category of play, the children describe their play both indoors and outdoors. The children’s descriptions range from playing football, climbing trees and swinging outdoors to building with Lego and Kapla sticks or play house indoors. At first, all the pictures of play seem to describe what we could call children’s free play; activities that the children chose by themselves. No adults are drawn in these pictures, which could support the fact that the activities are child-centred and maybe child-chosen activities.
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Circle time

Several pictures describe circle time situations. The category known as circle time contains pictures that in different ways show the contents of the circle time which is recurring in pre-school class almost every day. According to the children’s comments, they discuss ethical issues and value issues in the circle time. Some of the children’s pictures and comments also imply that the circle time can be a place for education in language and mathematics. What dominates the circle time in the children’s pictures seems to be the moment of “eating fruit and reading stories”. The pictures are telling us about the education in pre-school class, since the circle time can be seen as a method of teaching. Even so, I choose to give these pictures an individual category, since the children so clearly showed in their pictures and comments that the purpose with the pictures was to highlight the circle time as a specific activity.

Teaching indoors and outdoors

Within the category listed as teaching indoors and outdoors the children describe different forms of teacher-guided situations. The pictures and the comments show how they sit in benches or at tables and are working with books in which they are supposed to fill in letters and numbers. In the pictures of outdoor teaching, the children describe situations in which they go to the woods and are taught in flora and fauna, or locate branches with shapes of letters. Within the category, the children’s stories mainly describe the teaching of the Swedish language (reading and writing) even if pictures of mathematics, science, physical education and teacher-guided creative activities also occur.

5.5 Analyzing dilemmas

The question is what we possibly see in the children’s pictures. Despite the fact that the pre-school class is a school form, it’s remarkable that so many children choose to omit “formal school activities” in their pictures. On the other hand it might be argued that all pictures in some form express the children’s experiences of the pre-school class. Their representations in the pictures can be seen as the children’s interpretations of the activities. The children’s representations and interpretations are situated, and the children’s knowledge about the pre-school class is produced through their experiences (Skeggs, 1997). This means that even if the children draw an activity that we refer to as free play, this activity could be a representation of an advanced laboratory work in mathematics. It is all about interpretations.

Let me give some examples of difficulties in analyzing the pictures. In the category of play, we can’t tell from the pictures if the activities are chosen by the child itself, or if the building of the three Kapla-towers in different heights is a result of a lesson in mathematics. We can’t be sure that the pictures omit “formal teaching”; in fact it may be the teaching process the children are representing in their pictures.

Even the category of circle time has to be discussed. This category is large, which may be because the circle time is an activity that the children recognize and that they have extensive experience with from pre-school. It is an activity close to the children’s experiences; an activity which they know and can understand the content of, and therefore is easy to recognize and describe. One can also interpret these pictures of the circle time as the children’s understanding of the pre-school traditions and cultures influencing the pre-school class activities; the circle time is an activity which has a strong position in pre-school and is a moment where teachers can educate children in a perhaps less formal manner without bringing the children into school benches. I choose to separate the pictures of the circle time from the
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category of teaching, because the children so clearly showed in their pictures and comments that the 
purpose with the pictures was to highlight the circle time as a specific activity. But of course, the circle 
time can also be seen as a form of teaching. In the circle time, the teachers have an opportunity to discuss 
different subjects and relate them to the children’s experiences, and to read and sing and so on.

5.6 The pre-school class as a seamless transition?

Could the pre-school class be seen as a seamless transition from pre-school to compulsory school? Teach-
ers in pre-school class tend to mark that education and teaching in pre-school class is made in a partially 
“different” way than at school, even if it is in the same subject areas (cf. Ackesjö, 2010; Germeten 2002). 
Based on the children’s pictures and their comments one can say that the children’s play has been given 
much space in pre-school class activities. On the other hand, the pictures are not stressing learning and 
teaching to the same extent. Within the category of teaching indoors and outdoors, parallels from the 
children’s pictures can be drawn to the school’s teaching culture; it is within this category that children 
most clearly describe the school’s cultural influences on the pre-school class. However, the category is 
relatively small.

I do believe that pre-school class activities are much more complex than “just” (free) play. My con-
versations with teachers in pre-school testify to significant projects in mathematics, Swedish language 
and environmental issues that are planned for and implemented over shorter or longer periods of time. 
In these projects, the children are involved in both planning and implementation, and they seem to learn 
a lot. Most children learn to read and write during the year in pre-school class. They meet and learn the 
mathematical language in a playful and natural way; bar charts are made out of lost teeth and collected 
tea light cups. The children learn about the flora and fauna, species and types (Ackesjö, 2010). One can 
suppose that the children participating in the activities are aware of the fact that the pre-school class 
indeed is a school form, or at least, that they have left the pre-school for a different pedagogic activity. 
Given that, it is surprising to see the vast amount of pictures with playing children, and that they chose 
to omit the “school-like” educational activities in their pictures. Does this tell us something about this 
pedagogic practice, or does this tell us more about how children chose to paint pictures?

One possible conclusion that could be drawn is that the adult-led teaching is no dominant element 
in pre-school class activity from the children’s perspectives. Although, this doesn’t mean that adult-led 
teaching doesn’t exist. But from the perspectives of the children’s pictures, the teaching in pre-school 
class may come in other forms. One of these forms of teaching may be what the children show us in their 
pictures, which are pictures of playing and learning children. Given these findings, maybe the pre-school 
class constructs a seamless transition from pre-school to compulsory school, with playing and learning 
woven together and where the teachers educate the children according to the children’s interests and 
cultures.

5.7 …or an oasis to rest in?

The children’s descriptions of the pre-school class can also be likened to what Prout (2005) calls the “in-
ocent children’s social limbo” or “secret gardens” (op. cit, p. 11). Does the pre-school class activities 
foremost consist of (free) play (as the children’s pictures show), which contribute to the fact that this
school form can be seen as a secret garden or oasis for the children to rest in between the more knowledge based pre-school and compulsory school? This is what the teachers stressed (Ackesjö, 2010). If the children in their pictures generally describe their own child-centred cultures in pre-school class, cultures permeated by free play and a free childhood, one question could be why formal education is not emphasized by the teachers?

The fact that the pedagogical activities for the six year old children in Sweden were carried out in a crowded classroom at school, contributed to a minimal amount of space for the children’s play and lively movements. This made it important for the teachers to find new ways to adopt the activities in pre-school class (Persson & Wiklund, 2008). Therefore, it is interesting to consider why the teaching is almost not visible in the children’s pictures. Are the teachers, so to speak, teaching “on the fly”? One way of discussing the teacher’s role in the pre-school class, is to question the teacher’s balancing act between autonomy and formal goals of the school system; their apparent struggle between educating the children and encouraging the children’s free play (cf. Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2009). From the children’s perspective, their own free play is playing the most significant role in the pre-school class. The use of the free play in the education may be a conscious act of the teachers, and a way to make the transition easy and relaxed for the children.

As previously stated, teachers in pre-school class seem to be keen on not to teach in a formal “school-like” manner (Ackesjö, 2010; Germeten, 2002). Will this effort result in teaching conducted in pre-school class passing the children unnoticed? Could one result of the teachers’ aspirations, which is to make the pre-school class a seamless transition by weaving (free) play as a central part into the teaching of mathematics and language, be that the children interpret these activities as just a game? Through the children’s joint actions and activities in the pre-school class, they interpret and alter the social order in the pedagogic practice. Since the teachers are not “doing school” in the pre-school class, the children also may respond by not “doing school”. This can construct the pre-school class to an oasis to rest in, where the children can be at ease, and play and learn in their own time.

5.8 The children’s pictures as literacy events

The results require the choice of methods to be discussed. I had probably received other responses from the children if I had conducted interviews, and if I had asked them to tell different learning situations in the pre-school class. At the same time, children’s pictures can give clues to what the children think is crucial, when adults do not affect them with questions as in an interview. I choose to see the pictures as communicative narratives and as literacy events, which are here placed on an equal footing with the written language. The children are communicating their stories through their pictures, and by using a broader literacy concept, the pictures are seen as literacy events according to Kress (1997) and Heath (1999). The children’s experiences are situated in and processed through the practice in pre-school class, and the pictures are seen as representations of the children’s interpretations of these experiences. The children’s interpretations and representations are based on the children’s prior frameworks, and are recognized through the children’s understanding, naming and marking of the events in their pictures. The pictures therefore give us clues to the children’s knowledge about the practice although this knowledge is always changing, forming and moving. They use their pictures to tell us their stories about the practice; stories from their positions, processed through their experiences, via a well known language. According to the teachers they were taking an interest in the pictures, they were involved in the making and they
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were taking responsibility in the picture’s communicative ambition. In this representative process, the pictures become literacy events and the picture making becomes a mediated action in which the children are expressing their interpretations of the practice.

5.9 Concluding remarks

The children’s pictures give us clues about what is central in the pre-school class from the children’s perspectives. Therefore, it is interesting to consider how it could be that children’s play and their self-selected activities have such an impact in the children’s pictures. One reason may be that the free play is central for the children, and the play takes up a large part of children’s waking hours. The play is what gives the children meaning and nourishment, and is also the platform on which they can process their daily experiences. Given this, it may seem quite natural that the (free) play appears so frequently in the pictures. But on the other hand—can the children’s pictures also show that the children experience a lack of clarity in the educational activities? Maybe the children do not really appreciate or see this school form as an arena for learning and education. The compulsory school in Sweden does not begin until children are seven years old, and from that perspective it is perhaps encouraging that the children seem to view the pre-school class as a free and child-centred extension of pre-school. But then again; if the children do not pay attention to the school codes or school cultures in pre-school class, and do not notice that pre-school classes are not “just” pre-school, then what about the transition to compulsory school and the continuity between the different forms of schooling? Will the transition be seamless?

From this study, parallels can be drawn to the political debate about the Swedish pre-school class presented at the top of this article. While the Swedish government wants to make learning and knowledge acquisitions in pre-school class more visible by including achieving goals and assessments of learning, the teachers want to make the transition from pre-school to compulsory school soft, stress-free and comfortable for the children, with a lot of free play in focus and a lot of knowledge acquisitions in “different” forms than at school. Even if the teachers in pre-school class mark their differences to other school forms, my conclusion is that the pre-school class may be just a seamless transition from pre-school to compulsory school, with both “formal” schooling and playful learning.

Even if we don’t know much about the situations in which the pictures were made, the pictures reflect the children’s views of the pre-school class; a playful child-centred educational practice at the crossroads between pre-school and compulsory school.
A.1 Children’s pictures of the pre-school class

Children’s pictures can be a way to capture what happens in an educational activity. Often children are depicting their experiences in a “naked” manner. I want you to ask your pre-school class children to draw pictures of the activities, one picture or several pictures if they want. You are required to follow a manual for the collection of the pictures so that all of your images can be comparable in the study:

- Start by gathering all the children (in full or half classes).
- Conduct a discussion with the children where they can come up with their stories of what you usually do on a “normal day” in the pre-school class. Let the children come up with proposals that can inspire them in the drawing assignment. Emphasize that all answers can be right!
- Prepare the children with paper (A4-size) and crayons, so they can depict situations that they believe are central to the activities of this particular pre-school class.
- Ask the children to talk about what the pictures portray.
- Write the children’s words on the back of the pictures. Ask the children to be as detailed as possible in their descriptions.
- Do not write the children’s names, if they are boys or girls, or school’s name!

Before you perform the activity, you must give a letter to the parents, so that they can accept their children participating in the study. This letter is included in this envelope. Ask the parents to sign and return the letter to you.

After the activity, collect all images and send them to me in the enclosed envelope along with letters that the parents have signed. The pictures from those children who did not receive OK from their parents to participate in the study you keep yourself.

Thank you for your help!

Helena Ackesjö
B.1 Selected pictures and comments of play indoors

This is when I’m building with Kapla sticks.
We use to be in the building room, where I play with cars and Lego, and build spaceships.
I use to play with cars on the red carpet.
We use to play in the doll-room, we play mother father and child. Both mum and dad are cooking. The baby is asleep.
This is when my friend and I dress up as Jasmine. She is a princess from the stories.
This is when we have disco in the hall way. We dance and play and so on.
B.2 Selected pictures and comments of play outdoors

This is when I swing outside.
I and my friends have a secret hut in the bushes.
This is when we are sliding.
We are good bandy players. We use to play at the course outside the school.
This is when I’m building a sandcastle outdoors. I like to build things in the sand.
This is when we play football outside.
We use to play in the bushes.

B.3 Selected pictures and comments of circle time

We use to eat fruit and listen to a story.
This is when we have circle time. We have it every day. We eat fruit, and talk a bit. We count all the children and sing. It’s good to have circle time, because that’s when all the children are there.
This is when we have circle time. We are 15 children in our group. We talk about different things, like shapes, words letters. And we eat fruit.
When we have circle time, we use to play, listen to stories and eat fruit.
B.4 Selected pictures and comments of teaching

We do the ABC, we learn letters and the sign language.
This is when we learn stuff.
This is when the teacher tells us to do the Friday-book. So we do that. When we’re done, we can have free play.
You have to write and paint.
This is when we do homework.
This is when I do my ABC-book in the library.


