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# Parental involvement in Multicultural Preschool Settings- A challenge for Educators

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## **Abstract**

### **Background**

The importance of establishing well-functioning parent-teacher relationships are clear objectives in the Swedish National Curriculum for Preschools, (Lpfö 98, Lpo 94 & Lgr 11 chapter 1-2). Parental involvement in preschool activities is seen as important for several reasons. Facilitating healthy child development, learning and socialisation are some of these reasons. During the past twenty years Sweden has become a multicultural society. Today, people from more than 170 countries live in Sweden, and about 18% of the population are first or second generation immigrants. Swedish preschools have become increasingly multicultural. The author's experiences from working in multicultural schools and as a parent from another culture, coupled with knowledge from existing research on parental involvement in preschools, have been that for a variety of reasons it is difficult to involve certain groups of immigrant parents in preschool activities.

### **Aims**

The purpose of this study was twofold: The first objective was to shed more light on how parents and teachers in a specific multicultural preschool looked upon the importance of parental involvement in the preschool, what opportunities parents might have to be active, and which factors that might prevent active participation. The second goal was to try to improve conditions and increase parental involvement in this same preschool through a number of organised activities.

### **Theoretical perspectives**

Bourdieu's "Theory of practice" and Bronfenbrenner's "Ecology of Human Development" model were used as theoretical perspectives in the study.

### **Methods**

To answer research questions linked to the first purpose of the study, seven parents, three teachers and a school manager were interviewed about their views on parental involvement. The parents had come to Sweden from countries such as Chile, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey. The methods used in the second part of the study could best be describes as "experiments by nature and design", were parents, children, and staff members were encouraged to participate in various activities aimed at strengthening their relationships, and increase parental involvement in the preschool.

### **Results**

Interviews with parents and pedagogues indicates that both groups would welcome more parental involvement in activities and relations in the preschool, but that language and communication problems, different conceptions of childhood, or cultural differences in ways of looking at upbringing of children are creating obstacles. In addition, the family situation of many of the parents, such as long working hours, or lack of informal social network support were also brought up as complicating factors. The results from the second part of the study are showing, however, that the steps needed in terms of creating activities in the preschool which stimulate parental involvement, do not require great resources in terms of time and money, and could easily be integrated into the daily activities in the preschool.

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# 1. Introduction

The expansion of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Sweden over the past 40 years was influenced by factors at the societal level, like shortage of labor, changing gender role ideologies, and efforts of the Swedish society to create a comprehensive support system for families with young children. Today more than 80% of all 1-6 year olds are in preschool-settings while parents' work or study. During the same period, Sweden has become a multicultural society. Today people from more than 170 countries live in Sweden and about 18% of the population are first or second generation immigrants (Gunnarsson, 2007).

In segregated urban housing areas, preschools are becoming increasingly multicultural. In some preschools we might find children from more than 20 countries but no children with a Swedish background.

The importance of well-functioning parent-teacher relationships are clear objectives in the curriculum for preschool, (Lpfö 98, Lpo 94 & Lgr 11 chapter 1-2). The preschools are expected to form links between parents and teachers and create communications channels. Parental involvement in preschool activities is important for several reasons. Facilitating healthy child development, learning and socialization are some of these. The curriculum also stresses the importance of developing an understanding among teachers and parents of the democratic processes in the upbringing of children (Lpfö 98, Lpo 94 & Lgr 11 chapter 1- 2).

My own experiences from working in multicultural schools and as a parent from another culture, coupled with knowledge from existing research on parental involvement in preschools, have been that attempting to increase parental involvement is easier said than done. It is more difficult to involve certain groups of parents/families in preschool activities. The struggle between the parents and the schools existed long before minority parents arrived. Questions of parental involvement in preschools among immigrant families must be seen as highly complex. There are a lot of immigrant children in most of the preschools in the major cities of Sweden, e.g. in my city of Gothenburg. Parents' participation in preschool activities vary a lot.

Researchers have shown the difficulties of involving parents, among others Epstein (1990), who concludes that almost all parents from all backgrounds care about the education of their children. Hence it is not a lack of interest on behalf of parents that leads to low levels of parental involvement. Epstein suggests that it is the fact that few parents know what schools expect from them, or how they might contribute to their child's schooling, that is at the core of the problem. It is this lack of knowledge which acts as a barrier to the establishment of high levels of parental involvement. In some societies, there is no history or societal expectation of parental involvement in the preschools or schools of their children. Schools are seen as places where children are sent to be educated. Parents are not expected to be involved in the schools. Educating children is seen as the job of teachers and this is to occur in the schools, although these views are gradually changing in modern days (Hornby, 2000).

In order to provide a successful preschool environment, which makes space for the individual's experiences and views on life and the world, preschools will need to take the initiative to get to know the child's family (Flising, 1996). A multicultural society, in which the schools are of an intercultural character, challenges culturally more established approaches and places particular demands on them. There is a need for both cross-disciplinary and multicultural studies that consider questions from a variety of different perspectives (Bouakaz, 2007).

## 2. Aims

The purpose of this study is twofold: My first objective is to shed more light on how parents and staff in a specific preschool look upon the importance of parental involvement in the preschool, what opportunities parents might have to be active, and which factors that might prevent active participation. My second goal is to try to improve conditions and increase parental involvement in this same preschool through a number of organized activities.

The aims of the study give rise to the following questions:

- How is participation viewed from the perspective of the parents and the staff?
- What opportunities exist for parents to become involved in the preschool?
- Which factors prevent them from becoming involved?
- Is it possible for the preschool to create an environment which facilitates active participation and parental involvement in the preschool activities?

The first three of my research questions are being addressed in Part A of this thesis, where the goal is, with the help of interviews, to learn more about the perspectives of parents and educators in a multicultural preschool on parental involvement. In Part B there is a shift in focus to my fourth and last research question, which hopefully will be answered through my experiments with introducing certain parental activities in the preschool class.

### 3. Perspectives on Parental Involvement

The National Curriculum for the preschool (Lpfö 98) clearly emphasizes the importance of a good relationship between the preschool and the home. The parents are responsible for their child's upbringing and development. The preschool should be a complement to the home by creating a good environment for each child's progress and growth. Therefore there should be collaboration between the preschool and parents. Simultaneously parents should have the opportunity to be involved and influence activities in the preschool.

#### *Guidelines*

*All who work in the pre-school should:*

- *show respect for parents and feel responsible for developing good relationships between the staff of the pre-school and children's families.*
- *together with the parents be responsible for ensuring that children receive good introduction to the pre-school,*
- *maintain an on-going dialogue with parents on the child's wellbeing, development and learning, both in and outside the pre-school, in addition to holding the personal development dialogue,*
- *provide parents with opportunities to exercise influence over how goals can be made concrete in planning pedagogical activities,*
- *take due account of parents' viewpoints when planning and carrying out activities and*
- *make sure that parents are involved in assessing the activities (Lpfö 98, p. 10-13).*

Parental involvement is seen as important for child development, learning and socialization and supporting an ongoing dialogue between parents and teachers. It is also seen as important for the development of the democratic process, giving the parents opportunities to influence activities and relationships in the preschool setting.

In a historical perspective, many steps have been taken for preschools to arrive at today's situation, and underlying ideas linked to the importance of parental involvement have developed gradually for more than a hundred years. In the following section I will follow some of the changes that Swedish society has undergone during this period. I will then try to link this historical perspective to the present situation in the Swedish society, when the population to an increasing degree consists of parents and children who might have different standards and values because their experiences and value systems were formed in other countries and cultures.

#### **3.1. Parental involvement in the early stages**

In the first Swedish compulsory school (1842) the goal was to transfer and teach moral and appropriate knowledge to children so that they would become capable social citizens. This affected parents economically because of increased taxes and school fees. Many parents dismissed the idea that children would attend school instead of work, since they couldn't afford this. In the year of 1882, more focus was placed on compulsory school attendance.

Children's schooling age was then changed to include the period from the year they turned seven to the year they were fourteen. Even at that time there were parents who had comments on the content of what was being taught. Many parents considered it sufficient that the children learned what they themselves once were taught. The Catechism was considered by parents to be very important, and in many parts of the country parents reacted strongly when

the teachers taught other subjects, such as biblical history, writing, geography, or gymnastics. Many parents were strongly against this, and it even went so far that some parents took the children out of school, i.e. school strikes (Persson, 1996).

The year 1942 marked a clear division of responsibilities between home and school. Parents were regarded as responsible for raising the children at home, while at school the responsibility shifted over to the teachers. At that time, children entered schools at the age of six or seven, and they received their diplomas when they were fourteen. Only when serious problems arose, did the home and the school contact each other. Those parents who had an ambition for their children to continue schooling represented a minority of parents, and they probably had more contact with the school than other parents (Flising, Fredriksson & Lund, 1996).

### **3.2. Post-war reforms and the process of democracy**

The democratization process that Swedish society went through after the two world wars was essential for the future reform of the school. The school's primary mission was to foster the democratic citizen and human being. A democratic person would possess certain characteristics. He or she would develop some qualities like being independent and critical, but also cooperative and engaged. The democratic upbringing demanded that the teachers had a detailed knowledge of the student's physical and psychological state. Knowledge of the home environment and the general lifestyle of the family was important for teachers to be able to influence the individual development of the pupil in a positive way. (SOU 1948:27).

The discussion of the 1946 School Commission on the relationship between home and school described the family in companionship with the school as the environment in which the student's personality would be shaped. If the school was to succeed in its mission, detailed knowledge of the pupils' home background and their life in general was required. Establishing contact with the home environment was thus a very important task. The school had a responsibility for building a relationship of trust with the home. This required a much greater openness towards the parents than in the past. Through parental visits, parents were able to understand more what was happening in school, and hence, differences were overcome (SOU 1948:27). For that cooperation to work, it was important that the parents learned the circumstances of the school. Meeting with parents' associations and parents on occasions planned for meetings was crucial, where personal contact was the most important.

By analyzing the children's and family's situation on the basis of psychological scientific knowledge and inspiration from studies in the United States, Alva Myrdal, who saw the population crisis as a symptom of society's neglect of parental education concluded:

“A parental education sets its goal to give the people such knowledge and character that enable them to be better equipped to be able to live in harmonious marriage and thereby develop a good parenthood. Achieving this requires both an individual and societal interest” (SOU 1936:59, p. 442).

The necessity of community action was "in part dictated by social structural changes." Childhood requires so much more awareness of care in an industrialized society than during the time when the children more naturally joined in the home environment. Moreover, medical and psychological advances pointed to the need for a more extensive parental education. Alva Myrdal had great confidence in precisely the enlightenment force to change parents' attitudes and lifestyles. Education for parenthood must involve all aspects of society, but a special responsibility was on the school and public education.



A good cooperation between parents and kindergarten (barnstuga) staff was seen as a prerequisite for children's care, and education in the home and kindergarten (barnstuga) would be harmonious and consistent. It had proved to be a problem with collecting the working parents to meetings. Well-baby Clinics (BVC) could be a place for such advice but also more programs in radio and television on children's development, care and upbringing became a useful contribution to an expanded parental enlightenment.

Advice and assistance in upbringing issues have become dominant themes in the contacts with parents. The preschool is the field for this function to contribute to a new education and the reform of education in the home. This was originally the driving logic of the development of Fröbel's children's institutions. In the mid -1900's in Sweden, the upbringing message was different, but they had the same desire for reform. A growing knowledge of the child and its needs through the psychological and medical science, contributed to better child institutions. The need for parental education was stressed. Child development and child psychology became parts of parental counseling. Brochures giving advice on how to raise children; food refusal, sex education, appropriate toys and sibling conflicts could be utilized as a basis for discussion and advice. Information on good food and dentistry were recurring themes (Tallberg & Broman, 1995).

The 1968 National Child Care Commission (Barnstugeutredningen) stressed the importance of interactions between the parents and the child care settings. They also proposed various forms of cooperation, such as parents meetings, and conversations between staff and parents about the individual child. The report emphasized that all parents should be given the same opportunities for interaction and influence (Olsson, 1993).

School history shows that Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Sweden has a long tradition to build a close and good working relationship between parents and preschool staff, but as Bouakaz (2007) stressed, the questions of parental involvement are becoming more complex, concerning not only the parents of the child but also the importance of their being immigrant individuals who are struggling to become integrated.

The national curriculum for the preschool emphasizes a close cooperation with the home, and that parents should have the opportunity, within the framework of the national goals, to be involved and influence activities in the preschool settings. It is also stated that the activities in preschool settings are to take the living conditions of the children outside these settings into consideration, making it important that planning for these activities take place in cooperation between parents and staff. But parental involvement might be easier to envision in theory than in practice. Some parents are satisfied knowing that their children are happy to spend time in preschools and are well taken care of by the personnel. Receiving regular information about their child might be enough to fulfill the needs of these parents. Other parents want to influence planning, discuss decisions or even participate in daily activities in the ECEC-settings (Gunnarsson, Martin Korpi, & Nordenstam, 1999).

## 4. Previous Research

Much research has been done that demonstrates the importance of parent - preschool interactions. Researchers have pointed out a number of factors that make it difficult for schools and parents to meet and establish the close relationship that is needed. Researchers agree that much has changed since early 1900s, when the school was seen as spreading light into the general darkness. The responsibilities of the parents were limited to making sure that the child arrived at school neat and clean, with homework read and with a filled sandwich box. In the past, parents tended to be seen as a group that would be informed and influenced, whereas today they are more seen as a group with valuable ideas and knowledge resources. Educational research has shown that close cooperation between home and school strongly promotes both the well-being and performances of children as well as parents.

In their research, Flising, Fredriksson & Lund (1996) showed that the relationship between teacher and parents is based largely on the fact that teachers believe that parents have something to bring to the activities of preschools and schools, whereas parents on their part are particularly interested in their children's development (Flising, personal interview, 2009). Even if they are there, it is not always the case that all parents are interested in collaborating with teachers. Partly this might depend on which memories parents have from their own time in school and whether or not they feel that preschools and schools create an appropriate environment for cooperation. Flising found that teachers have everything to gain by engaging parents in the preschool and school activities.

When Flising discusses previous research she presents an overview of previous studies in this area, both Swedish and international studies. She presents in the book "Parents' contact" (1996), the following classifications of parents, based on these studies:

- *Parents as consumers* - a number of privately organized, non-municipal preschools and schools have started during the past 10-15 years, making it possible for parents to choose settings for their children.
- *Parents as partners* - focusing on things that only parent are able to take care of, i.e. how well the children might have slept the night before the preschool day.
- *Parents as helpers and problem solvers* - for example when school and home together make up a program if it turns out that not everything is working properly.
- *Parents as audience* - it is important to children's schoolwork attention.
- *Parents as teacher helpers* - around a group of pupils has a parent with a huge experience and expertise.
- *Parents as decision makers* - participation in a "Home and School Association" is an example of this category.

Flising also summarizes the findings of the American researcher Ira Gordon who is dividing parental involvement strategies into three groups:

A- Those who are working to strengthen the relationship between parents and children within the family framework.

B- Those who are working to involve parents in various school programs.

C- Those who are working to strengthen the relationship between schools, homes and communities.

Flising's studies are primarily based on interviews with parents and pedagogues in preschools and schools. She has studied parents' perspective in general, and has not focused on immigrant families in particular. She does, in the book "Parents' contacts" point out that many of the immigrant parents know little or nothing about the school and have to rely on the teachers. If the parents feel that preschools and teachers are unable to live up to their expectations and demands, their expectations might be transformed into disbelief. According to Flising, it is important for the preschool teachers to find alternative paths to involve immigrant parents. We should not expect these parents to immediately participate in the regular contact activities, such as parent meetings, and development talks. In the beginning, these meetings and talks should focus more on the preschool, its activities and objectives, than on the individual child (Flising, 1996).

Bouakaz in his research highlights parental interaction with regard to the relationship between home and school in today's Swedish society with a focus on schools in immigrant Arabic areas where parents only speak Arabic. These parents' knowledge of Swedish language is limited. They do not know how the school system in Sweden works. Cultural and social barriers, create many difficulties. Differences in values, norms and traditions between parents and teachers are creating obstacles making cooperation and communication more difficult. He presents the results of a project in an elementary school in a Malmö multicultural area in his doctoral thesis (Bouakaz, 2007) and in a more recent book called "Parent Collaboration in Multicultural Schools" (Bouakaz, 2009). He feels that the attitudes and approaches in schools must change. To develop cooperation between home and school certain policy strategies have to be changed. Bouakaz asks questions on how information is provided to parents. How do we reach parents who do not understand the Swedish language? He notes, that in order to get answers to these questions, we may only say: How do we define parents' interaction? Do we have a detailed plan or a strategy for parental interaction? And equally important: How much do parents from other cultures actually know about the public education and local services? How much do we know about parental involvement, participation and engagement outside the school (Bouakaz, 2009)?

Bouakaz (2009) believes that the living conditions of new immigrant families are often characterized by the so-called 'double absence', i.e. a social identity and an absence rate in relation to both the new and the old society. The dual impact on absenteeism often restricts the person's involvement in both communities. In relation to the school this may result in the parents' lack of visibility, which doesn't necessarily mean a lack of interest in traditional forms of cooperation. The school as an institution should take the responsibility in providing information to parents and integrate their activities

Bouakaz research also shows that parents many times want to protect the child from the school, whereas the school sometimes wants to protect the child from the parents. This might be linked to parental concerns that the child is becoming "too Swedish", or teachers' concern that the child might suffer from some kind of "religious oppression" in the home.

Bouakaz identifies three types of parental involvements. He talks about home-focused parental involvement. This means that parents play an active role in bringing up their children well, take care of their needs, help them with their school work and ensure that they arrive at school in time and well prepared. School-focused parental involvement means that parents

spontaneously could visit the school and make themselves visible at meetings and other activities organized in the school area. The teachers' and the school's collaboration with the parents themselves are not too important as long as everything runs according to teachers' expectations. Complementary teaching methods, could be seen as a way for the parents to protect children. Extra activities organized by parents after school hours and on weekends in the form of homework or native language instruction for the protection of cultural heritage (culture, language, identity and religion) and protect their children and young people from becoming influenced by what the parents call the "street culture".

Based on his action-oriented research Bouakaz identifies and analyses various forms of collaboration between school and home, and suggests ways of reducing barriers caused by cultural differences or language problems. Some of these forms of collaboration are:

*Learning meetings* (workshops): arranging meetings to assist teachers and parents with tips and advice that supports the children and facilitate learning at school and home.

*Two-way communication*: creating effective forms of communication about what is happening in schools and about children's performance, progress and development.

*Volunteer work*: recruiting and organizing parents for help and support.

*Homework assistance*: providing parents with information and ideas on how to help children with their homework.

*Decision making*: including parents in school decisions, developing parents as leaders and representatives.

*Cooperation with the local community*: identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen family and school activities and child development and learning (Bouakaz, 2007; 2009).

Research is also showing that many parents feel that they lose their power as parents because their children are early adjusting to Swedish manners, speaking Swedish after a short time. Parents might try to involve themselves in a "learning partnership" in accordance with the Swedish education system, but many times this may not work out because the Swedish school system is still structured on the basis of Swedish norms and beliefs, and families from cultural minorities might have difficulties to fit in (Sjögren, 1996). Parents might still live in the old tradition. Learning the language process is not going fast and they might be unfamiliar with the school system. Many children might be at risk to become parents for their parents, and have to take on too much responsibility in their own family (Alfakir, 2004; 2010). Parents with different cultural backgrounds have different views on children and child-rearing, and different ways of understanding cooperation and what it might mean to "be there" in different ways in the preschool, school or leisure time center (Flising, 1996). Their knowledge about the preschool/school system and their perspectives with regards to being new in the society, limited language skills, miscommunication, and lack of social codes and in some cases religious beliefs establish quite a few obstacles leading to parents having difficulties to participate in preschool (Bouakaz, 2007).

In addition to studies of parental involvement in preschools and schools, I have also found research on informal and formal social networks of parents useful in my study. Cochran et al (1990) demonstrated in several studies the importance of supportive personal networks for the

healthy development and functioning of both parents and children. Outcomes affected by such networks included life satisfaction, positive self-regard, satisfaction with parenting, mother responsiveness to child, and adjustment to divorce and widowhood. For the children socio-emotional functioning and peer-related social skills were related to the supportive capacity of their parent's networks. Strong network links between teachers and parents - schools and homes - created common perceptions of norms and values. Trust and reciprocity were key components in the networks (Cochran et al, 1990 in Sandqvist, 2001). It seems clear from these studies that immigrant parents' *social capital* developed through well-functioning interactions with teachers and other parents. Social capital is a concept used by Bourdieu . His thoughts have influenced me in this study as shown in the next section.

## 5. Theoretical foundations

### 5.1. Bourdieu's "Theory of Practice"

The framework of this study is based on French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory. Bourdieu developed a theory of action. He connected his theoretical ideas with empirical research, grounded in everyday life and labelled his cultural anthropological perspective a *theory of practice*. Bourdieu describes each individual who absorbs a position in a multidimensional social space; he or she is not defined by social class membership, but by the amounts of each kind of *capital* he or she possesses (Broady, 1998). In short, *capital* may be described as symbolic and tangible assets. (Bourdieu, 1999) distinguishes between different types of capital: cultural capital, economic capital, social capital and symbolic capital. Another key concept used by Bourdieu is *habitus*.

#### Cultural capital

The cultural capital exists mainly in the human body of knowledge, experiences and ways of perceiving and thinking, to speak and move. Cultural capital also exists with Bourdieu's language, in objective and institutionalized forms, such as educational institutions and museums, books, newspapers, theories and techniques. The cultural capital is based on people's beliefs. The dominant language is capital because it is recognized as superior and as more desirable than any other language. Language as a method of communication is a mechanism of power according to Bourdieu (Broady, 1998). Language and culture are both very important and are closely related. We get our identity, our knowledge and our preparedness to handle life situations in different ways mainly through language. Language interprets life and is environment for us. Language skills are some of our most important tools for future education and participation in culture. It gives self-confidence and possibilities for development. Language makes it possible to think, dream, learn and express ourselves. It is not just the words but also the intonation. Gestures and mimes are also a part of our language.

Culture gives a distinguished identity to a specific language or behavior pattern and it is thus a further advance or an additional extension of the "metaphorical mind" after language. And thus there exists, in my opinion, an intimate connection between language and culture.

Culture is not only artistic aspects as theatre and music, but it is also expression of human life and our behavior. Culture is a setting of rules, values and symbols shared by a number of people. The life experience and knowledge of a person depends on where one lives. The language, culture and references are cultural phenomena with a particular validity.

The cultural capital of immigrant families might be quite different from that of families belonging to the majority groups in Sweden, and hence quite important to pay attention to in relation to the questions raised in this study linked to parental involvement and communication patterns among preschool teachers and parents from cultures outside of Sweden.

#### Economic capital

Economic capital consists of material resources. Class membership and income are crucial in relation to which different opportunities exist for individuals in society. Quality of things and life styles are often dependent of economic capital (Broady, 1998).

### **Social capital**

Social capital consists of things like family bonds, one's circle of friends and acquaintances, contacts with schoolmates from earlier, membership in organizations involving close contacts, and the like, i.e., a person's informal or formal social network. Measuring social capital is more difficult than measuring economic capital. Having or not having a job affects one's social capital, just as one's engagement in social events does. Having a low level of social capital can be interpreted as a sign of isolation or of being an outsider, a situation which can also be created by having recently moved into a new living area or to a new country (Bourdieu, 1986, cited in Boaukaz, 2007).

### **Symbolic capital**

Symbolic capital consists of holdings of prestige, honor and status. The symbolic capital of different social groups vary considerably, affecting their power to be listened to and to influence their situation (Tabrizi 2007).

### **Habitus**

Habitus is illustrated as the disposition to act which individuals gain in the earliest stages of socialization and which they consolidate by their consequent choices in life. Habitus is capabilities one has for being able to act, think and orient oneself effectively within the social world. These capabilities are attained gradually through a learning process (in my study parents' experiences have different standards and values because they were formed in Iran, Iraq or Lebanon, etc). The history of a person forms its habitus. Habitus is connected with the lifestyle space (Bourdieu, 1993, cited in Boaukaz, 2007).

These concepts are relevant in relation to my study where the focus is on "immigrant parents in preschool", whose experiences were shaped outside of Sweden. These groups generally have access to other cultural, social, economic and symbolic capitals, and their habitus are different from Swedish groups of parents.

## **5.2. Bronfenbrenner's "Ecology of Human Development" perspective**

A second theoretical perspective I have found useful in my study is the Ecology of Human Development perspective first developed by the American psychology professor Urie Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Development, socialisation and learning take place in interaction between the individual and the environment, where roles, relations, and activities are seen as the basic building-blocks in these interactions. Bronfenbrenner identifies in his systemtheoretical model four different levels which encompass each other like Chinese boxes. At the first level, the *microsystem level*, we find a number of settings where the child spends time, and interacts with people, i.e. the preschool, the home or the neighborhood. The *mesosystem level* represents the relations or links between these settings (Fredriksson, 1991). Of particular interest to this study are the links between the home and the preschool, the relations between parents and preschool teachers, and the content of the communication between them and their joint activities. Opportunities to develop positive and regular links between different microsystems, like the home and the preschool, are affected, by factors at the *exosystem level*, the third level in the ecological model. Here we find factors like parents' work-places or local School Boards that might regulate possible times for parents to visit the preschool or the teachers' chances to set aside time to meet with the parents. At the *macrosystem level*, finally, there are cultural, political and economical factors that affect decisions linked to the content of the curriculum, the expansion of the preschool system, labor market regulations, or special supports to immigrant families, which might all indirectly affect

opportunities for parents and preschool teachers to communicate and cooperate (Andersson & Gunnarsson, 1990).

By using this ecology of human development perspective as a guide in my study, it has been possible to move the focus from the individual family to more general living conditions for families who are newcomers to the Swedish society and the preschool.

## **6. Part A - Parent and Staff Perspectives**

As specified earlier (p. 3), my study consists of two separate parts, with Part A designed to answer questions about perspectives of parents and teachers on parental involvement, and Part B being an attempt to facilitate parental involvement through a set of introduced activities in the preschool. I will start by presenting the design, methods and results of Part A, then continue with a presentation of methods and results of Part B, and finally try to conclude with a summary and integrated discussion of my findings.

### **6.1. Methodology**

#### **6.1.1. Participants in the study**

To answer my research questions on perspectives on parental involvement I have conducted interviews with parents and teachers in a preschool class in a multicultural school in Gothenburg and the school manager of this school. The preschool class consisted of fourteen children with family roots in nine different countries, including Chile, Spain, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, Syria and Poland. The staff group working with the children consisted of a preschool teacher, a teacher assistant, and a leisure time teacher with immigrant background and a good command of several languages.

Informing the parents about the study, and invite them to participate and be interviewed was not an easy thing because of the large number of languages represented among the families. I wrote a letter to all parents, in which I asked if they were interested to talk about how they see cooperation with the preschool and the ways in which they might be involved in what happens in the preschool. I also translated the letter into five different languages and sent it, both in Swedish and in the mother tongue to each family. These invitation letters are included in Appendix A. In the letters I also made a special effort to explain to the parents that all the personal data would be anonymous and that the information and discussions between us during the interviews would only be used for this study. Parents were also told in the letters that they could talk through an interpreter if we had problems understanding each other's languages.

I managed to recruit parents from seven families to my study group through this procedure. Three families reported that they did not have time to participate in the interview, and two families were travelling abroad for a long period and were not available for my study. The staff group and the school manager were all positive to participate in the interviews.

#### **6.1.2. The Interviews**

To get answers to my questions, I have used semi-structured interviews with a number of pre-determined questions, which in the interview situation were supplemented by follow-up questions, where this was found appropriate. Using interviews as a research method has given me the opportunity to communicate with families and understand their views on a deeper level. I felt that this method was especially well suited in this study, since most parents



participating had a limited mastery of the Swedish language, and at the same time their experiences and capacities were in the centre of attention. Using a questionnaire with written questions would, in my opinion, not have generated useful information, and motivation to participate in the study would have been low. Through carefully conducted interviews, I felt I would have a better opportunity to find out what obstacles parents experienced in relation to being involved in various activities in the preschool. Through interviews, I would also be able to create a dialogue with staff members on ways to allow parents to be involved in their children's daily lives in the preschool. The staff could see clearly that all people have different habitus and routines. The interviews would give parents opportunities to express their point of views about what they feel that the preschool wants from them as parents, and it was a chance for their voices to be heard by members of the institution. As Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) and James and Prout (1997) have suggested, the qualitative studies that are currently being applied in early childhood education are also important in allowing new voices to be heard (referenced in MAC Naughton, sharne & Siraj, 2004). These are the voices of parents, preschool teachers and other members of staff.

The actual interview revolved around questions like the following:

*What did the parents know about the preschool before their child started in this setting?*

*Did the parents often discuss with their children things that happen in the preschool?*

*What did they think the preschool expected from parents?*

*Had the parents ever experienced misunderstandings or conflicts with the preschool staff?  
What might have been the reason for that?*

*Is parent involvement in the preschool important and useful? If not, why not? If yes, why is it important?*

The interview forms used in the study are presented in Appendix B.

### **6.1.3. The pilot study**

During the process of constructing the interview, I made three pilot interviews to feel more comfortable in the interview situation and be sure that my questions were perceived as I had intended by the parents. The pilot testing gave me reasons to make some adjustments and remove or change some questions that the respondents had problems understanding and come up with answers to.

I interviewed two female and one male parent, and I selected parents who spoke Persian, the same language that I speak. It turned out, for example, that some of my questions around democracy, one of the cornerstones in Swedish preschools, were difficult to understand and answer. My questions around democracy were often interpreted by the parents as being linked to politics, so I had to make changes in my questions to help the parents think more in terms of the intentions of the curriculum for preschools. My reformulated question:

*In the preschool curriculum it is stated that "democratic development" is important. What do you think "democratic development" means? Now generated a more relevant answer from the father: I think my child is not a child any longer. She is asking a lot of questions. She doesn't want to be silent. I think democracy helps her to think independently, choose an active option. It gives her dignity and develops her in freedom and in self confidence.*

Other areas where the pilot interviews helped me reformulate questions and sort out misunderstandings had to do with children's behaviours in the preschools and the homes and perceived expectations by parents from preschool teachers. I felt more ready to conduct the interviews for my study after I had done the pilot study.

#### **6.1.4. Data collection procedure**

From the beginning I had planned to conduct all interviews in my office, which is located quite close to the preschool. As it turned out, only four of the parents came to my office. Scheduling the interviews turned out to be a problem, especially when both parents were to be present, so I needed to call several times to be able to find times that would work for all parties. I made two interviews in the homes of the families, and interviewed one parent on the telephone. Each interview lasted for about an hour, and I had prepared tea or coffee to create a relaxed interviewing situation. When I conducted the interviews, I tried hard to have a good relationship with the parents, not only with respect to their views, but I also tried to make sure that their experiences and capacities were in the centre of attention. It is obvious that we all have different views on, and interests in life, and it was very important for me that the parents should feel comfortable to express themselves freely during the interviews. I tried to make them confident during the conversation and give them good opportunities to talk about their experiences in the preschool as a second home.

There was a free choice which of the parents would participate and answer the questions. Most important was that we could communicate with each other. I switched between the different languages that I mastered during the conversation. In one case, the parent used different languages so that we could understand each other and communicate in a good way. In this case, the mother was very proud that she had been able to talk in my mother tongue. The leisure time pedagogue in the preschool class was also an important link in that I used her language competence to understand the views of some parents. Among the interviewed parents there was one illiterate couple. The mother could not speak Swedish so the father responded. I tried to take the mother's opinions into consideration when the father translated questions for her. To create a more relaxed situation, I decided not to use a voice recorder during the interviews, but rather to write down the answers in a note-book. Immediately after the interview I went through all the answers I had written down, and tried to remember and fill in comments and wordings that the parents had used but I hadn't been able to write down in detail during the conversations. I read my notes several times and sorted the key points of each respondent under the research questions of my study as a preparation for my result descriptions and analyses.

## **6.2. Results - Part A**

As stated in the methods section, I have interviewed seven parents and four pedagogues to gather data for the first part of my study (Part A). I will start this results section by presenting two of these interviews, one parent interview and one interview with a teacher, in quite a detailed way to give the reader an illustration of the level of details and the type of interview data I have had available for descriptions and analyses.

### **6.2.1. Interview example with a parent couple**

Both parents came to the interview, but it was mostly the father who answered my questions because the mother could not speak Swedish and I could not speak their language.

*Q: What did you know about the preschool before your child started?*

- She is our second child attending preschool, so we were familiar with the system.

*Q: What is your opinion about your child attending preschool?*

*Do you feel that you know what is going on in the preschool; what the children are doing; what the day looks like with routines such as eating, indoor/outdoor play; structured group activities, etc?*

- We do not know exactly what they do and how they work with the children, but we know that they read fairy tales, that they play, and that they go to the theater or the park.

*Q: How did you find out about these things? Who informed you and how?*

- When the preschool sends the paper to us, it is difficult for us. I am illiterate and can not read. I can not help my children because I have never been to school in my life. My wife picks up our child from preschool, but she can not talk to the staff.

*Q: Would you like to know what is going on in the preschool? Which would be the best ways of informing you?*

- I do not need to know more, it's my child who needs the help. My daughter does not feel good and needs extra help. She cries a lot every day but still it seems like she enjoys preschool.

*Q: Do you often discuss with your child the things that happen in preschool?*

- I come home late but her mother asks her. She (the daughter) says sometimes she is tired and wants to be concise and tell only a little what they did. She is more concentrated on what will happen after, for example if we have promised to go to Mc Donald's, or such. She will never forget when we promise something to her. For me, it is most important that she will have a good time with her friends.

*Q: What doesn't your child like about preschool?*

There are some boys that beat other children. I don't want any conflict with the staff or other parents so I don't do anything.

*Q: In the preschool curriculum it is stated that "democratic development" is important. What do you think "democratic development" means?*

- The good thing about democracy is that children are getting stronger, independent and thinking for themselves. But what is bad about democracy is that it gives too much power to the child and this little individual (the daughter) wants to be in charge. We adults must set the borders, but often it will be difficult. We have difficulties around bedtime with her, and in the morning she is determined to stay at home, and after one hour then she wants to come to preschool. We have ongoing problems about this issue.

*Q: Have you ever experienced misunderstandings or conflicts with the pre-school staff? What was the reason for that?*

- When my child comes home unhappy because of something that has happened during the day at preschool, I don't make a big story of it. I have accepted that children will play in one moment and fight in the next. I have respect for the staff and know they are doing their best for our children.

However, I will talk to my child and say that she should not use dirty words or fight like other children. I can not go to different families and say how they should raise their children but I can have a serious talk with my child. I think that parents have great responsibility to speak with their children.

*Q: What do you think preschool expects of the parents?*

- They want us to teach our children good habits so that they listen and become good citizens in the society. They want that we constantly keep in touch with them.

*Q: Is parent involvement in pre-school important and useful? ( If not, why not? If yes, why is it important?)*

- When a preschool teacher will arrange a parents evening I never go to the big meeting, I do not understand what they say. But when the teacher will meet me alone to talk to me about my child and her development in preschool, I always will be there, and the picture that the teacher gives me of my child matches well with what we as parents feel at home with our child.

If I see a child who fights with my child, I cannot go to him/her and stop the act while it is difficult to be witness to such an act.

*Q: What does the concept of "collaboration" mean to you?*

- I think that parents should not be in the preschool more than what the staff will arrange. We have to follow in the same direction as preschool but it is not necessary to be in there.

### **6.2.2. Interview example with a leisure-time pedagogue**

This teacher has worked as a leisure-time pedagogue in the preschool/school for ten years. She came from Iran to Sweden twelve years ago and studied to become a preschool teacher. I asked her how she communicates with immigrant parents with respect to the language barrier. She responded that parents often stay for a while in the afternoon when they pick up their children to share a concern with her. They want to communicate and often have many questions. She thought it might be easier for parents to talk to her than to other Swedish teachers. Parents often express that they understand her better. They have a feeling of affiliation with me, she said.

*Q: What does "integration" mean to you?*

- Integration is about becoming more and more familiar with the Swedish culture and the Swedish language. It will be much easier to be involved in school and in society when having the knowledge of the new culture and language. We don't need to become Swedish but we can bring together good habits that are relevant here and now. We can keep our roots, which are important for one's identity. We, as pedagogues, are important links between these parents and the community. Pedagogues in the preschool are a good "channel" to a person's integration.

*Q: What are some obstacles between educators and parents with minority background with regard to limited language skills?*

- It is mostly cultural differences that bring about concerns. Parents who are unemployed feel stressed. For some families it's a big burden because the number of children in the family are many and parents are tired and do not have time to participate in every child's school events. Another reason may be that parents have low self-confidence and of course language barrier is included in it.

*Q: How could you increase a two-way-communication between the parents?*

- I arrange different activity occasions, such as "drop in", when the children will bake something and we invite the parents. They usually attend such occasions but when we organize "parent evenings", there are often not many parents participating. Maybe they are afraid that they can't contribute anything to the discussion, or they look down on themselves because of their backgrounds. With providing an opportunity to "drop in", we want to show that the preschool is an important part of children's lives, and also that parents are an important part of that. It is a good opportunity to meet the parents and get them involved in preschool activities.

*Q: What steps can help you to have a better communication with these parents?*

- All contacts, formal and informal are essential. Perhaps an informal conversation outside the school has been very important for parents. They feel respected and it reduces their feeling of exclusion and being outsiders.

- We have "children's week" in our school. For example, if the child is from Turkey, teachers and educators talk about that country from different aspects. Children will bring pictures and Turkish clothes to the school. Sometimes a parent joins in and tells something about the country, or in my study group children make the flag.

*Q: What resources should be available at your school so that you succeed in your communication with parents?*

- When a teacher is sick, there is no possibility to bring in a substitute teacher, you become more tired and you do not prioritize parental interaction the highest.

*Q: How can you implement democratic ideas with parents?*

- Respect for parents in various forms is important. It is not always what the pedagogue says that's the right thing. The pedagogue should recognize if an error or a misunderstanding occur between the children and the pedagogue. It creates trust between parents and staff.

*Q: What strategies do you suggest to get parents more involved?*

We always remind the parents of the importance of the preschool. Their children spend many hours a day here (for some children it's between 6.30 am to 6.30 pm). Parents are always welcome to see what activities we are having with their children, and last but not least we must show that their views are important to us. These are some of my reflections.

*Q: If you are going to guide parents to democratic thinking, what is most important to you?*

- The parents should not be afraid that their children grow in individual thinking, but support their children and our work. They should be involved in the preschool and see what we do. They might just be insecure because they do not participate in preschool.

### **6.3. Results Descriptions and Analyses**

#### **6.3.1. Interviews with Parents**

In the following section I am presenting the responses from the parents to my interview questions and try to interpret and analyse these responses, using my theoretical perspectives as a starting point. The parents' own school experiences, their limited language skills and possible difficulties in understanding information provided by the preschool have been part of these interpretation. We will hear the voices of all the participating parents throughout this presentation, although I have selected for the text those responses which speak most clearly to the issues, when the same type of response was given by several of the parents, which happened quite often.

*Q: What did you know about the preschool before your child started?*

Some of the parents in my study felt that they knew quite well what it meant for the child to start in the preschool. A reason for this might be that older siblings had earlier been enrolled in a preschool providing the parents with previous experiences; another reason was that the parents had talked a lot about the preschools with neighbors and relatives with such experiences. "We knew that she (the daughter) would meet and play with a lot of other children inside and outside" and "We knew that we would learn a lot about school routines and what will happen when he (the son) is older and goes to school". For other parents, represented in my study by single mothers with special problems (illness, dyslexia), it had been more difficult to find out what would happen in the preschool: "I did not know very much when my child started preschool, and I would have liked to know much more".

My interpretation is that many parents would like to learn more about the preschool and receive information in their own language that they could understand before their children start in the preschool. Their knowledge about the content of preschool activities was very limited. Other parents were able to use their own personal experiences or learn from members of their social network to be better prepared for their child's start in the preschool.

*Q: What do you know about the preschool and the kind of things going on there?*

To make it easier to understand my question, I explained that I was interested in how much the parents knew about what was going on in the preschool, what a normal day looks like with routines like eating, indoor/outdoor play, structured group activities, etc., and also how they felt about the preschool and that the child attended the preschool.

The parents' answers were different but similar. "My daughter likes preschool, she likes the teachers and me and my wife are satisfied with her attending preschool". "We know for example that the preschool teacher reads fairy tales and they play a lot which is good". One mother pointed out that "the preschool prepares the child for the school and children learn when they play. They learn different things all the time". Parents also felt that the children listen to what the teachers say in the preschool. One mother also felt that limit setting and structure also affect the children that come to the preschool, "and this is something that the children benefit from". Some of the parents tried to stay for a short time in the afternoon to have a dialogue with the staff. These parents mentioned a good communication with the staff.

I interpret the parents' answers to this question that they feel that their children are in a place where they experience lots of things and where they are happy, which is what the parents expect and are satisfied with.

Some parents were less satisfied in their answers to my questions on how they find out information about preschool, who informed them and how. Many times this had to do with language problems: "Preschool has sent a lot of papers to us at home but sadly all the information was in Swedish. We only knew which date our daughter should start preschool."

It was clear from the answers to these questions that many parents felt that the preschool needs to find more tools for a better communication with families with limited language skills. Linked to the above questions, I then asked the parent which would be the best ways of informing them so that they know what is going on in the preschools and received some helpful answers from some of the parents who felt that the communication worked fairly well:

"We have a 'contact book' where we can see what the children eat or when they have excursions". "In the contact book we can see what the children should bring to the preschool or what clothes to put on if it is raining". Some parents also mentioned that when they pick up their children they have the opportunity to talk to the staff and get information about the day.

My interpretation was that the contact book served as a link between teachers and parents. It was a useful tool for communication that the parents were satisfied with.

I also asked the parents if they often discuss with their children the things that happen in the preschool, and learned that parents received lots of information from their children. One father said that he had full control and knows what is going on in his daughter's preschool: "I ask my child every day". One mother described quite proudly that her child is "very social. She is very verbal and has a very good ability to talk about the daily events with me, and also talks to other people about it". For some parents, it was very important that children expressed themselves and told them how the day has been. In other families the parents didn't show any interest what happen during the day in preschool. The same was true for the children; some children talk a lot about the day in preschool, other don't talk about this at all.

I was also interested in finding out what kind of activities parents want their children to have in preschool, and the parents gave me a variety of answers: One father said that "it is most important that my daughter have a good time with her friends". When the preschool organizes excursions for the children, this was always a popular activity among all parents. Different outdoors activities and dancing, painting, making things and role playing were other activities the parents would like their children having a chance to do in preschool.

Activities preparing children for future school-work, like counting, reading and writing, were also seen as important by many of the parents. One mother told me that her daughter can now count up to 500. She felt that the daughter was now competent to start her schoolwork, like reading and writing. But another mother thought that her son had not yet started to think about school work. "He sees the preschool as a game room. He still brings his toys. I think the children should have more to read and write in preschool. If he was in a school in my home country, he would already be in the compulsory school".

Development of social life seemed to be important for the parents. The preschool was viewed as a part of life long learning, and the parents were pleased when the children could count and write, and gave signs of being ready for school.

When being asked what they didn't like their children to do in preschool, parents expressed different views. But the most important topic had to do with children fighting and using "bad words". One father said that there are some boys that beat other children. "I don't want any conflict with the staff or other parents so I don't do anything". One mother also expressed her disappointment with the staff, because she felt that the preschool should deal with this issue as a serious problem, react to the problems and share their thoughts with the parents.

Fighting and bullying among children in schoolyards have been a widely discussed topic in recent years. Neither schools, nor parents want their children exposed to or involved in such situations. But unfortunately the problem exists and schools are struggling to find different strategies to avoid discomfort for each individual student. According to my interviews, parents would like more cooperation concerning this issue.

One father said that one thing he didn't like his child to do in the preschool was playing football: "Football is an activity for boys and not for a girl child". I don't interpret his idea concerning girls participating in football activities as an attitude linked to democracy or gender. It has more to do with cultural differences. According to his culture girls should not play football.

To return toys to their proper place was not a fun task for a few children, but it was ok for some. Cleaning and leaving the toys at home were serious questions for some mothers but one mother had got consultation with the teacher, and she said that every child has different faces in home and in preschool.

My next questions to the parents had to do with democracy issues: In the preschool curriculum it is stated that "democratic development" is important. What do you think "democratic development" means? Some parent felt that children nowadays are getting stronger, more independent and more likely to "think for themselves", but some also felt that democracy gives too much power to the children. "We adults must set the borders".

Parents' perception of democracy was not always the same as the preschool's. The preschool would provide the opportunity for each child to grow independently, the child's own determination will be met with respect, and the child should be able to practice to have a different opinion than the others in the preschool. From this view the child is not only active, but socially active when participating in negotiations with others, adults as well as other children. But the parents seemed to agree that the freedom the preschool gives to children, will make it more difficult to control them later as they get older. With democracy, it takes much longer to reach the goal. "At home, I have no time talk to my son", one mother replied.

My next question had to do with the parents' relations and communications with the pedagogues. Have you experienced misunderstandings or conflicts with preschool staff and what was the reason for that. Most of the time the parents were very satisfied with this relationship, but there were situations when they felt that the preschool staff could have done things differently. One father said "I trust that the staff knows what's best for our children. I don't allow my child to complain about her teacher. She has to learn to respect the staff just as we do in our country." Another parent felt that "we have good contact with the staff. We should accept and respect their views, but there are other parents who do not understand some situations because of limited language skills." I also heard one father express some disappointment: "I am disappointed that educators hear children use 'bad words', but they say nothing. I really want to be present in the preschool once a week. Maybe children use these words less when there are more adults in the schoolyard." And also, "my child was bullied by



two older boys at school. He learned the 'bad word' jargon. I have been several times in the preschool and talked to the staff. Finally, they took the signal seriously and helped us parents meeting each other. The teachers are very careful people and the conflicts were stopped." "I had no help from the preschool when I asked about limit setting for my child." one parent complained, but also added that "I have good contact with the preschool staff. I cannot attend the meetings with the teachers at a regular basis. But I will always meet them when it is 'development talks'".

My interpretation from what parents' expressed is that parents wanted to show that they trust the preschool and the staff. They wanted to avoid conflicts with them. At the same time there were a few parents who expected more cooperation from the staff at the preschool when something negative happened among the children. These parents were disappointed that the staff seemed to reduce the problems, maybe because they wanted to avoid conflicts with the parents. Both groups actually tried to avoid conflicts with each other.

When I asked what parents think the preschool expects of them the answers were quite similar and went something like this: "The preschool would like that we parents teach our children good habits. That we engage in our children's learning and constantly have good communication with our child and with the personnel. They expect us to come to school and interact with other parents. Children should not use bad words or fight with each other. They want us to be helpful and visit the preschool. They would like that we have the same procedures and structure at home". The feeling from the answers is that the parents want to try to meet the expectations of the preschool. In reality, however, this goal is not easily obtained.

A set of questions were used to find out if the parents felt that parent involvement in preschool was important and useful? Do they participate in Home – Preschool activities? Which types? If not why they do not participate?

The importance of parental involvement is clearly stated by several of the parents: "We parents can't send our children to preschool/school and hope everything will be fixed by them. We should engage and get involved.". "Preschools can schedule different activities like walking in the Botanic garden, or any other game together and ask parents that they engage in the program". One father would like to participate more in preschool activities: "If I occasionally will be present in the schoolyard, or participate in any activity in preschool, all the children will know me and I will know them, too. There is a possibility that the staff would know other sides of me, too. The preschool has not yet asked me".

There are several obstacles to parental participation, however. A father with limited language skills said: "I never go to the parents evening. I do not understand what they say. "Development talks" is about my child and her development in preschool. I will always be there and the picture that the teacher gives me of my child matches well with what we as parents feel at home with our child." He said very clearly that he does not need to be in preschool more. The preschool is seen by him as an institution that knows all about the care and learning that his child needs. "I fully trust what the staff are doing to help my child". There was no opportunity for the father himself to go to school when he was a child, but he is thankful that his child has this opportunity now. He looks at himself as a person who can't contribute anything that could be beneficial to others. He wants to follow the preschool-guidelines and care about what they offer to his child.

A father who had good ability to speak Swedish replied, on the other hand, that “parents’ evenings are uninteresting to me; the information will not be available to all parents because of limited language skills. There is no communication between the parents. There is no dialogue between preschool staffs and the parents. I will not use time for this activity.”

Several examples of unsuccessful ‘parents evening’ came up in the interviews: The staff cancelled a meeting because the group of parents who wanted to participate was too small, which one mother felt “was unfair to the children and parents who looked forward to participate in this planned activity”. One of the reasons that the parents did not participate was limited language skills. They were not motivated to participate in parent evenings. Even parents who could master the language put off meetings because they thought that the information would not reach those who did not understand the language. The result of this was that no dialogue happened between the parents. Both groups were disappointed.

During the interviews I came across many different factors which might have prevented these parents to participate in preschool activities. One family did not have permanent resident permits. They had no permanent home address. This family was forced to move to different homes all the time. One single mother with three children was very low on motivation; they have been at war and exposed to very difficult experiences. She was depressed, complaining about psychosomatic disorders, and she did not have energy for parent evenings. Another mother was seriously ill. One mother was in a difficult divorce process and changes in family structure. She was working and studying at the same time. She could not participate in preschool activities because of lack of time and power.

### **6.3.2 Interviews with staff**

In the following section I am presenting the responses from the various staff members to my interview questions and trying to interpret these responses based on interviews with three teachers and a school manager.

My first question to the staff had to do with the word “integration”, and what integration meant to them. The school manager replied from a somewhat different perspective:

“In my school 85% of the pupils have other nationalities. I don’t like talking about Swedish and immigrant parents. I would like to talk about parents in general. It is fantastic that we have diversity here at our school. Meetings between cultures happen - intercultural encounters are a treasure”. The leisure time pedagogue felt that “integration” meant that families from other cultures became more familiar with the Swedish culture and the Swedish language. “It will be much easier to be involved in the school and in society with more knowledge about the new culture and language”.

It is a fact that in this pre/school there are many different nationalities, people with different norms and values. The school is an actor in community integration.

The major factor for integration according to the staff is that children gather good knowledge in the schools about life here and now. Parents’ participation contributes to their integration. Multicultural schools give children and staff access to the different languages and cultures of the children.

When asking the staff members to reflect on how their contacts with immigrant parents were with regard to a Swedish language barrier, one of the answers was: “I have been eight years in the U.S myself. I know how it feels when you cannot express yourself. When I came back to

Sweden my son was eight years old and we were foreign even in my native home. That is why I speak in a simple manner and do not use difficult words. There is always a way to communicate with the parents. It is more the cultural differences that create concerns". The leisure time teacher, who came from Iran to Sweden twelve years ago, said that parents often tell her that they understand her better than some of the other teachers. She mastered several languages. "Parents have a feeling of association with me" she replied.

What I heard the staff members saying was that we can overcome the language barrier. There are several ways, for example to get help from an interpreter for essential communications. Some parents know English, and some parents have access to other languages. Sometimes there is someone in the family who can communicate with the teachers, and sometimes the staff at the school can speak different languages. Contact through mother tongue is also a way to establish close contact with some parents. It is also important to keep in mind that parents already have their language and that they have a lot of experiences. These experiences are resources that the individual is bringing along. What separates us from each other is that we have different capital. Bourdieu's theory states that we have different capital as social capital and symbolic capital, and that our habitus are different. Lack of these assets relate to barriers of parental involvement. Lack of knowledge of the Swedish language might be one of these barriers.

When I asked how they could enhance two-way communication with parents, the teachers talked about the importance of making the parents feel free to visit the preschool by showing that there is a give-and-take perspective, and by a willingness on both sides to work with each other. "But it is difficult to speak in a language so that we understand each other". But with this statement, the interviewed staff did not refer to a Swedish or non-Swedish language but to difficulties in finding ways to understand the content and communicate with each other about that. This might have to do with communicating about caring about time, caring about what is planned by the preschool, providing sufficient clothing for the planned activity etc. When teachers and parents follow the same lines, the child feels more comfortable and the child is not afraid. It is not necessary that the parents spend time in the preschool every day, but the staff told me that it is extremely important that teachers and parents have a regular contact with each other.

In response to the question Do you think that children develop better if parents are involved in their schooling the teachers agreed, but also felt that the parents didn't have a lot of time for visits. "We would like that parents take an active part in preparations for parents' meetings, and children's class activities are very important, too". "Parents should feel involved in what is going on in preschool or outside of school for their children". "Parents must have the courage to come to preschool. Some parents stay out of the preschool and they don't want to come any closer", where some of the answers to this question.

The staff agreed that if the parents follow the same principles as the preschool and if they have a regular contact with teachers, it would be much easier for the adults to set borders for the children. If the parents know what is going on in the preschool, this would create a better pedagogical environment for every child in the preschool as well as at home. There would be better opportunities to work on the socio-emotional development for each child because adults would be able to work along the same lines.

I asked about how often it happens that the preschool arranges something for the parents, teachers and children to do together. The school manager pointed out that they invite the entire family for school start and when the school closes for the year, and to a party when they

welcome the Spring. During the “Spring Party” when many parents participate, all the children are running and playing in the forest area around the school. The school offers hot dogs and bread and children and adults have real fun together.

Which resources are required at your school that would enable you to perform better in your communication with parents? One complicating factor pointed out by the teachers was that when a teacher is sick, there is no possibility to bring in a substitute teacher. “You become more tired and you do not prioritize parental interaction”. The time is not enough in an intense work situation to arrange more activities or invite parents to school more frequently than they do now. Teachers do not want to stay in the school when the regular workday has ended. “Why should we stay longer in the school when we have our own families and children to come home to and be with after work?” The teachers welcome the parents to visit the preschool when they want as long as the teachers know that the visit will not interfere with other activities on that same day. But there are still some parents who are hard to reach because of language barriers. And some educators are too tired to stay in the school when their working hours are over.

The question about how the preschool would be more successful in implementing democratic ideas with the parents was not an easy one to answer. The school manager said she had definitely no simple answer to this question. “We work hard about this issue every week. We have ‘life skills’ as a subject. We talk constantly about respect and empathy. We send information to the homes. We have parents who cannot speak Swedish but we do not always have the resources to translate the letters, and we also have parents who are illiterate and cannot read. This is a big problem in our school.”

After discussion with the staff about the difficulty of implementation of democracy, we discussed the cultural differences and how patient you should be when working with people from all over the world. My follow-up question to the school manager was: If you are going to guide parents to democratic thinking, what is most important to you?

“The parents should not be afraid that their children grow in individual thinking; they can support their children and our work. They should be involved in the preschool and see what we do. They might just be insecure because they do not know about the new culture. Parents should not remain in an old system and give away all responsibility to the school.

The children's lives are characterized by multiple cultures, and children will subsequently know, understand and appreciate more the valuation - and the norms, behavior patterns, traditions, language, thereby creating their own cultural identity (Lunneblad, 2006).

In earlier days children would only listen and obey, but now it is more independence and own decisions that are important for each child. It is important that the parents give their children more time and become involved in the child's everyday event. The child should be seen as an autonomous individual with the right to influence his or her own life. Children should be encouraged to discuss and challenge”.

Finally, I asked what strategies the staff would suggest to get parents more involved, a question also related to my own intentions of trying out various parent involvement activities in the preschool as part B of my study. The answer was that they always remind the parents of the importance of preschool. “Parents are always welcome to see what activities we are having with the children, and we try to show that parents' views are important to us. “We arrange different activities like ‘drop in-sessions’, when the children will bake something and

the parents are invited. We need to be open and welcoming, and tell the parents that they are needed in the preschool”. “Parents do show up when the kids have a performance, for example a theatre or something similar”. The staff members stressed the importance of having a regular contact with the parents, and of being respectful, listen, and in a professional way really make an effort to find out the needs of the parents. Informal conversations outside of school were very important to some parents. One of the teachers talked at some length about the “children’s’ week” in the school: “For example, if the child comes from Turkey, parents and educators might talk about that country from different perspectives, and children might bring pictures and Turkish clothes to the school. Sometimes a parent joins in and tells something about the country, and in my study group the children made a Turkish flag.”

## **6.4. Conclusions - Part A**

When summarizing the interviews with the parents it is fair to say that the parents were generally very satisfied with the preschool and expressed feelings that this was a place where their children were well taken care of by educated staff that knew what was best for the children and who created a stimulating situation for the children that the parents felt secure about. Sometimes low education or limited language skills would put the parents in a situation when it was difficult to communicate with the preschool teachers about things that might be problematic - the educators were the experts. This was confirmed by the pedagogues who felt that sometimes the parents seemed to be “afraid of the unknown”, and a low level of education, limited knowledge of the Swedish language or previous traumatic experiences in their home countries seemed to create a lack in self-confidence among many of the parents.

Most parents were satisfied knowing that their children are happy to spend time in the preschool and are well taken care of by the personnel. Receiving regular information about their child might be enough to fulfill the needs of these parents. Other parents want to influence planning, discuss decisions or even participate in daily activities in the ECEC-settings. These parents expressed the need to be asked if they wanted to participate.

Like many other parents in families who have recently arrived in Sweden from other countries, the parents interviewed in this study also lived in stressful situations affecting their possibilities and motivation to become involved in the preschools. Without a permanent home address, or in a situation where they didn’t have a permanent residence permit or were actually hiding from the authorities these parents were facing a difficult situation. Some were recently divorced, unemployed or sick which removed most of the energy or motivation to get involved, at least temporarily. Factors at the macro- or exosystem levels were clearly affecting what went on at the meso- and microlevels (home-preschool), as described in the ecological model used as theoretical support for this study (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Different perspectives on important aspects of child-rearing, child development and the role of the preschool in supporting children’s learning also sometimes created uncertainties and communication problems among parents and pedagogues. Culturally related differences in views on the needs for daily routines or limit-setting was brought up by both the parents and the staff as areas of disagreement, but since both groups tried to avoid conflicts such differences were not easy to bring to the surface, especially if there was also communication problems linked to the languages spoken. Differences in perceptions of democracy and the perception of children and childhood are other factors that might prevent parents and educators from working too closely together, and parents from being involved in the activities in the preschool as reported in the interviews. Historically, ECEC in Sweden has a long tradition of building a close and good working relationship between parents and preschool

staff. However, for children of immigrant individuals who are struggling to become integrated the forming of such a relationship might be easier in theory than in practice.

Perspectives on children and childhood are not the same in all cultures, and both staff and parents need to learn more about what such differences mean in theory and practice. Some parents concerns were that the preschool gives too much power to the children and that they thus get stronger, more independent and learn to think for themselves too much and not to listen to the parents. Parents had ongoing problems about arriving in time to preschool, time to go to bed and other limit setting problems. The expressed opinion from the interviewed staff members was that parents should not be afraid that their children would become too independent. They should be involved in preschool and see what is going on.

The preschool is instructed to give each child the opportunity to be independent and acquire critical thinking, but also be cooperative and engage with other children and pedagogues and this view should be communicated to the parents. The goal is that children should understand why they should behave in a certain way - not that they might otherwise get punishment, which may be what some immigrant children expect. From the perspective of the Swedish ECEC, parents should educate their children and guide them into the adult world by giving them more freedom, as they get older. In addition, girls and boys should be educated on equal terms. As a result, children are aware of their rights, and also require that parents knows about the rules. Swedish preschools consist of children/families that have different standards, values and habitus because their experience was formed in different countries and different cultures.

The results of the interviews in Part A of this study also indicate that cultural differences often prevent parents from participating in preschool. Limited cultural and social skills explain many difficulties. Differences in values, norms and traditions between the parents and the educators prevent both sides from taking the steps needed to establish a relationship based on cooperation and understanding each other.

Habits are difficult to break and a great deal of education for staff is needed for them to understand cultural differences in this area. For many immigrants, there may be a struggle between the old and the new as well as between the current school culture and a parent's previous school culture. Many parents want to stay in their old traditions; an explanation also supported by previous research (i.e. Sjögren, 1996; Boaukaz, 2007).

## **7. Part B - Introducing Parental Activities**

Interviews with parents and teachers helped me understand how parental involvement is viewed from the perspectives of the two groups, what opportunities that exist and which factors might prevent parents from being involved. Parents expressed confidence in and appreciated that their children were having a good time in the preschool, both staff members and parents would have liked to see parents more involved but gave several reasons why this involvement didn't come so easy. Lack of time and energy linked to the life situation of the families or limited financial or staff resources on the part of the preschools were some explanations given, and so were also different expectations linked to child rearing ideologies or the role of the preschool, and communication problems linked to language problems or differences in cultural background. All in all, these findings were for the most parts in line with previous research in the area and found explanatory power in the theoretical perspectives of Bourdieu and Bronfenbrenner (pp. 11-13).

A second purpose of my study was to try to find out whether it would be possible for the preschool to create an environment which would facilitate active participation and parental involvement in the preschool activities. To do so I designed, with the help of the parents, a set of activities to be carried out in the preschool. These activities were intended to create a closer relationship between parents, children and staff members in the preschool setting.

### **7.1. Introduction**

In order to improve relationships between parents and preschool, I arranged a "Parents' evening". Only three parents, two mothers and one father showed up. We discussed the importance of parent interaction. One of the mothers who attended the meeting argued that the first time when she came to preschool her boy was upset with her and asked why she followed him when no other parent did. The second time her boy reacted more dramatically and asked for the reason that the mother wanted to spend time in preschool, but the third time he asked "are you going to school today, are you?". According to the mother, the boy looked forward to seeing his mother at the preschool and she had also more subjects to talk to him about after her son arrived from preschool. Now she knows about the physical design of the class, toys and other things. She not only asks how the day has been, but she can continue and ask more questions. She has a relationship with the other children, activities in progress in preschool and a different social relationship to her son in the environment. This form of interaction, according to the ecology of human development theory, forms a "micro-systems", which proves that interaction between different people influence all parties.

Two days later the father who attended the meeting came to the preschool and followed the activities for three hours. The staff thought it was a positive effect from the parents' meeting even though only very few people participated.

How a child functions in preschool is for example not only dependent on the environment s/he faces at preschool, the roles, relationships and activities that develop there. The child also brings experiences from other environments. There is reason to believe that environments with many contacts with others work better from the child's point of view than environments with few contacts. For example, if the parents are close and have good contacts with the preschool, it is probably good not only for parents but also for the child. Parents learn about activities in the preschool and can assist and support the child in a better way. Teachers in preschools will also get a better understanding of the child's home and relationship and can

easily take this into account in their daily interactions with the children (Bak & Gunnarsson, 2000).

In order to follow up and enhance the bonds between parents and preschool, I followed up on some factors that prevented parents to come to the meetings. The most common reasons were that parents did not have anybody to take care of the children. The second reason was that they were exhausted because of daily events like to find job, housing and stress that didn't know language and the codes in the society. I suggested that maybe the staff should write in the invitation for the next meeting that parents who wanted could take the children with them. If parents need to bring their children to the meeting, a member of staff could help and set up activities for the children in the room next door. The staff had never tried this model but still they were hesitant to this idea.

According to (Andersson & Gunnarsson 1990), referring to the ecology of human development theory, it is difficult to disconnect the environmental structures that have an impact on the individual. There is a collision between two systems. Macro-systems are the political systems in the society and Exo-systems are systems which place demands indirectly on children and parents in everyday activities and relationships. When the staffs have long working- days and their work situation is already burdened by many different tasks, how can we expect them to work beyond their duties? The number of children in a class become greater and greater, while the number of personnel is reduced as a result of political decisions at macro- and exolevels in the system.

Parents can be overwhelmed when trying to establish new roots in a society, finding housing and jobs with limited knowledge of the language. In a case like this we can't expect these parents to prioritize involvement in preschool activities over finding a job. This are examples of factors that are out of the control of the individual but more related to other systems levels in society.

This second part of my study (Part B) is an attempt to find ways of increasing parental involvement in the preschool through a number of planned activities in this setting. I will start with a description of the various activities, continue with an attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of these in relation to the purpose of the activities, and end with a summary and conclusion of my study in relation to my specific aims and research questions.

### **7.1.1. Sara's cookie**



To establish contact and encourage parents to willingly come to preschool and increase the possibility for better collaboration and improve parental involvement in the preschool, I sent a letter through the "Contact Book", i.e. a book used for communication between staff and parents, which the child carries back and forth between the school and the home every day. In the letter I asked the parents if they have some specific interests that the children could be interested in learning more about. I asked them if they would consider coming to the classroom and doing something for and with the children.

One of the mothers said that she would like to come to the preschool with a simple recipe for a cookie. We made an appointment with the preschool teachers that the mother could come to the classroom and show and tell about the whole process of baking the cookie. I helped the mother to write the recipe. The paper was very nicely decorated and it was signed by "Sara's



mom” as a greeting to other parents. It would be sent to parents by the contact book. The mother and daughter made cookies at home together. I was in the classroom when they came.

I tried to help her, not just because of language difficulties, but to provide a good learning situation for the children. “Seeing the world with eyes and speech provides us with a significant insight in discussing ways of promoting appropriate aesthetic education for young children” (Booyeun, 2004). The mother asked if the children wanted to bake this cookie for “Mother’s Day”, and the children answered “Yes”. She explained very simply the whole procedure. She also commented that Sara had helped her to wash up while the cookies were in the oven. The preschool teacher asked the children small questions to make the children participate in the discussion. I suggested: “You can ask your mom or dad. Maybe they would like to come to school to do something for all of you”.

Sara was very happy, proud and generous. She went around and invited all children to take a cookie. The students’ assistant prepared a drink to everyone. All the children waited until Sara’s mom said: Here you are! The children thanked Sara’s mom with two different songs. She received also the hug of a few children when she left the class. They had had a very pleasant time together.

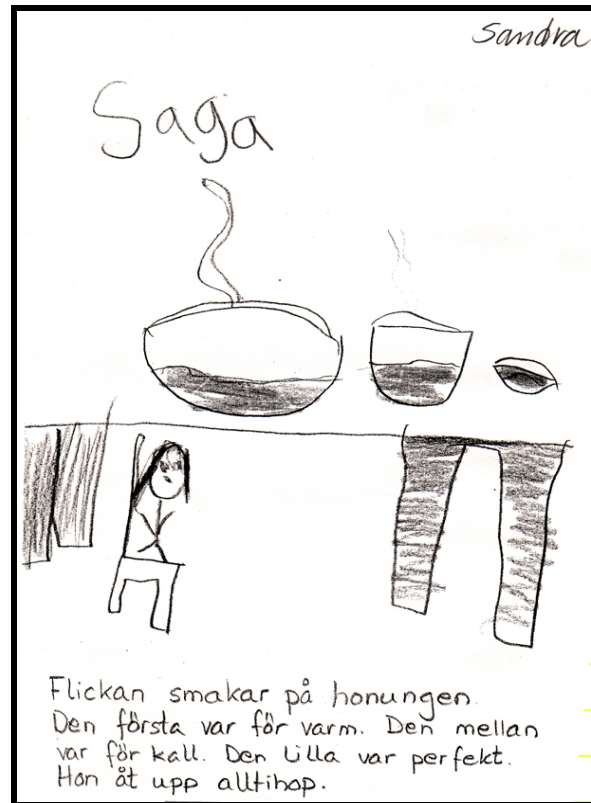
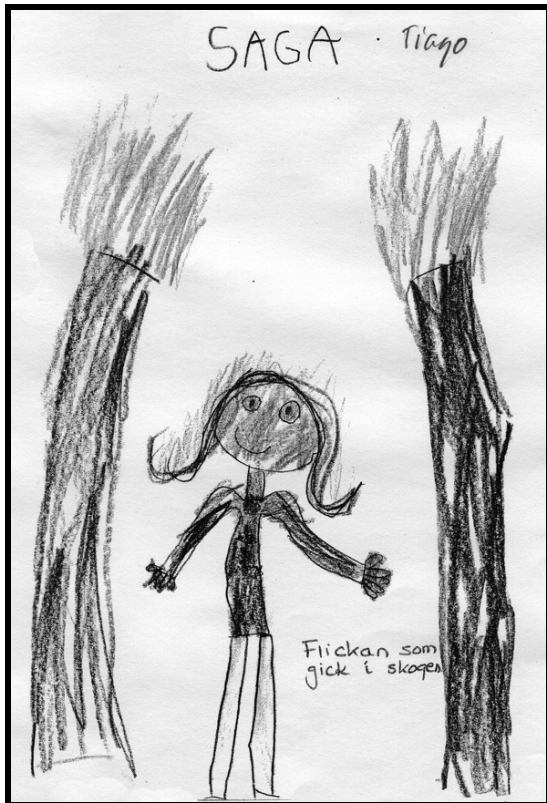
According to Andersson (1990), based on the Bronfenbrenner’s theory, children develop roles and relationships with other adults through activities like the one just described. In connection with other people they develop social relationships which are important for their general development. This is a simple model of how the preschool teacher can give inspiration to other parents and also use it as a model for contact. They can also keep the recipe in a book and use it in other contexts.

The preschool needs more parental involvement. Preschool ought to invite parents to participate in developing different activities. Activities are sharing processes between children, parents and educators and the results create relationships between them. (Flising, 1996). Flising also states there is a great deal to gain from parents feeling confident in the work of the preschool and in how school staff succeeds in clarifying the content and work. To be clear in your approach means not only to show what you do but also why you do what you do and what you want to achieve with your policies. Clear professional roles and clear parental roles are important components in achieving cooperation (Flising, 1996).

### **7.1.2. Telling a story**

During my study period in the preschool, I tried several times to be there in the afternoon as well as in the morning, to talk and have more contact with parents, teachers and children to learn more about their ways of looking at parental involvement. One day, I spoke with the mother of a girl named Sandra. She had been one of the parents who responded to my interview questions. I mentioned the letter I sent home about different activities that possibly the parents would be willing to share when participating in class. I asked if she could choose one of the activities. Her answer was that she wanted to do something for Sandra. She wanted to read a story for the children. After contacting the preschool teacher, we agreed on a day for this story telling. Both parents came along with Sandra, who looked very happy and proud. The parents come from two different countries. All children were waiting for a surprise. After an introduction Sandra’s mom began:

*Once upon a time there was a girl who went to the forest and she came to the bears’ house. There were three bowls of honey in it. The girl tasted the honey. The first was too hot. The second was too cold. The small one was perfect so she ate it all!*



The following day the teachers had reproduced the fairytale with the children. Then the children were encouraged to tell the story and draw pictures from different parts of it according to their views and level of ability. When the story ended, another child from another country recognized it and said that her mother used to tell her the same story. The children thanked Sandra's mother with this song:

*The itzy bitsy spider went up the water spout.  
Down came the rain, and washed the spider out.  
Out came the sun, and dried up all the rain.  
And the itzy bitsy spider went up the spout again.*

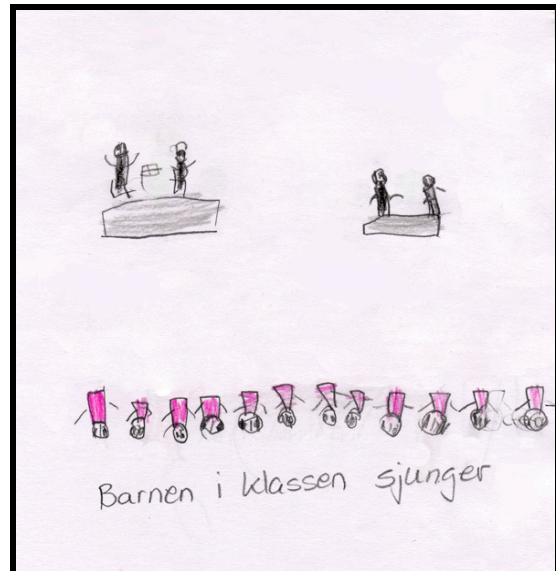
After this, Sandra's mom sang the same song in her language. I asked if the father knew the song in his language too, but he didn't. Suddenly the preschool teacher presented a book consisting of songs in different languages. In the book, we found the same song in the father's language. He sang the song with the same melody. Even I could contribute with something similar in my language. It was an exciting experience for the children. Afterwards two other children wanted to sing songs in their languages. They experienced joy and fun throughout these activities.

### 7.1.3. Building a bridge between the home and the preschool



”Building a bridge between the home and the preschool” was one of the themes I arranged for the parents’ evening. This time I focused on the children's talents, when I sent the invitation to families. Almost all parents responded that they would participate in the meeting. Only one family was not able to come. In addition to the pedagogue, the school manager and the leisure time teacher attended the meeting. Thus, at this parents’ evening 35 persons participated. The program consisted of different activities where the children would

perform in one way or another. For some children who could read, I had planned that they would read a short story.



Other activities involved three girls who would sing together. A third activity applied to all children, where the boys as a group were to sing for the girls and the girls would respond, and then they would go hand in hand while they would sing together.

In the last part of the program, a parent arranged a pedagogical performance. The activity was called "Building a bridge between the home and the school". A mother had planned that every two or three families, including the children, were to form a “bridge” in the limited time of five minutes. The headmaster and other pedagogues participated in different family groups. Each group was given directions of how they could build the bridge using paper, tape and needles. During the time they talked and gave information to each other, practically supported each other, and emotionally supported all group members (e.g. “Give me five!” when the idea was successful). They were generally very creative by, for example, giving fantasy names to the bridges. When the time was up, they looked at each other’s contributions. The children set scores for the adult’s work. All groups had a lot of fun together. It was a model that encouraged different families to cooperate with each other.

The meeting ended with a song that all the children sang for the parents. The headmaster was really surprised that so many parents participated in the evening. All the families were happy and satisfied, except one family who did not want to participate in the activity. When I wanted to introduce them to building the bridge together with another family, the father said, "Too many cooks spoil the broth." They sat by themselves in a corner and followed the whole evening with the group but did not leave the meeting. This form of activity can support an intercultural perspective among the children as well parents and improve their personal skills.

#### **7.1.4. Play together**

During my studies, I tried to be at the leisure house three days a week in the afternoons, where parents pick up their children from the preschool. The aim was to have a dialogue with parents, to find diverse relationships with them and prepare preschool for a good parent interaction. During my talks with a mother, I asked her if she would make a play for the children, where the children would be in emotional closeness and in a friendly atmosphere. Her answer was "Of course, I will do it". We decided on the time and like previous activities, I chose the time 8.45-9.15 am.

She prepared the activity in the playground for all children. At first she tried to identify all children with their names. Then she explained what she would do. She divided all the children in two groups. The children called themselves the red team and the blue team. The play began with joy and small tasks in which two children represented their team and fought towards the goal. The play continued until all the children had carried out the task. It went on with other tasks over time and all the children competed against each other with much laughter and joy.

At the end of the game the mother said that the preschool had never asked her to participate before. She obviously wants to be more present in the preschool, but at the same time she doesn't want disturb the pedagogues' work. I said that I believe in more adult being present in the preschool; it gives more variety of activities, and a closer relationship between parents and preschool staff. I continued that the more adults the better for children, they will be happier, they have more adults to trust. The single mothers, who have no partner to help them organize different activities and also are recently arrived immigrants with totally different cultures, would appreciate to make contacts with other parents after preschool. The preschool is one of the main neighboring arenas outside of the home that these families encounter. These activities could build a network even outside of preschool.

Usually, parents are not regular participants in most of the preschools. But there is reason to believe that the results of these contacts give good relationships between all partners; i e between child-child, child-pedagogue and pedagogue-parents.

#### **7.1.5. Plant the seed**



It was 8.45 am, and today the activity was to "plant the seed" together. Another mother would like to show the children how they could plant the seed. This activity was also interesting. The mother showed how vegetables grow. She showed the whole process and I helped her with the language as it was difficult for her to explain. All the materials were placed on a table. Children came up in pairs to the table and took soil, which they put in a small flowerpot. Then they placed the seeds from the plant "Flower over day" in it. They taped their names on

the flowerpot, watered it and then washed their hands. As they sat down, the next two children came up to the table. The children had a great time together. They felt it was exciting. Every day, different experiences of a child create a unique culture, like a new page in her/his own book.

There were other children who asked me: “When will it be my mom’s turn?” “What would we do?” I told them there are a lot of fun things we can find out to do, for example playing a music instrument, dancing, singing, arranging an excursion, go skating, go together to the Botanical garden, do some magic play, help arranging Open-House with a special theme like United Nations Day. We could also ask if the children themselves have some specific interest like fishing, painting, photography, sport, etc. The children would be proud to have parents who participate in preschool, proud of their own culture and to learn from the challenges of cultural differences. The staff would also become familiar with various competences and cultural traditions, as brought along and communicated by the parents. The staff would be challenged to ask parents questions they haven’t asked before. Each time staff and parents meet, cooperation would come easier. Relationships where educators, parents and children care about each other are created.

## **7.2. Results - Part B**

### **7.2.1. Staff reflections**

To evaluate the various parent activities as described above, in relation to my research question I wrote to the educators and asked for some responses and reflections related to the activities. I summarized the six activities and asked them to answer the following questions:

- 1 - Would these activities help parents and preschool staff to establish better contacts? How?*
- 2 - Would the preschool become more transparent for the parents through these activities?*
- 3 - Would activities like these help creating a stronger feeling of security among parents?*
- 4 - Would two-way communication between parents and teachers improve? In what ways?*
- 5 - Do you have suggestions for other things that might improve the cooperation among parents and pedagogues?*

The reflections and answers from the preschool staff to my questions around the organized parent activities were overwhelmingly positive. “These activities opened new doors for parents”, argued one pedagogue. “It became easier for them to come to the preschool. Now they realized that there must not be a special occasion for them to come to the preschool. They are welcome to come and visit us when they want”. “In the future, we must inform the parents about this very clearly already during the adjustment period when the children start here.” “We need to show that the preschool needs close cooperation with the parents”, said the preschool teacher. “At the start of a new semester, we can tell the parents for example that twice a month we expect some of you to come to class and do something for the children; thus, maybe we will succeed in having more parents spending time with us. We can write in a welcoming way to them, for example: ‘If you have a day off, we would be glad if you would make one of the following activities’. Then we can come up with a few tips to them.”

Just two weeks after my study project ended, the teachers themselves arranged a party in the school-yard for these children, together with other classes in whose rooms the children will

begin next semester. They invited me to the party, too. They had arranged a "quiz walk" containing ten questions that the children were supposed to answer with the help of their parents. The questions were selected from areas the children were familiar with. The plan was that parents and children moved around in the school area to find the questions and then come back with their answers to the judge. Those who answered correctly received a small prize.

Each family had brought a picnic basket, which contained various food and cakes from different countries. Two or three families were sitting together on the lawn, or on a bench. They invited each other to share food. The pedagogues had not expected that so many parents would attend, and there were also several grandparents participating. It was a very successful party. In my opinion, it would have been even better if families walked around in pairs, answering the questions together. This activity could be developed further for next year. It represents a good opportunity for the preschool to help parents forming supportive social network among themselves.

### **7.2.2. Parent reflections**

Sara's and Lea's mothers happened to meet at the preschool. The latter says to the former about her last Sunday; "I baked with my daughter according to your cookies recipe. We had a good time together". She thanked her and said: "The next time it would be nice if our girls baked together. Could I call you and ask your daughter to come to us?" She went on to say: "Me and two other moms meet sometimes in the yard; we sit there while our children play together. Would you be with us?" Sarah's mother, who baked the cookies, thought her cookies had magical effects, which led to an opening for contacts with other parents. She also thought contacts with the educators were easier after she had participated in some activities in class. She felt safer when she asked questions to the teachers. She continued: "I am divorced and living with my two children in Gothenburg, and it feels as if we now have expanded our small family."

I also tried to collect more systematic evidence of possible effects of the parent activities by asking the leisure-time pedagogue to interview the parents with a set of questions formulated by me. I felt that asking somebody else to do the interviewing would make the data more reliable, since the parents knew that I was the one who had organized the activities, and maybe they would feel tempted to give me more positive answers just to be kind to me.

This is how the seven parents responded to the questions, as reported by the leisure-time pedagogue:

**Question 1:** *Can these activities help parents and preschool establish better contacts? Give reasons why!*

P1: Yes. It gives better contact, we know each other better and parents feel more secure for their children.

P2: These activities help the parents understand Swedish school culture better. Parents may not have been given school education of their own or not with same economy and social status. So, to be involved in these activities will give a positive effect.

P3: This is good. We can go out of problems, know each other. Sometimes it is good to have the children in the meeting and spend time with the other parents.

P4: Before, we didn't have much contact, but now we know each other. These activities are like breaking the ice between the parents and school, children's presence will give easier contacts.

P5: Of course. Absolutely, we meet other children, other parents and teachers, which enables better relationships.

P6: Yes. It seems to be good. It will give way to talk, discuss and agree.

P7: I don't know. I have just been involved in the activity 'Build the bridge'. But I am sure that is very good. Communication between parents and school is always good.

**Question 2:** *Can the preschool provide feelings of openness of these activities for the parents?*

P1: Yes. More contact with personnel gives more secure feelings for the parents.

P2: I think so. Parents get answers and will understand the base of the Swedish schools. This would make us feel secure for children and a positive environment.

P3: Important, if we are involved in school activities, then we feel better. It is not good to have activities both in preschool and in leisure time. School should plan better, so that school activities will not collide with other activities.

P4: Yes. These activities always give a good feeling (consciously or unconsciously)

P5: Of course. We feel a welcoming to the school.

P6: Really. I think so. I felt more welcome.

P7: I feel good.

**Question 3:** *Could this lead to a greater feeling of security among parents?*

P1: Yes, parents know what the children do and experience during the day. Since I have had more contact with the preschool, I now have more words when I talk to my child. When I ask about relationships between peers, I now can link each name to a specific individual. It is clear that I have more knowledge about what is going on in my child's daily life while he is not with me.

P2: It is good to have a direct contact instead of just letters.

P3: Yes. As parents we don't have contact with each other usually. But now, I have contacts and I know with whom my child is playing and spending time with.

P4: Not more secure but more openness. I feel that I am not isolated.

P5: It is good to know other parents and unconsciously it gives a good feeling.

P6: It concerns both parents and children. My child was very happy that we were all in school together; he talked a few days about it.

P7: This is good, to know other children along with their families.

**Question 4:** *Can parents and preschool enhance two-way communications with such activities?*

P1: Of course, if we have more contact, we would have better communication. We would be able to talk about both positive and negative aspects.

P2: Yes. More parents in school increase collaboration.

P3: Good. These activities will help us to make two way communications.

P4: Of course, we should absolutely meet each other in school.

P5: Very important.

P6: Very good to have communication between both sides.

P7: I don't know. Teachers are afraid to have conflicts with immigrant children. Every child should be treated in the same way, it shouldn't matter whether they are Swedes or immigrants. Swedes are in minority in this school.

**Question 5:** *Can the development of these informal contacts do good in home and school development?*

P1: It depends on the preschool class and the parents. Everyone should give his or her participation.

P2: Yes. Social development improves by understanding other cultures, which improves children's development.

P3: Yes. I think so. If I have more opportunity to meet other parents, I would have someone to exchange thoughts concerning my child with. I could pay attention to my children's needs together with other parents.

P4: We should improve our contact and do funny activities for the children in the classroom.

P5: Yes. This is a good start. This improves during the time. More relationships give better contact. It shouldn't be more complicated, it should just be a cup of tea or coffee and to share some conversations to communicate with each other.

P6: These activities will help to develop the home and school activities during the time.

**Question 6:** *Is there anything you suggest that could improve collaboration between parents and preschool?*

P1: More activities with teachers, parents and children need to be arranged. The parents should be involved in planning. It is important to know each other and meet each other once a month. The meeting should be planned in advance. This meeting should be sometimes with children and sometimes without. I would appreciate to have a bigger place for the meetings.

P2: More contact with home is very important. Information, both positive and negative, to parents about everything increases relationship. Contacts in every means (sms, booklet, telephone, et c) are appreciable. Activities like open discussions between parents and schools. We can ask questions, sometimes in a large group and sometimes in a small. If parents know about how the school works will give a more secure feeling, which gives effect to the children's development. When we ask some questions, the pedagogues can suggest some tips. This context helps us to take care about everything.

P3: I don't know.

P4: It's a good start to have these activities to have more contact with school. It is a signal of welcoming each other. We would not like to do it by ourselves, but if the school lists the activities, we welcome it.



P5: No answer

P6: I recommend the grill evening, which will be very nice. All activities, which made the children and parents come to school, are good.

P7: This is a good start. And it is good to meet each other.

### 7.3. Conclusions - Part B

By introducing a number of parental activities in the preschool, I wanted to find out if it was possible to create an environment which facilitates active participation and parental involvement. I also tried to encourage the parents themselves to come up with ideas for such activities, with the idea that this would give the parents a chance to use their own skills and interests, and hereby feel more comfortable in the situations and more sure about themselves in the preschool. Baking cookies, reading stories, singing songs and playing games were example of such activities suggested by parents, where they also brought their own cultural background and traditions to the preschool and the interactions with the children, parents and staff members.

Many of the activities in my study drew on aesthetic cultural education. Every day a child's different experiences create a unique culture, like a new page in her/his own book. Young children as active learners in varied situations accumulate different experiences. Young children's expressions are multifaceted. Through different creative activities, children achieve different skills. All multi-sensory experiences of touch, sound, hearing, smelling and feeling engage them to gain opportunities to build a rich aesthetic culture. A child's physical, mental and emotional development improves. Young children climb to a new level of awareness with e.g. drawing, playing, and drama. Aesthetic Cultural Education is about quality of experiences for young children that help children reach a holistic development. Children explore different ways of thinking through ACE; for instance problem-solving increases, their flexibility to make up a sentence grow, and language development is taken to a new level. The child gains power and control in mastering the surrounding world (Booyeun, 2004).

It was my own spontaneous observations when I participated in the various activities organized, that the children and the parents enjoyed doing these things together in the preschool, and that the staff members were very enthusiastic about these "experiments". My more systematic attempts to evaluate the experiences, by asking a number of questions to the teachers and parents also supported my impressions. The teachers expressed their feelings that these activities, and the fact that the parents were active both in suggesting and carrying out the activities, had opened previously closed doors and created a feeling among the parents as well as the teachers that parents would be able to contribute to the daily activities in the preschool and that the children would benefit a lot from this.

The parents were saying the same things, when asked about their feelings about these activities. Getting to know other parents better and also understand the Swedish school culture better, were recurring themes in their reflections about this parental participation.



They also pointed at the importance in getting to know the other children that their son or daughter was playing with and get a better understanding of what life in the preschool was like for the children. To feel welcome in the preschool, and getting to know other parents and teachers better created a feeling of security which was

very much appreciated. I also noticed, during the weeks that followed the activities, that many parents showed up, and stayed for a while in the preschool, or stopped and talked to other parents outside of the preschool and arranged to meet with their children outside of preschool hours, an observation which was confirmed by the pedagogues, who saw this as a very positive change in parental involvement.

## **8. Final Discussion**

It came as no surprise to learn through the interviews with parents and preschool staff that amount, intensity and variation in parental involvement were related to a large number of often interacting factors. By using the theoretical perspectives of Bourdieu and Bronfenbrenner, structural factors at all levels in a system theoretical model entered into the picture. Level of education, employment situation, family structure, social class, immigrant status, social network support, family history and language skills were among the factors that facilitated or made it more difficult for the parents to be involved with their children's everyday activities in the preschools. Lack of time, transportation or babysitters at home might prevent parents from visiting parent meetings in the evening, limited knowledge of the Swedish language might prevent useful communication with preschool teachers. My results confirmed previous research with larger groups of parents, but also added valuable information about parent and staff perspectives on parental involvement in the particular preschool I was studying.

Results from the interviews also made clear that communication problems between parents and staff members were not only related to language difficulties. Different backgrounds and cultural history of parents and preschool staff created different expectations of what was the role of the family or the preschool in the education and care of the child. Some parents felt that it was the responsibility of the preschool to foster and educate the child, some of the teachers felt that the parents should try harder to understand the rules and regulations of the preschool activities. Cultural differences need to be acknowledged to a higher extent. Research has shown that parents and pedagogues often lack sufficient knowledge about each other when it comes to cultural backgrounds, or different habits and values. Newly arrived immigrant families often have very limited, if any, knowledge about the preschool system in Sweden. Parents' personal history and their experiences during childhood and while growing up, create considerable differences in their conceptions and understanding of how preschool teachers and schools should be and what should be taught there. Such differences between Swedish preschools and other countries, for instance, is that in Swedish preschools one tries to get children to become independent and make them think for themselves, and to see the child as an active and competent individual, who is thinking independently and critically, and who is taking a lot of own responsibility (Skolverket, 2001).

It was a reassuring result from the interviews, however, that the parents were generally happy with the preschool, and felt that their children liked to be there and learned a lot, and that they trusted the preschool staff as competent and well-educated persons taking good care of their children. Without this basic trust, I think it would have been much more difficult to start and organize the parental activities which made up the second part of my study.

In Part B of the study I tried to find out if it was possible for the preschool to create an environment which facilitated active participation and parental involvement in the preschool activities. Six different activities were organized and analyzed in terms of possible positive effects on parental involvement. I wanted to find out if and how parents, children and educators changed when they participated in these roles, relations and activities, and if the links between the home and the preschool could be strengthened?

I think that the results of these experiments showed how easily a preschool could open the doors for new immigrant parents and increase their participation in daily activities with children and staff. The study showed how the situation can be improved in the form of dialogues, "give and take", or in other words "a two-way communication" between educators

and parents. A lack of cultural tools, different norms and limited language skills had earlier prevented parents from taking these first steps.

The results pointed to several ways of improving parental involvement. In the first activity, "Sarah's cookie", the recipe was sent home to all families. This activity created opportunities for parents to contact each other. "Telling a story" created interactions among children, parents and educators, where children were in focus. "Playing together" focused on interactions between children and other parents. "Build a bridge between home and preschool" created an environment where adults as well as children were participating. It brought much joy to all. "Planting the seed" gave a sense of connection to the mother, as she came several times afterwards to water the plants.

The results show that by developing the use of creative activities and interpersonal skills among the professionals, parents will have more opportunities to be involved in preschool. The goal was to build a bridge between the parents and the preschool and to show the parents the meaning of democracy but also to point out the needs of the child and highlight that their child's early years will not be repeated. Parents' knowledge about the child might be sufficient in regards to caring for the child's basic needs such as feeding, protection, etc, but they sometimes lack the knowledge of how to raise a child in a new culture. There is reason to believe that a partnership approach between the preschool and the parents could help the parents understand the education system and come closer to their children. At the same time we should also keep in mind that with increased parental involvement educators can learn a lot about a new culture from the parents. The educators need to have the capacity to think in new and different ways with more understanding of different cultural backgrounds, when they are working with people from the world's different corners. Preschool teachers and leisure time educators can create an environment where parents feel welcome as active participants in what happens to their children at the preschool. Their presence at the preschool creates meaningful roles, relationships and activities together. The preschool should not invite parents only when something negative happens to the individual child. If this is the case, the parents often interpret criticism of their children by the teachers as criticism of themselves, not only for what they have done or not done as parents, but also as criticism of themselves as persons (Flising, 1996).

"Build a bridge" or "Plant the seed" opened new doors for parents. It became easier for parents to come to preschool. They saw that there must not be a special occasion for them to come to preschool. They may come from time to time and participate. "In the future, we must inform parents as clearly as possible during the first few weeks of the children's preschool attendance that parental involvement is welcome" was a conclusion made by one of the teachers.

There were many positive effects of the organized activities based on parental involvement. For example, there were some children who had irregular attendance and they were very tired in the morning. These children came to preschool on time, after we had the discussion about setting limits for bedtime at a parents' evening. The staff agreed that it would be easier for parents to set limits in everyday events if they have more contact with the other parents through these activities. Children showed that they liked it when other parents visited them in the classroom, and they looked forward to seeing more activities. Activities for children in interaction with adults in a friendly network give positive effects on the development of both parents and children.

In addition, the pedagogues noticed that during this project, that parents who never visited them before, started to visit more regularly. Their participation helped bring out the children's talents through the projects the parents introduced. It was also good that there was the possibility that parents could bring their small children to the parents' evening. "We will try to continue with this in the future. The parents feel more closeness; more comfortable and safe", one teacher concluded.

The results indicate that these parents will continue to participate, cooperate and have influence in the preschool if these contacts with staff can become a habit. Research has shown that parental attendance at preschool enhances children's identity through protecting their cultural heritage (Bouakaz, 2007). The acceptance of cultural differences will be respected in every culture and will help improve the well-being of the children. Parents' social capital increases, since it enables them to build networks with other parents and build knowledge about the Swedish school system in practice. Educators have the opportunity to get to know parents, the family's original life situation and relationships within the family before their arrival in Sweden.

The curriculum, (Lpfö 98, Lpo 94 & Lgr 11 chapter 1-2). emphasizes that "a prerequisite for children and parents to have the opportunity of exercising influence is that the preschool is clear about its goals and the contents of its work". The findings from the present study present educators with tools to use in order to give parents this opportunity. The findings also suggests that the preschool staff should take the initiative and create the space for dialogue with parents, and find and recognize children' special needs from this dialogue. "Social capital is about knowing the rules of the game" (Bouakaz, 2007). The preschool should also increase its efforts to give parents information and advice about how society works and how to get what they are missing. The results might be an increasing sense among immigrant parents of control over their own lives. Information must be given in small portions and repeated at various times. It should give practical advice that parents can use in various activities for children as a reinforcer in the parental role (Godani, 2004).

The school at which the present study was carried out was formerly a member of the Home and School Association. According to the school manager, the Home and School Association filled its functions quite well. In the study, teachers expressed that they had little energy to work on parent interaction. They felt that they had long working-days and that their work situation was already burdened by many different tasks. Children's groups have become larger and larger, the number of personnel has been reduced. Maybe this school should take the initiative to helping the Home and School Association to be formed again with special focus on parent interactions outside of school activities. The organization might assist in increasing parental interaction in practice, to expand parents' social capital by organizing parents' courses, excursions together with pedagogues, building network among parents, and arranging so that each week a parent comes into the class to do something for the children in the same way as it worked when I organized different challenges for the parents during my study. The pedagogical work was not interrupted. The activities were carried out in agreement and support with the preschool teacher.

In summary, I think that it is important with information to children and children's parents about the Swedish school's value base, knowledge, vision and work, as well as about expectations and roles in school demands for developing well-functioning parental involvement. The results from the present study show that this work is a challenge for educators because of cultural differences, but that the rewards are enormous in that involvement enhances communication, and creates better working conditions for children and

adults. The study also shows that the steps needed, in terms of creating activities that enable involvement, do not require great resources in terms of time and money, but can be integrated in the daily activities of the preschool.

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## Appendix A

### Hej mamma eller pappa!

Jag heter Saedeh Amini går en universitetsutbildning i pedagogik. Under våren kommer jag att skriva en uppsats om föräldrasamverkan i förskolan.

Är du intresserad av att berätta om hur du ser på samarbetet med ditt barns förskola och på vilket sätt du kan vara med att påverka det som händer på förskolan?

Dina personuppgifter och vårt samtal är anonymt. Informationen och diskussionen mellan oss kommer endast att användas för den här studien.

Samtalet tar ca 30-40 minuter. Behöver du tolk, pratar vi via någon som kan ditt modersmål. Jag tackar för den tid du lägger ner att komma till förskolan och svarar på frågorna.

Med hjälp av dig kan värdefull kunskap samlas in som kan användas till att förbättra förskolans samarbete med er föräldrar.

Hälsningar

Saedeh Amini

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Hi Mom or Dad!

My name is Saedeh Amini. I am taking a university degree in pedagogy. In the spring, I will write an essay on parental involvement in preschool.

Are you interested telling about how you look at the cooperation with your child's preschool and how you can join to influence what happens at preschool?

Your personal information and interview are anonymous. The information and discussion between us will only be used for this study.

The interview takes about 30-40 minutes. If you need an interpreter; we will talk through someone in your native language.

I appreciate the time you spend to come to the nursery and answer questions.

With your help, valuable knowledge can be collected that can be used to improve cooperation between the preschool and parents.

Regards,

Saedeh Amini

پدر یا مادر گرامی

اینجانب سعیده امینی هستم که در حال حاضر مشغول نوشتن مقاله ای علمی در خصوص همکاری بین والدین با کودکانها میباشم.

آیا شما علاقمند به شرکت در یک تبادل نظر در مورد نحوه همکاری خود با مهد کودک فرزندتان هستید؟ مدت زمان این مکالمه حدود نیم ساعت است که در محل مهد کودک فرزندتان انجام میگردد. کلیه اطلاعات شخصی شما و مسائل مورد بحث کاملا محرمانه بوده و فقط جهت درج در مقاله و بصورت آماری استفاده خواهد شد.

ما به کمک همدیگر میتوانیم اطلاعات ارزشمندی در خصوص نحوه همکاری بین والدین و کودکانها جمع آوری نمایم که از آنها جهت بهتر شدن سطح آموزش و پرورش در این نهادها استفاده خواهد شد.

قبلا از همکاری شما صمیمانه سپاسگزارم.  
با احترام

سعیده امینی

---

تحية الي اولياء الامور الامهات والاباء

انا اسمي سعیده اميني ادرس الان دورة تربوية عن مرحلة الحضانة او ما قبل المدرسة . وسوف اكتب موضوعا عن تفاعل الالهل وتأثيرهم الايجابي في المدرسة ... اذا عندكم اهتمام او افكار تدعم هذا التعاون فسيكون حوارنا و كل المعلومات الشخصية اثناء الحوار سرية ..... اذا كنتم بحاجة لترجمان فنستطيع تدبر ذلك الامر ..... سابقا أتوجه بخالص الشكر لتعاونكم.

فيما يتعلق

سعیده اميني

---

Hola mami o papi!

Mi nombre es Sahedeh Amini, graduada en pedagogía. Durante la primavera escribiré un ensayo sobre la participación de los padres en la educación preescolar.

Estarían interesados en contarme cómo ven ustedes la coopeación con la escuela preescolar de sus hijos en esta etapa, y de qué manera piensan que pueden participar para influir sobre lo que ocurre en la escuela

Su información personal y nuestras llamadas son anónimas. La información y el resultado del debate sólo serán utilizados con fines académicos.

La duración de la llamada será de 30-40 minutos. En caso de necesitar un intérprete llamaremos a uno en su lengua materna.

Aprecio el tiempo que puedan tomarse para acercarse a la escuela preescolar y responder las preguntas.

Con la ayuda de su valioso conocimiento se podrá trabajar para mejorar la cooperación con los padres en la etapa preescolar.

Atentamente,  
Saedeh Amini

## **Appendix B**

### **Questions for the parents in the study**

- 1-What did you know about the preschool before your child started?
- 2-What is your opinion about your child attending preschool?  
Do you feel that you know what is going on in the preschool; what the children are doing; what the day looks like with routines such as eating, indoor/outdoor play; structured group activities, etc?
- 3-How did you find out about these things? Who informed you and how?
- 4-Would you like to know what is going on in the preschool? Which would be the best ways of informing you?
- 5-Do you often discuss with your child the things that happen in preschool?
- 6-What doesn't your child like about preschool?
- 7-In the preschool curriculum it is stated that "democratic development" is important. What do you think "democratic development" means?
- 8-Have you ever experienced misunderstandings or conflicts with the pre-school staff? What was the reason for that?
- 9-What do you think preschool expects of the parents?
- 10-Is parent involvement in pre-school important and useful?( If not, why not? If yes, why is it important?)
- 11-What does the concept of "collaboration" mean to you?

### **Questions for the educators in the study**

- 1- What does integration mean to you?
- 2-What are some obstacles between educators and parents with minority background with regard to limited language skills?
- 3- How could you increase a two-way-communication between the parents?
- 4- What steps can help you to get a better communication with these parents?
- 5- What resources should be available at your school so that you succeed in your communication with parents?
- 6- How can you implement democratic ideas with parents?
- 7- What strategies do you suggest to get parents more involved?
- 8- If you are going to guide parents to democratic thinking, what is most important to you?