

The idyllic grey chair

-an essay about adapting my professional practise into the Swedish preschool environment

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Abstract

The environment in the preschool I work in is lacking equipment, but something more is effecting me in my professional practises. By writing, I come to realize that it is my own child perspective that affects me. Setting up the environment, I am using my teaching experiences from England and trying to adapt my professional practise to the preschool in Sweden and the Swedish curriculum. With newfound knowledge from teacher training in Sweden, I use the idyllic notion of a perfect environment I have to reassess my teaching practices. I have used an earlier study on Swedish and English preschool environments and I have discussed the influence that the Reggio Emilia approach has had at my place of work in Sweden.

Keywords: Preschool, England, Sweden, Professional Practices, Environment

Titel: Den idylliska grå stolen- en essä om att anpassa sitt förhållningssätt i den svenska förskolans miljö

Sammanfattning

Förskolemiljön på min arbetsplats saknar inredning, men något mer påverkar mig i verksamheten. Genom att skriva kommer jag till insikt med att det är mitt barnperspektiv som påverkar mig. Jag organiserar miljön utifrån min förskoleerfarenhet från England och försöker anpassa den till den svenska förskolekulturen och läroplanen. Med ny kunskap från lärarutbildningen i Sverige använder jag mig av mina idylliska föreställningar om den perfekta förskolemiljön för att omvärdera min yrkespraktik. Jag har använt mig av tidigare studier av förskolemiljön i England och Sverige och tagit upp influenser från Reggio Emilias filosofi som haft genomslag på min arbetsplats.

Nyckelord: Förskola, England, Sverige, Yrkespraktik, Miljö

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1 The story

1.1 Preschool environment

We have been placed in a big empty warehouse, placed like we have no other choice. There is no option in it and there is a dull feeling settling over me as I enter the building. Everything is white, bare and industrial. It feels like an institution like no other, there is no feeling of belonging, impersonalised and as far away from homely and cosy as I can imagine. It takes me straight back to upper school, which I attended in a building that previously had been used as a mental hospital, until closed down a few years earlier. Empty corridors, rooms placed out in sets of twos, doors with see-through windows and a vast amount of concrete seemed to swallow me completely as I stepped inside. I am left feeling small and pale, feeling as if the building is ignoring my existence. The world outside is forgotten and I step into my role as a teacher, like putting a coat on; I dress in my profession with a smile on my lips, confidence in my eyes and relaxed arms, I am ready to meet the children, parents and co-workers.

My story starts in an English speaking preschool with staff of origins all over the globe, we are set to develop a new pedagogical approach for the children to become part of society as a whole; part of the world. Not just the staff are from all over the world so are the children, we work extra to raise children's different cultural background as something positive and something to be proud of. We teach children that we are all humans and together we are part of a worldwide community. There are about 50 children in the ages 1-5 years and eight staff. Three are lower schoolteachers, one has a degree in social studies and three have no education in childcare. Then there is me, I have studied in England and have a BTEC National Diploma in Early Years, which qualifies me to be team leader but not a certified teacher. I work with the woman who has a degree in social studies and we teach the 2 year olds, the Woodpeckers, a group of 11 children.

Some stone steps take me down to the hallway that the younger children share where there are rows of benches and hooks full of small coats, the first sign of children in the building. I enter through a glass door into the canteen where three round tables are pushed together in each of the two corners furthest away. There is a big empty space in front of me and I cross it towards the four rooms we use for the two youngest children groups at the preschool. Two sleep rooms and two playrooms. Fluorescent lights light up only one of the four rooms. There is a silence in the building, which is only broken once I reach the door of the lit up room.

Happiness rises in me as I hear the children chatting. I raise my hand to open the door, at the

same time there's a roar followed by a teachers' booming voice, my stomach turns with a mixed array of emotions, sadness, anxiety and stress. "What will today bring?" I wonder as my heart rate increase. My hand falls heavily on the door handle and it is with a sigh of exasperation I enter the room.

Its eight o'clock and the children are slowly trickling in at the "Woodpeckers" where we always start the day. The room has been furnished with two small IKEA tables with four little chairs each. On one, there is a jar with crayons and papers, the other two puzzles. Furthermore there is a big round mossy green rug, two Kalix bookshelves and a grey armchair, which you put your feet up in as in a chaise longue. Four foam squares lay in a corner with a few cars scattered round and on the rug in the middle of the room is a pile of base coloured foam building blocks. In one of the corners there's a little toy kitchen with two pots, a jug, three spoons, a whisk and two plates. There is a box of food items made of fabric for the kitchen also from at IKEA. A big floor to ceiling window divides the playroom with the adjoining sleep room; it is covered with thick colourful curtains. Even though there has been a clear, effort in trying to set the room up to be inviting for play there is still something in the atmosphere that is lacking.

When I started working in childcare, it was in an English nursery in the middle of the countryside as far away from the sea as you can get whilst in England. This was also a bare setting due to us only having a rental agreement for the use of the building Monday to Friday. At the end of the week, we had to tidy all the materials and toys away so that anyone else leasing the building for the weekend would have full use of it. However, there was a calmer more settled feeling amongst the children and staff. We set up stations for play every morning, the main room was massive with great potential for running games and screams to echo through the building, however there was a clear balance of teaching opportunities through organised activities like a maze guiding you in sparking curiosity. There was also a sense of the type of calm and security associated with a child being at home; not because of the furnishings but the way routines fell in place and the freedom that was given to the children in their play. Both the setting in England and the one in Sweden are sparsely equipped but the children and staff display very different behaviours.

In the Woodpeckers room, I quickly count fifteen children whilst I say good morning. I sit down on the floor and the conversation in the room takes me straight in to the routine of which teachers are working today and when we are dividing and joining the groups. The

“Owls” teacher comes and says she will take both hers and the “Eagle” children, which are the two groups of older children. As per usual, one of the children is refusing to put away the toys he has been playing with. To make the transition easier for him, he is allowed to take the toys he has been playing with from the kitchen with him. This routine has come to place to meet the boys individual needs to feel secure in the setting. Unfortunately, none of the toys are returned and the already low amount of toys is falling little by little every day. We are doing what is best for this child but how is it effecting the rest of the group? Should I approach his teachers or take my thoughts to my boss?

A few weeks into the term, an impatient parent puts me on the spot asking when they are going to see more toys and equipment in the preschool. I really have no idea of how the economy has been planned and the time schedule of purchases so I come up with an explanation.

- We are currently observing the children’s interests and evaluating where we need to grow first. We want the children’s interests to permeate into the environment so we can form it to suit their needs the best we can. Unfortunately, this is going to take some time, but meanwhile we are all working together and changing toys in between the groups to try them out and see what is working and what we are lacking.

The parent seems to relax by my answer, her mind being set at ease for the moment at least. Inside of me however, the thoughts just tumble, most days are spent breaking up fights over toys, uncertain of how to counteract the development of unsettlement and agitation amongst the children in the preschool, what am I going to do?

A few weeks later in the afternoon, I am in the middle of calming one of the children down. She does not have much language yet and tends to let her feelings of frustration or anger out by using her teeth instead of words. After stopping her from biting a child, whose toy she wanted, I sit down with her on the grey chair with a puzzle. We are in the middle of talking about the puzzle pieces that are shaped like animals, when another child climbs up on the arm of the chair and takes a piece. I look at the girl I have been trying to calm down and connect to, as her eyes grow wide and she freezes up. This is the indication that she will bite and I am forced to turn the other child away from sitting with us to keep the situation under control. I know we have one more animal puzzle but it is not in its place on the shelf, most likely one of the other groups has borrowed it. I am on my own with the children in the room and cannot

leave to search for it as I am next to the sleep room waiting for the rest of the group to wake up. Therefore, the dismissed child is staring at me sadly and I am left feeling torn.

At a different time, I am having a boy, who has speech delay, with me on the grey chair. It is cosy and I have his focus on “the hungry caterpillar” in the book. He is copying some of the words when I point to them. More children come and try to climb on the armrests of the chair. I can fit five children in my lap if we cram up properly and I reach round them. When a sixth child comes, there is no more room and chaos stirs as this child is feeling left out in the collective. Instead of the norm of having a two or three seater sofa to sit and read stories in we have a chaise longue. The type of furnishings is once more causing an issue as I am forced to stop reading with the main purpose of practicing speech with the boy I started with. Instead, I find myself trying to hand out books from the box next to me and the focus I had from the boy disappears. It ends with him losing his chance for language training.

Like the grey chair that no one else uses and everyone wants to move, I feel misplaced. Where do we belong, the chair and me?

1.2 Professional Practices

Due to my training in England child safety is a big part of me, built into my personality, as this was one of the core practices taught to me. I see scenarios of emergency occurring and want to plan and be prepared for how to act in these circumstances. I choose to rearrange the furniture in the room one morning when I am on my own with five children. They are exited and are pushing and pulling toys, tables and chairs round. My main objective with this is to put one of the bookshelves by the windows, as they are about 1.75m high up we cannot reach them as we need to. This is because they are our only way out in case of emergency such as fire in the canteen or kitchen. I move the grey chair next to the door joining our room with the sleep room thinking it will be nice to be close when the children wake up, ready for them with a cosy reading corner. When my co-worker comes in, she jolts to a stop, her hands clutching tightly round the binder she is holding. She stands there frozen, looking round with a plain expression that I am unable to read.

- Oh, you’ve moved the furniture.
- Yeah, I want to change things up a bit see if we can use the room differently to see how the children’s behaviour is affected. In my experience the change helps to fuel their curiosity.

- But it's going to make them even more unsettled, she replies in an exasperated voice.

- Well if it doesn't work we'll move it back next week, but we have to think about what to do about fire safety and escape routes. I think they seem to like it.

- Well we don't have time to talk about it now its five minutes till changing nappies time and then its snack, she barely breathes before starting to sing the tidying up song.

As a team leader, I feel like I have the right to do what I feel best, I have more experience from working in an Early Years setting, but she has a university degree in social studies and I want to find a way to fit the role of team leader the way she pictures it. She has expressed she does not want any responsibilities outside the care of the children, and I am happy to take it all on. We do not get further in the discussion as a scream echoes across the room, the girl that often bites is shaking, standing over another child who is holding her back letting out yelps of pain. Both of us, me and my co-worker spring into action focusing on the children and leaving our discussion for later. She deals with the child that is holding her back, lifting her t-shirt revealing a set of red teeth marks. I grab the other girl, guide her out of the room to the hallway and sit her on a chair.

- This is unacceptable behaviour; it is NOT okay to bite. You have to STOP doing that.

In my stress about the furniture and the response from my co-worker, I am still worked up and tell the little girl off in a strict fashion, much as I have many times before when working in England. I forget where I am and take the role of having to lecture the girl of her wrongdoings. I firmly tell her to stay on the chair and leave her in the corridor for her two minutes of calming down time whilst I go in to check on the other child and my co-worker. At this moment, a parent comes to pick up her children. She asks why the little girl is sitting on her own in the corridor and I explain that she is having a timeout. The parent, who is Swedish, is appalled.

- That's not okay. I don't want you to treat my children like THIS when they do something wrong.

I am put on the spot, never have I considered this a bad practice before. It has been the correct way to treat children in England where I have trained, following the English idea of not to

give them a slap on the fingers or spanking for misbehaving. I have not reflected upon that a reprimand in form of a time out is inappropriate.

* * *

After parental leave I return to the preschool, a last term student, almost fully qualified as a teacher. The environment totally changed, redesigned with inspiration of the children. There is colour on the walls, real colours such as green, blue, red, yellow, purple, orange, strong and pale shades. I get excited and my role as a teacher feels more like a profession than a cloak, the item of clothing I used to dress in for work. My smile feels more natural than before as I step in the building. The silence is still present, but pictures, photographs and crafts are displayed all the way from the door, down the stair into the hallway. The coatracks have doubled in amount and the room is now crammed full with coats, rain clothes, wellies, gloves, hats and shoes. However new co-workers welcome me into the same atmosphere that I left, stress and a sense of me not belonging. I see worried parents dropping their children of, one mum crying herself. I am shown round the building by my boss to see the changes and to be introduced to a developed idea of how they work in the new environment. Each room has a specific function and aim. Drama, math, science, language, water play, construction, games, pretend play, arts and crafts, five senses room, library and the gym. Even the hallways have a purpose; the small IKEA tables are set out with crayons ready to be used when you pass. The corridor upstairs has birch trees along the wall with a cosy corner, pillows and a big mattress invite you to sit for a moment and read one of the books from the shelves on the wall. The canteen has benefitted, maybe the most, of the change I think to myself as a look round and round discovering new things, palm tree leaves in the ceiling, thick ropes along the columns, all the animals that inhabit a jungle painted on the walls. Curtains in shades of green and little activity centres nailed to the walls invite you for more play. In the middle wood shelves, full of crockery and cutlery, divide the tables. The round tables in a light tinted green moulded almost to fit in to the surroundings not the other way around. I find the grey chair placed in a corner in the rarely used drama room and ask:

- Oh, I remember that chair, what is it used for here?
- Oh, I can't find any use for it, can't throw it away but it just doesn't fit anywhere. It's just not suitable.

With that, she finishes the tour and I am left with my own thoughts. There is change in the environment and I now have a solid knowledge base, but why do I still feel like an ill-fitting

puzzle piece and at the same time filled with hope? Triggered by her comments of not finding a place for the chair to fit in I sigh as the confidence my newfound knowledge has given me slowly starts to evaporate. The uncertainty of my skills as a professional teacher comes back to me and is unintentionally questioned by myself from her comment. When did I start to define my suitability as a teacher with the suitability of the furnishings, especially the grey chair?

The next morning we are taking the children to the park. It is pouring down with rain and some of the children are not appropriately dressed, wet, cold and crying. There is a cold damp air biting my cheeks and making me shiver.

- Do we have to go on an excursion today? I ask
- Yes, of course we do its Tuesday! the current team leader tells me.
- But they are cold and crying, is this really the best for the children? I press on not wanting to back down without an objection.
- Their parents know we go to the park on Tuesdays they should have dressed them accordingly. We always go on excursions on Tuesdays; the parents that don't like it or want their children not to do it can have them at home! she finishes the discussion by turning away from me and pointing the children in the direction of different seats of the prams.

The children are loaded up into two prams, six in each of them. There is rearranging of children, who can sit where? Some of the straps are broken so we have to move the children around causing more tears. I do not feel a stress of the responsibility anymore; I just feel a dull sense of being unable to offer the right words to calm the situation. I feel locked in a world where I can't do anything, I get told a Swedish saying of "there is no bad weather, only bad clothes" and off we trot. Jumping in the puddles, I make my way to the park with the children breaking out in a laugh and co-workers silently frowning. I sit down in the park on the grass and sing to a crying child, one more comes to join in and soon I have a little posse around me. I ask if they want to go play, maybe swing or jump in some puddles, I get vigorous shaking of heads as a response and I decide to continue my spontaneous sing-along. My new co-worker comes up to me and briskly says:

- They won't get warm if they stay still.

I wonder where her care and consideration for others that has been imprinted in me as a fundamental value in the Swedish curriculum during my years at university is. Anger fills me

as I realise how different views we have of the children's rights and learning. What voice have the children got, where can they be heard? In my mind, I see a memory of me in the grey chair with children all over I do my best from my education and experience but still I feel as that ill-fitting puzzle piece. How can I move forwards?

2 Purpose

The purpose of this essay is to, through writing, understand my thoughts and reflect upon the uncertainty, which I feel in my professional practises. I want to understand what it is that makes me see things differently, see certain things that stand out to me or that I question and like to change. I teach with a different background and experiences than others who have perhaps solely worked in Sweden, so, is there perhaps knowledge missing in my role that makes me uncertain, and if so what? Gaining experience, education and teacher training in England and Sweden in aim of an idyllic preschool setting, I live in bewilderment at the complexity of reaching my nostalgic, romanticised Bullerby environment for the children.

Whilst being torn in how to react in the depicted scenarios, I often act before reflecting on my co-workers or on the children's perspective. I work in a unique pedagogical environment where I have to consider my options on a daily basis. My professional practises are in transition, as I am between two different preschool cultures, both where the child perspective is central. The environment of the preschool is similar to my previous experience but the dull feeling I get is new. I believe the best way for me is to try to understand this feeling and improve things by finding a balance in my knowledge and experience, my new daily challenges and my new findings.

I have a vision of what I want to offer the children when they come to preschool each day. The different opportunities to inspire, grow, learn and develop that I want to offer put pressure on me to perform and I have yet to find my feet in the jungle of different approaches and practises. My previous experience is sometimes a hindrance and other times a big resource when I try to adapt my practise to fit in the new preschool environment working with the Swedish curriculum, values and norms. My idyllic notion of what the preschool environment should offer the children stuns me when I face challenges in the routines and new teaching approaches in the Swedish preschool. The questions I will ask myself in my

essay writing are based on differences, similarities and my adaption in to the Swedish preschool culture from the English one.

What effect does not feeling like I belong have on me as a teacher?

What changes can I make by reflecting on my role and child perspective, to work with the environment that I have in the best way possible? How will I act differently with my new knowledge, my practical and theoretical knowledge?

What parts of the environment influence the unsettled and dull mood in me within the preschool; layout, equipment, colours, materials etc.?

3 Method

It is through writing about my teaching role that I will investigate my professional practices. I will use my narration as a base for reflection upon my thoughts and actions. The method used is *essä* a specific type of scientific essay, a form of reflective writing developed by “The centre for practical knowledge” at Södertörns university used to deepen reflection and expose experiences to reveal and increase knowledge and understanding (Alsterdal, 2014, p.65). By writing, I explore being torn between my idyllic ideas and compromising with reality. I get a chance to reflect on my teaching role at the preschool and from this, I can learn and grow in my role as a teacher. By taking a step back to write, I also discover more about my learning, discovering things I already knew but even things I did not realise I knew, giving greater depth to my reflection (Hammarén 2005, p.15).

The theories I use are to investigate how my education in childcare, specifically aimed for work in preschools with an English curriculum has affected me. By using Davidssons (2002) study “Preschool and lower school teachers developing a pedagogical cooperation between their environments” as an analytical tool, I will identify some of the issues I face working with colleagues from different teaching backgrounds, when trying to develop my own teaching practice. To establish my perspective I will also be using Nordin-Hultmans’ (2004) thesis on “pedagogiska miljöer och barns subjektskapande” (freely translated: Educational environments and creation of children’s identities and subjectivity) where she has studied the differences and similarities in preschools in Sweden and in England.

I will relate to the Reggio Emilia approach as one of the theories that have led to change and development in the perspective of how we view the child and what elements affect the environment. By using Wallin (1996) a Swedish educator who has been active in bringing aspects from the Reggio Emilia approach into practices and curriculums in the Swedish settings, I will get a perspective on the historic background of the direction in which Swedish professional preschool practises have developed.

Using the idyllic children's book about the Bullerby children by Astrid Lindgren I will also use the environment described in her books as a contrast of my aim with my idyllic setting as way of raising a new viewpoint with negative point in even the best of environments as perfection for me is unattainable. With Björn Sundmarks article "The Bullerby books and tradition" and Kyttäs (2006, p.141-153) chapter Environmental child-friendliness in the light of the Bullerby Model I will investigate how historic influences have been interpreted as an ideal to strive for to satisfy the Swedish parents and the Lpfö 98 curriculum in their outdoor exploration as part of healthy living and vital part of children's development.

4 Ethical considerations

I leave out names of people and places in my writing in consideration of the Swedish regulations on ethical considerations by Vetenskapsrådet (2002). The main requirement I have to consider is how to decode the workplace in my story, as I need to take all individuals rights to confidentiality into consideration in my writing. One way to do this is by not using any people or place names.

The danger in not considering confidentiality can be that a reader identifies the people that play a role in my story, thus making this person a target for unwanted identification. This is extra important to consider if any person has an extra sensitivity to exposure such as minorities or a secret identity.

Information on my subject of the environment in the Early Years setting for my essay has been given to all my co-workers and supervisors who are aware that I am writing from my own experiences, moment observations and contemplations. As this form of essay writing is

based on my own experiences it does not include any personal views or experiences from others in my field studies and therefore I do not need written consent to be given. My personal experiences as a starting point in this essay will not be used in any commercial ways.

5 Reflection

5.1 A nostalgic back flash

Growing up in Sweden I never attended preschool, instead I had a day care mum who looked after me, my brother and three other children. However, I can say that the Swedish preschool spirit is instilled in me since birth as both my grandmother and mum worked in preschools and I often attended with them. I was raised with a mind-set of being an able and in large a self-sufficient child. As I became older, I followed their example and my first employment was at a Swedish preschool. I was young and scared, I did not know anything about implementing a curriculum in the setting, but what I did have, was a natural way of being around children. My practical “know how” was not based on theoretical knowledge but on something innate, an ability of performing acts of practical knowledge. I was able to care for the children without reflecting upon or thinking about how or why. I just did it and the children’s parents still remember the short time I was in their children’s lives. How did I have such a big impact when I did not “know” what I was doing?

Firstly, I will examine the onset of my feelings of uncertainty. I have always been confident in the way I care for children, and through further education I have grown in my teaching role. However, somewhere along the line, I began to get feelings of uncertainty when I faced working in Sweden after years of experience and education in England, which I cannot disregard. I believe at some point I will find the cause of these feelings of uncertainty and find what influences it. One thing for certain, I do light up when I hear the children’s voices upon arriving at work in the morning. I always strive for excellence, but are my ideals a romantic idyll of something unattainable?

When I enter the old warehouse building in my scenario I dress in my profession, it is like a cloak I dress in as soon as I get close to work. However, it is getting more and more often that I forget to take it off and leave it on as I am constantly striving for understanding the origin of the unsettled feelings. I spend my time outside of work in the role of a teacher by considering activities and materials in my spare time; I live for my career. The uncertainty might be

explained by Salmson author and lecturer on equal rights and Ivarsson publisher and author in their book where they simply put it as being demanding and at the same time creatively challenging to work in a preschool as the essence of the curriculum should be seen all through the setting (Salmson, Ivarsson, 2015, p.296). Is this where my uncertainty originates, in not having education of the Swedish preschool curriculum?

I have a hard time letting go of my profession, my robe. As in the story where I feel my English teacher training has made child safety an actual part of me. I have gained an anxiety in my everyday life that is not left at work. Not yet having children myself, I still feel a responsibility towards all the children I meet and a constant desire giving them perfection. This clouds my view and without enough qualifications and knowledge on the subject, I have not yet reached a state of reflection upon my view of the child perspective. When returning from maternity leave I have a new understanding of the parents perspective on their children and preschools, however this does not change the uncertainty. I still feel incomplete, like something is lacking in the environment or in my practises that does not break the unsettled feeling amongst the children.

5.2 English education

5.2.1 Child safety

During my years studying and working in England in various Early Years settings everyone was on the clear on what shaping the environment in a preschool should entail. I was taught by clear guidelines on what type of toys, what areas of play and development including the layout and health and safety aspects needed to be considered. There was never a question of its importance. When studying play opportunities and types of play the environment should offer in England a big part of my training was focused on health and safety. Before a building was even considered for use, as a setting where children would attend it needed childproofing, this was considered almost before anything else.

My thoughts of fire safety when I move the furniture around in my story is as always from a piece of me that feel it is necessary to always do my outmost to keep the children secure and well cared for. I forget to put this past my co-worker and thus a friction emerge. It does not stop us working together or create an argument, we disagree and then leave it at that. Some of my uncertainty can come from the lack of communication and my own worries about the large role safety plays. This is the opposite of the Reggio Emilia pillar of dialogue and confrontation described by Tove Jonstoj and Åsa Tolgraven producers and writers in their

book “one hundred ways of thinking” written in cooperation with the pedagogical artisan Veà Vecchi. This is where safety and awareness in the environment can be used to challenge insecurities and open up to dialogue and confrontation thinking of communication as being a key to learning (Jonstoj and Tolgraven 2001, p.61).

5.2.2 Experience

The preschool that I am now in is an old warehouse with big open spaces; this is very similar to nurseries and preschools where I have worked in England. Therefore, at my first visit I see lots of potential for me to feel at home. In England, my only experiences in preschools and nurseries were in buildings that consisted of one or two huge rooms. At first glance, the starting point is this big open space offering loads of opportunities for organising the room layout in a way I have experience of. This is also a reason I take the job knowing that there is so many opportunities to implement what I know in this setting, taking the best from my previous training and using it and adapting to enforce the Swedish curriculum in the setting. Here I will use Elisabeth Nordin-Hultmans doctoral *Educational environments and creation of children’s identities and subjectivity* as a tool for reflecting on whether my experiences from England are more than a personal viewpoint. With focus on the actions that are taking place, the meeting with learning opportunities in the environment is never in a stalemate. Actions and activities are made possible by the environment in the child’s here and now perspective (Nordin-Hultman 2005, p.200). When I let go of my preconceived notions of what the children should be like it gives me an opportunity to take the step back and reflect on the fact that the material and furnishings in the environment make learning possible in more ways than I can map out in advance. By offering challenges, I can catch children’s interest and engage them in activities based on the laboratory way of teaching that I have worked with in England.

The general difference to a traditional Swedish preschool is that we at my place of work in the depicted scenario do not have a group of rooms in a part of a building as our “homestay”, or to use the Swedish name “avdelning”. It is tradition to have your own hallway, toilet and nappy changing room, dining room, playroom with a home corner and a room for building. Puzzles and drawing takes place in the dining room. Painting, water play and gym will generally be rooms for communal use. My experience is similar to the layout described by Nordin-Hultman of the traditional Swedish and English preschools room layout and function with the messy areas such as painting and water play are set in rooms away from the

homestay (Nordin-Hultman 2004, p.68-69). Where as in England everything was available in the same big room, books, painting, building blocks, water play and a home corner all set out ready to be used. Therefore, with the similarity in the warehouse building's layout and size of the rooms I should be able to feel at home. However, that dull feeling that settles over me when I enter the building every morning comes to me after about a week of working there. It makes me insecure as I see my own shortcomings in not succeeding to create the same feel as in the English nursery where we had to tidy everything away at the end of every week. Here I feel I am lacking knowledge and even though many of the staff is educated teachers from abroad, I feel unfulfilled in answers I seek to my questions. To continue my education in Sweden becomes a vital need for me almost like breathing. I will drown in questions and helplessness if I do not start getting some answers. Teacher training becomes a lifeline, to learn to swim with and against the currents.

5.3 The idyllic Bullerbyn

I grew up playing outside in all seasons; slushy spring, blossoming summers, muddy fall and snowy winter. Much like the children in the Bullerby books (Lindgren and Wikland, 1997), I was free to explore and there was safety in numbers. If there were more children, we were allowed to go further afield as we could look out for each other. Stepping in big muddy puddles is part of children's play; it makes me as a teacher wanting to take a step back. The children will find out by themselves by testing and trying what happens if you jump in puddles. How mud is formed, how friends can be splashed, and how water somehow always seeps into your wellies. I am seen as a rebel for jumping in puddles myself, but maybe the free spirit that has followed me thorough my life, just as with the fictional characters in the Bullerby books, is what I can pass on to the children. To inspire discovery, experimenting and learning is what I want to achieve for the children referencing to the curriculum "discover new ways of understanding the surrounding world" (Lpfö 98, 2010, p.10).

I personally have the experience that children, both in Swedish and English settings are offered a range of activities to strengthen their independence and development as described in my story. All settings have books, construction, arts and craft material, home corner, vehicles, and opportunities for sand, water play and gross motor skills development.

Part of my romantic notion of the perfect setting for children to spend their day comes from my own upbringing. We spent most of our time outside, I never felt I lacked learning

opportunities or was under-stimulated. On the contrary, nature offered me new challenges every day. Now when the preschool has taken nature inside with birches and palm trees, is this a beginning to assimilate to the Reggio Emilia inspired environment by bringing nature inside? As nature is one of the pillars in the Reggio Emilia philosophy according to Wallin (1996, p.20).

My aim of perfection in the environment puts constant pressure on me to preform, to change and question how things work. I am striving for something unattainable, a “setting so idyllic, it is impossible to live up to” (Sundmark 2009, p.28). If I change the direction of my aim I feel I am losing myself, I am proud, wanting to achieve the best and never be just good enough. What I take with me from reading Sundmarks article “The Bullerby books and traditions” is that if I just step to the side my angle will change but the target I am aiming for can remain. Sundmark does this by stepping back in time to when the books of the Bullerby children were written showing that parental views described were that of “a later era” (ibid. p.28). He claims that the books are “positive images of traditional life” “while embracing modern ideas of child behaviour and psychology” (ibid. p.34). My view is that the children should be free and play with less restrictions from us adults like the children in the Bullerby books. However as the point Sundmark raises about child safety there is a side that comes with this freedom. The children did get hurt and although making both school, work and chores into games there were incidents that were “near-fatal” (Sundmark 2009, p.30).

Astrid Lindgrens (2007) books about Barnen i Bullerbyn (the children in “Bullerbyn”) a Swedish traditional village are used by Kytta (2006, p.141-153) in her chapter *Environmental child-friendliness in the light of the Bullerby Model* to describe children’s free opportunities to learning and developing in their own environment. Their everyday life offers countless meetings with new exciting explorations in safe and secure surroundings. The children own the environment as much as the adults do, as a teacher I have to be the one shaping the environment. To do this I have to consider every individual’s physical and social needs and interests and adapt the environment to match the child’s perception of the environment, as activities will emerge (Kytta 2006, p.145). The benefit with this type of environment is the play opportunities that the children are offered in a diverse environment where “affordances are not only perceived but also utilized and possibly shaped” (Kytta 2006, p.150). In the Bullerby books, the children are given a large freedom of mobility. This means the affordances the child friendly environment create increase, the more freedom of movement and opportunities of individual interests to be explored create a positive cycle, motivating this

type of environment as rich in giving children the actualised affordances that enable learning (Kyttä 2006, p.148). With this in mind, I can see my idyllic notion of the environment offering an abundance of materials in a large open space like in the nursery I worked in in England being an opportune teaching approach. However, if I turn look at the Bullerby books as a fairy tale, a glorified story of children's upbringing the materials and space offered can give "unrealistically positive or idealised" (ibid.) affordances. Kyttä would describe this as a glasshouse environment where the dangers are at a distance, affordances can be seen but not met (ibid. p.148-150).

5.4 The profession of teaching

In this essay, I have chosen to use the term teachers rather than pedagogues, as this is what title we all have in the workplace in my story, where the culture is from a more traditional English community.

In Sweden, all staff has the title pedagogue; regardless of education, their role in the setting is to be pedagogues for the children. They all call them by their first names and the connection between the preschool and the home is significant. In England and in my employment I am a teacher, I have also been a teaching assistant and nursery nurse. The titles have different meaning and are all to make it clear for parents and children the specific role of each adult in the setting. Due to my surname not being easy to pronounce, I have been allowed to be called by my first name, after it has had the all clear from the manager or head teacher. It has still been of necessity to have a title of Miss for the children to use when addressing me.

There seems to be a growing amount of Swedish preschool teachers that oppose the title themselves. They feel that learning is taking over; they teach in the preschool, the words teaching and learning are in focus for education and development. They feel that the ever so important care and the pedagogical issues are downplayed (Gustafsson, 2011, p.137).

Therefore, they fight for the use of the title pedagogues, which to me almost seem alien. I am proud to be training to be a teacher, for me the role consists of working close with the caregivers and the children. My experience is that teachers in England have a close relation and daily communication with the children's caregivers. The wellbeing of the children is a basis for their learning to be made possible. Activities and schedules are adapted to fit the group of children and play is central in all planning. Reading is taught with games and

puzzles, fine motor skills trained with beads and sewing, math by playing shops and sorting shapes and colours; much the same as the activities in Swedish preschools.

The moment I step inside the building a feeling of anxiety rises up in me and as the weeks turn into months that feeling of worry and being torn in between what I feel is the best way to act and the way others around me act mount up to an enormous heap of stress. My daily quest of improving my practises is spreading a stress from insecurities and imperfections. When I identify a stress trigger in the routines I go about changing the routine, to decrease the stress and make it calmer for the children, for example, when I move the furniture in the playroom with the children. However, this change causes stress with my co-worker, nothing is stagnant, I want to act and improve, she would prefer to leave it and see what will happen in time. Without setting time aside for joint reflection meetings we work with different and at the same time similar views of children and their learning. We just do not have the time for a discussion to sort out similarities and difference in where we stand. Every day it feels like I come to a point where I am in the middle of what I know and have been taught about children, their development and education in an Early Years setting in England and a new Swedish model of teaching. I feel it is more than just a learning curve; as I have been given the role of team leader I am trusted by my employer to be the one to lead the team of staff in didactical issues. I walk around at work collecting little post-it notes in my mind of what situations, issues and relation clashes I come across in my daily routines. The post-it notes stack up and cloud my judgment even more. I feel insecure of my own being, but I am keeping up appearances when put in situations like the issue raised by a parent in my story about the lack of toys. To everyone in my surroundings I make the outmost effort in keeping a confident façade, invisible to others my little post-it notes of what to do, what not to do and things I wish I had not done very rarely get thrown away. Through staff meetings and during planning time I desperately try to sort through them, looking for another staff member to lean on.

The environment in the Early Years setting is not just made by the physical surroundings and materials; it is also the teacher's approach that forms it. Like ripples on the water, a teacher can turn the best into the worst and vice versa. A teacher that lets children partake on their own premises, make their own choices and move forward in their own pace in the direction that they are fascinated and intrigued by is enabling excellent learning opportunities and is able to use the physical environment in the prime way (Karlsson, 2008, p.71).

When I enter the Swedish setting and a parent questions my acting of leaving a child to think over her wrongdoings I am yet to enter into Swedish preschool teacher education. I am yet to learn that in Sweden even regulating bodies such as “Folkhälsoinstitutet” (the institute of public health) are involved in the preschool teachers practice. They would call my actions when removing the girl from the room an unacceptable behaviour; it could be seen as abusive treatment, which should be reported to the head teacher as abuse towards the child by disrespect and undignified behaviour (Gustafsson, 2011, p.12).

In Sweden, there is a love and closeness to nature something that is important to us when forming the professional practises we implement (Gedin and Sjöblom 1995, p.125). For me the importance of access to nature has been vital and the freedom that it should offer. Walking in a line holding a rope equal distance from each other like a dog team on a lead or cramming six children in to a pram so they don't run away, is for me one of the outdoor practises taking over in Sweden that I feel is losing the Reggio Emilia spirit. In the city of Reggio Emilia, you can see the children out in their aprons with easels and brushes painting what they see in the town (Jonstoj and Tolgraven 2001, p.35). This is similar to my experiences in England where we often took the children out for a walk by the canal and in the forest. I never remember telling them off for wandering freely or to stay in line I stayed pushing the pram with the babies in that could not yet walk. The community was different, and the atmosphere made me a different teacher. Cars would race down the lane or horses ride by, more of a danger than the odd bike here in Sweden, yet there was a trust in humankind, the cars would eventually slow down and we would step aside. A snowplough down a path in Sweden makes the teachers shout at the top of their voices. Muddy puddles were not stepped in as the English children were never dressed suitably decided by the weather, but this was not on our say. They quickly learnt themselves that puddles make wet shoes and socks. I would smile with joy not feeling like I had to dress in my profession as I do in my story.

The tradition of “punishment” is alien to most Swedish families, even reprimands are uncommon. The national curriculum gives the notion to teachers' practices to be of nurturing, supporting and enabling character to the children. I have to wean myself off putting children in the naughty corner and find a new way to exercise my role as an adult in the Swedish preschool culture.

Learning by using the whole body is a tradition in Sweden (Nordin-Hultman 2004, p.84-85). In England, we used our hands. Both cultures see the importance of using the sense of touch

but in different means. Does the body take over in Sweden, not letting the mind take in the sense and movement that the hands perform and that is the discourse in England? This might be the missing link between the environment and me. The way I as a practitioner approach the children's learning. The constant movement in the playrooms affects me. The children come into conflict and the games are centred round gross motor skills, loud, full of energy that somehow seem to drain me. I blame the lack of material for the children being unsettled but maybe the type of play we offer with the materials are what creates this tension.

5.4.1 Different teaching education

So here I am in Sweden being a teacher at a preschool where the distinction is being made between being a *förskollärare* and a *barnskötare*, the former being the qualified teacher with the responsibility of implementing policies and procedures in addition to following regulations and legislation. Whereas the *barnskötare* often has a very similar background in education but not at the same depth or length as the teacher, a position that relieves them from the final responsibilities. However we are not pedagogues, we are teachers. Is there something in the titles that differentiate us? I do not feel like a teacher, I am not qualified as such, yet I belong to their category, as the grey chair placed in the setting, given a use yet not belonging. Davidsson make a clear marker of the preschool sofa as a piece of furnishing that sets lower school teaching environments aside from preschools. According to her study on how preschool and lower schoolteachers develop pedagogical interaction between preschool and school, lower schoolteachers do not place sofas in their classrooms, they see it as a cosy home comfort not related to the learning in the classroom that requires tables and chairs (Davidsson 2002, p.146). Could this be the link to why the chair and I seem to go together? No other room has any soft furniture to sit on; the lower schoolteachers feel it is out of place. Maybe our different training has given me a way of seeing the children's needs of furniture differently. I feel they need the grey chair almost as a link in between the home and the preschool, whereas the lower schoolteachers see the need for tables and chairs to be a greater one. The lower schoolteachers in Davidsson's study see the need for children to sit down quietly to work, they fill the larger rooms with tables in the centre and shelving with reading, writing and craft materials are all on wall-mounted shelves (ibid., p.145). This work related learning is also what I see happen in the older child groups Owl and Eagles as their team leaders are lower schoolteachers. These children are aged three till six years so I agree that the material can be organised differently from the younger children as their needs differ.

However, they keep tables in the centre when they divide the room in to smaller work areas. The big round mat in their classroom is by the door and when I enter, I am always struck by the strong impression of “work areas” that hit me. There are four tables in different heights that are divided by shelves full of material, there are experiments in the windows and no curtains, but there is no place to relax or to use any larger movement whilst playing. Most play opportunities are offered on the tables in means of sitting still, investigating and learning. The walls have posters on space and on the human body; teaching is in clear focus. I as a preschool teacher have organised the Woodpeckers room with tables along one wall and little play areas in all corners of the classroom. The link to the home can be seen by the curtains, the grey chair to relax in, the rug in the middle and toys similar to the ones they have at home. The lower schoolteachers are actively trying to put a distance to the home whilst I try to create a link.

What joins my co-workers and me together is our way of seeing the need for the children to play. The lower school teachers find play an as important part of the children’s need during the day and through this play utilise learning opportunities that occur, this is also Davidssons (2002, p.125) findings in her study of preschool and lower school teachers cooperation and integration of the two settings.

In Sweden, there is a clear-cut culture of what the preschool education should offer. Opportunities in the setting to learn by playing and develop social skills are valued high. The children play outside all year round and no matter what the weather offers the children get dressed accordingly and play regardless. However, I bring experience from something more, and so does my co-workers. There are ways to get the most out of uniting several different pedagogical practises. By comparing, trying new things, inspiring each other we can be open to change and adapt after the children’s needs and development at the same time as we have a large activity and teaching base to offer a wide range of learning opportunities. It gives children a wider range of learning opportunities that will benefit in broadening their learning and benefit the wide range of learning styles (Carlgren, 1999, p.12).

Besides being a teacher and team leader of my group of children the list of responsibilities and other duties I have in the preschool is never ending. I am the union representative and responsible for food ordering, the work environment, showing new parents around, hosting open houses, fire safety and all tasks requiring knowledge of the Swedish language as I am the only one besides the coordinator who is fluent in Swedish. I also sit in on interviews for

new staff and meetings regarding the supervision visits that the council performs for quality checks.

As a team leader, I have the responsibility to make sure planning is executed, documented and evaluated. I am the first to be contacted by the international parents as there is a firm hierarchy amongst English speaking adults; all complaints, worries, problems, questions and issues are bounced back to me. However, the Swedish parents will turn to my co-worker or me whomever they first come across or go to the head of the preschool. Occasionally the feedback is positive and with time and reassurance, most parents relax as they see their children happy and developing. I am also responsible for training a novice who has no previous experience in childcare or the Swedish educational system. As a team leader, I also partake in all planning meetings and help to organise “tradition days”.

All this responsibility piles up and my frustration over everyone else’s incompetence grow. I never have time to reflect upon my own role as a practitioner or to consider whether I need to open up to do things differently. By taking on a more relaxed and approachable attitude, I can help to support everyone and to work on their strengths, with energy and enthusiasm.

5.4.2 Perspective on play and the child

The Swedish curriculum states, “Conscious use of play to promote the development and learning of each individual child should always be present in preschool activities” (Lpfö 98, rev. 2010, p.6). In other words, it is my responsibility as a preschool teacher to use the environment to enable the children to play. Allowing a self-exploration and not devalue the educational purposes of play is important, but what this play should consist of is free to interpretation both in the CRC (Gustavsson, 2011, p.140-141) and the Lpfö 98 (2010).

During my studies here in Sweden, we have completed a unit in “children’s play”, basing on the importance of play in children’s development. This is a similarity to my training in England where the “learning in early years” unit also centred round this concept of children learning through play. The difference is that in England, much of what I was taught was centred round child development, health, and safety, in Sweden the unit was of a more philosophical character as it included children’s existential questions.

The CRC states that children should have the right to rest, free time and play suitable for their age, and to have the freedom to partake in cultural and artistic life. The word *play* is here

mentioned as part of something children have rights to. I as a teacher have to ensure children are given the free time in its true meaning (Gustavsson 2011, p.138). In my current place of work, all the children have access to all the materials. It is not available to them at all times of the day but when entering a room all materials within it are in reach and no restrictions are given on the amount or type of the materials. The children are also free to use the furniture as they see fit. Nevertheless, how free are the children to choose what to partake in when the rooms are so restricted?

In Birgitta Davidssons chapter *Solrosens affär* she regards play as a mean to children's orientation in life, which gives it its importance as a vital part in children's learning processes (Davidsson 1999, p.63). The imagination that sparks a child's interest for discovery can be utilised by developing their play with them. When a child plays, new discoveries are made and this is how learning becomes possible, through processes of abstract thinking and productive, creative play knowledge of the world is developed (Davidsson 1999, p.64).

When I rearrange the furniture in the playroom at the preschool, I do it from experience in England, where I have seen that it will work to encourage the children to stop in their tracks, spark their curiosity and interest them. This is one of my favourite moments, to read children's faces when they enter environment that has undergone a change, to see them spot the innovation, be lured in to play and discover new ways to play. My inspiration can be interpreted from Malaguzzi, the fighting spirit behind the Reggio Emilia approach and his poem about children's hundred different languages, to let them invent a hundred different worlds and be surprised every day (Wallin 1996, p.9-10, 120).

The Swedish curriculums important cultural factors are:

“The activities of the preschool should be carried out democratically and thus provide the foundation for a growing responsibility and interest on the part of children to actively participate in society” (Lpfö 98 2010, p.3)

“The task of the preschool involves not only developing the child's ability and cultural creativity, but also passing on a cultural heritage – its values, traditions and history, language and knowledge – from one generation to the next.” (Lpfö 98 2010, p.5)

“The internationalisation of Swedish society imposes high demands on the ability of people to live with and understand values inherent in cultural diversity. The preschool is a social and cultural meeting place, which can reinforce this and prepare children for life in an increasingly internationalised community. Awareness of their own cultural heritage and participating in the culture of others should contribute to children's ability to understand and empathise with the circumstances and values of others.”(ibid.)

What I see in the Swedish curriculum Lpfö 98 is linked in many ways to the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC). In article 28-29 of CRC, a big emphasise is made on respect, cultural identity and values within the educational system (United Nations, 1990, p.8-9). Gustavsson argues that when we as practitioners think of the word respect we should also include its synonym, esteem (Gustavsson, 2011, p.130). In this aspect, I have to include the child, his or her parents and me. All of my teaching practices have during the last three years of education changed to envision the ethos of the CRC. Instead of excluding a child putting them to the side I mediate, we have some calming down time, sitting next to each other if needed and talk about why an argument has occurred or why it escalated. It seems that in England they have focused more on the word “discipline” that is also raised in article 28 of the CRC. What I carry with me from English practises is a thought that children should do as they are told. After studying and reflecting my child-perspective has developed and respect has come to be about equality treating others in a way that I would like to be treated.

Wallin argues that children of different ages need different possibilities and stimuli from their environment (Wallin, 1996, p.22). We have always divided the groups which the children belong to by their ages, however when starting we had our separate rooms where we belonged, now the children are in different rooms every day, but they all access the same materials in these rooms. Therefore, what are the benefits and the disadvantages of this and can I adapt my teaching practises to follow suit?

5.5 The physical environment

In Sweden, the environment is often called “*the third teacher*” also implying its importance. This comes with inspiration from the Reggio Emilia approach, of the environment being one in the triad of teachers, children and the environment. Together they form a whole, the walls are filled with photographs, art and crafts, windows come alive with coloured sheets of paper; everything to lure out curiosity and awaken a will to discover. As the English saying of something aesthetically pleasing for the eye, it speaks to me; the environment has its own voice. My idyllic notion of the children using all their senses when playing, discovering and learning comes from childhood memories of being part of something bigger, a whole nature. However, during my studies here in Sweden there have been no clear guidelines taught, no list of materials or play opportunities that need to be on offer in the setting. Accessibility has been brought up as part in the special educational needs course, other than that layout is free to be planned after the way each teacher personally thinks the children benefit the most from

it. This is also to fit in with the implementing of the ever so freely interpretable Swedish Early Years curriculum.

Traditionally the Swedish preschool environment has looked and had the same functioned since the 1970s when most of them were built (Lenhammar, 2009). They are large buildings divided into departments, which all consist of a calm room, a dining room, toilets and a hallway. Generally, there are joint rooms for art, gym and water play. The same occurrence of having a few rooms designated for different age groups is in place at the preschool in my story. My group has two rooms, one that we use for rest time and one for play. The furniture is small and all toys are within reach for the children, the playroom is clearly divided into different types of play and materials organised thereafter. According to Davidsson this divide and use of interior is common to define the role of the teacher (Davidsson, 2002, p.111).

Preschool teachers furnish a room different from lower schoolteachers due to the purpose of teaching versus playing. My departments two rooms do not offer the children too freely use the two rooms. Access is limited to rest time in the sleep room and the use of this room is otherwise obsolete. This differs from the preschool environment in Davidssons study where the children during free play have access to all the rooms where also a clear divide of the purpose for the rooms is visible through the materials accessible in each room (ibid. p.121).

The rooms being separated with their specific and separate use is only enforced when I return from my maternity leave and the rooms have had a major makeover. There seems to be a need for rooms to have a purpose, every little space need to have a justified use. Myself, I struggle when I am at work with the lack of material, but looking back there was the materials just not available for play. Even though the shelves we used, the white IKEA Kalix ones had eight compartments, each making the toys available on the children's level they were not visible as they were not in clear or marked out boxes.

The Swedish curriculum has a dreamy notion of idolizing the Reggio Emilia approach and trying to pinpoint the corner stones both in the professional practices and in the environment. We copy the big circular mats in the rooms, we centre funding on developing our art rooms by buying brushes and paint, setting up easels in long rows. In the preschool I work, we even get a stage built inspired by the amphitheatre, and the jungle that has moved in with trees on the wall is an aspiration of making an atrium in spite of the building not being purposely built for this. We document and it spreads through the building, drawings, paintings, photographs, and art hang from the ceiling.

At first glance, the equipment and materials in the environment is sparse, but what is very positive in comparison to Nordin-Hultmans study on pedagogical environments in Swedish and English preschools is that my depicted preschool in Sweden offers almost all its material to the children on their level. She writes that even though a lot of preschools can offer a vast arrangement of materials much of it is stored out of reach and therefore limits the materials “actually” on offer in the setting (Nordin-Hultman 2005, p.86). At my place of work, we have bottles of paint in the art room next to brushes and pots that the children themselves can reach and use. The children have a trough for water in the water playroom, where there are drawers full of ping-pong balls, bubbles, sponges, jugs, colanders, bottles and water animals. The children have access and can choose themselves what to use, there is also sequins and glitter that they sprinkle in the water. They are allowed to experiment with all the materials that we have, as storage possibilities are small, everything is available. In a positive viewpoint, the environment we set up does not limit the children in the traditional way of materials being inaccessible in Swedish preschools.

Here in Sweden there is a mixed array in the room layout, we have the big dining room and gym and the slightly smaller play and sleep rooms. At the preschool in my story, we have a shell, an empty building and my hope is that we can fill it and create an inspiring and harmonious place for the children to spend their days and for me as a teacher to have the tools to enable me to work from my perception of the best professional practices. However, Wallin, an author and lecturer on the Reggio Emilia approach argues that, the architecture of the buildings we use for childcare reflect the way we work with children. The way we view children is reflected in the setting, as the children are in the centre of how we organise furniture and materials. We do what is possible with what the environment offers (Wallin, 1996, p.18). We have low tables and chairs and the storage shelves from IKEA are no higher than that every child can reach both shelves. This shows our child perspective and this type environment is what enables us in our work as child-focused practitioners. Therefore, I wonder what I do when the environment is not designed with opportune ways to enable us to execute the work with a vision of the child in the centre. We have to work with what we have and find ways to use the building to our advantage. The remark and unwillingness for change my co-worker expresses when I move the furniture round in the room, makes me doubt that there is enough energy and will amongst my co-workers and me, to accomplish better professional practices by possible changes in the environment.

5.5.1 Colours

Part of accomplishing the idyllic setting I strive for is to make the environment easy on the eye, welcoming and aesthetically pleasing and inspiring when parents, children and staff walk in through the doors. The lack of colour drains my spirit and that dull and impersonal feeling I get when I enter the building every morning comes to easily with nothing entering my line of vision to change that feeling. This is especially interesting to me as there has been a study making a connection between colours and emotions especially in with younger children (Meerum Terwoegt and Hoeksma 1995). This is further investigated by Read and Upington, in their article based on their study on “Young Children’s Color preferences in the interior environment”, where they interview and use image selection as their investigative methods. They motivate the importance of this study is to raise self-esteem by changing colour schemes in preschools by children’s colour preferences “because their color perception at the age of 3-5 years is reflective of their developmental level” (Read and Upington 2009, p. 492). Their findings clearly indicate that colours like red purple and blue are in the top whilst grey, orange and yellow are the least favourite ones (ibid., p. 494). This makes me believe the feeling I have in my setting is partly due to the lack of colour. When getting the go ahead on painting the rooms we start in the water room making an undersea world, we make the canteen a jungle and the sleep room becomes the drama room with purple, red and green walls. The children have been enlisted to help choose the colours that makes me believe in the project of change. I got the children with me in the enthusiasm that follows. However, as the excitement of the new colour scheme on the walls die down the dull feeling settles over me like restlessness, maybe I have stepped into the child’s perspective too far and need to take a step back to make change possible again. In the Reggio Emilia preschools, there are many beautiful furnishings but nice furniture does not change a lot. It is in your mind it has to change, this being said by Vea Vecchi the atelierista at the Reggio Emilia preschool Diana (Jonstoj and Tolgraven 2001, p.61.)

Most preschools in Sweden have a colour scheme as the one I work in with white washed walls. The occasional light yellow, green or beige colour pops up with the light beige linoleum floor throughout for a gender-neutral feel (Salmson and Ivarsson, 2015, p.297). Nevertheless, we choose these colours for our indoor environment although it clearly is not the children’s favourites (Read and Upington, 2009, p.494).

5.5.2 Scheduling

To add to my stress there is the ever so important time schedule. I believe routines are one of the pillars to children becoming secure so we base a lot of our work on the transitions. We make sure the children know the daily schedule and introduce a clear order of playtime, outdoor, eat and sleep times by e.g. adding songs to sing for tidying up and one minute left warnings during transition time. These transition times are increasing and time schedules are planned in detail now more than ever (Nordin-Hultman 2004, p.94). We write meal and snack times, toilet times, sleep time, playtime, time to dress, outdoor time, tidying up time, story time, circle time; every five minute time slot of the day is accounted for in an attempt to create order and reduce stress for the children and staff. I forget to reflect upon what this does to me. As in the story when I have moved the furniture around, we have not had time to talk it through first and the schedule does not allow us to talk about it when it happens. This is a regular occurrence, we are constantly moving the children from room to room, in waves, and the children come and go through the rooms to make way for the next group to eat, sleep or play. Make note that we as practitioners are moving the children according to schedules from room to room; the children themselves are not in control of this move. This is also a distinction that Nordin-Hultman does “children move -or are moved- between environments” (ibid.). It is not until reading Nordin-Hultmans chapter on time, control and adaptation in the environment that I stop to see how time planning is central to issues in the environment (ibid. p.97). These transitions are as much interruptions as necessities at my place of work. All children do not fit at the tables to eat at the same time or in the hall getting dressed, therefore we need the structure but what happens with the child perspective in this? The Lpfö 98 focuses on the importance of free play, the child’s own interests and choices (Lpfö 98, 2010, p.7), but in reality this clashes with the way the daily routines run in the preschool. In Sweden we clearly map out all the times and transitions. I used to believe it was a way of being structured now I see how limiting this can be. The children are forced to conform to the routines as everyone in the group transition at the same time.

Like the morning in my story when the teacher comes and collects both the Eagles and the Owls, the two older groups, I am working alongside the one year olds, the Sparrows. We use the same hallway and as the school accepts more children we grow, and we start to share the sleep room. This is to start uniting the groups and work towards a better collaboration between staff and join us together as a whole team in the preschool. Similar to Davidssons (2002, p.129) study we aim to strengthen the community amongst the children, we still have a

room that is our classroom and so does all the age groups. However these are used strictly only during organised pedagogical activities, the rest of the day the children are able to use different rooms. The difference from the children in Davidssons study is that at my place of work we move the whole group of children; the children are not free to individually choose where to play during free play (ibid. p.130). This is partly restricted for safety reasons as staff rations have to be considered and partially because I take on the responsibility for all the children not trusting in my co-worker to ensure the pedagogical activities are carried out. I am also very stress sensitive and I choose to shoulder her insecurities about what to do in situations and occurrences that come as surprises most days whilst working with children.

6 Conclusion

During the process of writing, I have discovered something about myself. It is the thoughts and perspectives I use when I step into my role as a teacher in the preschool that form my professional practise. It is not so much the environment that will change the way we approach the children or the way the children act. The change has to start from within, my thoughts and views changing are what gives me a different aspect and will offer the biggest change towards a more harmonious, inspiring setting. The environment is more than the furnishings, layout and colour on the walls. Routines and practices are all influenced by the environment and reversed I can also affect the environment by changing the routines and practices. For the environment to reflect the child centred teaching approach, I have started to see beyond content and extended my teaching approaches and view my methods to change. I have discovered how time is also restricting me in my work when I schedule and make strict routines the structure of the day becomes limiting for the children's learning.

By using my writing and researching I have extended my own learning; this has shown me that my previous education and early experiences present major benefits in the way I am striving for change. I have realised I am a teacher who belong in the preschool because of the way I put the children in the centre, but also their play opportunities. I have seen differences between lower schoolteachers and preschool teachers, which gives me an understanding of why I act differently in organising the environment from them.

I see the freedom to learn and play that I can give the children now I have deepened my knowledge of what separates the different materials in a Swedish preschool as messy and

clean play. The change is on-going and I am yet to find my ideal entry to my own professional practises. I can make the grey chair fit in, I can mould my teaching practises to fit in, but I am still in a process of what am I taking with me and what am I leaving behind.

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