



FACULTY OF EDUCATION
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PARENT ENGAGEMENT IN SWEDISH PRESCHOOLS

A narrative inquiry through the conceptual lens
of proximal processes

Tina Elisabeth Yngvesson

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Level:	Second cycle
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Supervisor:	Professor Susanne Garvis
Examiner:	Professor Adrianna Nizinska

Abstract

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- Aim:** There is an overall heavy emphasis on establishing strong teacher-parent relationships in the Swedish National Curriculum for Preschools and parent engagement in this regard, is considered important for reasons such as promoting child well-being-, healthy development-, socialisation- and learning through play. The central target of inquiry in this study was thus to investigate children- and adults' understanding of parent engagement in Swedish preschools through the conceptual lens of proximal processes and explore how this may or may not affect child well-being and development
- Theory:** The importance of understanding children's learning as embedded in the social, cultural and family contexts in which it occurs contributes to the overall consensus that children will, in a well-being-, development- and learning perspective, do better with parents who are actively engaged in their children's pedagogical life. Thus, designing pathways in order to develop the communication between home and preschool is considered a significant factor in children's developmental outcomes. Against this background, the thesis applied the theoretical framework of the Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, adding also the 'bioecological' aspect in order to incorporate proximal processes in both execution and analysis. The theory defines six layers of environment, each which are considered imperative in understanding the wholeness of a child's development.
- Method:** The study assumed a transformative worldview and a narrative design was applied in order to determine how the participants personally experience parent engagement. Stories were collected through interviews, then assembled into case-studies which highlighted the interconnectedness and bi-directional nature of the stories, illuminating also story constellations as method of analysis.
- Results:** Through identifying harmonies and contradictions in the stories, the thesis has investigated the construct of children's-, parents- and preschool teachers *understanding* of parent engagement in the Swedish preschool and from that perspective identified where the stories align and where they contradict, thus broadening the academic debate in regard to how parents and teachers can better prepare themselves for the dialogues within the micro-societies that their children's immediate world consists of.

List of abbreviations

ALLEA	All European Academies
EACEA	Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency
EC	European Commission
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ICDI	International Child Development Initiatives
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.
Lpfö 98	Curriculum for Preschool as revised 1998
PERFAR	The Population Europe Resource Finder and Archive
PPCT	Process, Person, Context and Time
UN	United Nations

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Note to reader:

Throughout the thesis, the general term used for the person(s) responsible for a child or children, is 'parent(s)'. Where the child is referred to by gender, the singular 'he' is used. The reason for this is that all child participants are boys.

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Thank you.

To the Children, without You these stories would never have been told - May your voices never be silenced.

To the Mothers, for taking the time for what matters most and for trusting me with your boys.

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To Niclas, Oliver & Lukas, for the madness and the love.

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To Vincent, for beautiful symbiosis.

To myself, for being true.

This is water.

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In order to develop normally, a child requires progressively more complex joint activity with one or more adults who have an irrational emotional relationship with the child. Somebody's got to be crazy about that kid. That's number one. First, last and always.

Urie Bronfenbrenner.

Chapter One

1.1 Background

Fostering children is a task ascribed to every society, everywhere. Albeit exercised in a multitude of different ways, children are born, fostered and turned into adults over time all over the world every day. In Sweden, the task of fostering children into adults, has long since been one ascribed to both the state *and* the individual family. Since the 1970's, Swedish childcare and preschool system have become one of the primary foundations upon which Swedish family policy is built (Gunnarsson, Korpi & Nordenstam, 1999; Hiilamo, 2004), ensuring that the fostering of children is a two-pronged task divided between the home- and the preschool. Thus, childhood has in many respects, become a state affair where protecting children from the potential dangers of unsupervised freedom, as well as negative influences from other family members, is a shared responsibility between state and family (Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001; Karlsson & Perälä-Littunen, 2017). This heavy focus on engagement between home and preschool makes relevant a sort of management of the divide between the two.

Encouragement of the Swedish approach to common fostering, is strongly supported by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which states children's right to respect, to dignity, to make informed decisions and to self-determination (Söderbäck, Coyne & Harder, 2010). In the year 1990 Sweden approved the Convention, meaning also that the state was obliged to follow it. However, whilst the existing Swedish legislation is very much in line with the stipulations of the Convention, it has not yet been made law. In the year 2018, in an effort to ensure the legal rights of children, the Swedish Parliament voted in favour of the Government's proposal, the amendments coming into force on the 1st of January 2020 (Riksdag¹, 2018). Thus, the provision of quality ECEC as provided from government institutions means that early learning educators will have a legal responsibility to ensure children's rights and that the child is given forum for-, as well as encouraged and enabled to make their view known in all issues that affect them. As will become evident throughout this thesis, parent engagement in preschool is such an issue. Before proceeding however, the following section will in brief present the history of the Swedish preschool, as well as a chronological overview, from the very early stages in the year 1836 up until the present time.

¹ Swedish Parliament

1.2 A brief history of the Swedish preschool

Early 20th century Sweden saw the birth of preschool education, which originally was privately organised and based on various philanthropic initiatives from women (Hartman, 2005). Later on, preschool pioneers would be inspired by the German educator Friedrich Fröbel (1782-1852) and the *Kindergarten* movement, however the task of caring for young children was not yet considered to be an area of responsibility for either local authorities, or the state (Hartman, 2005). During the 1960s, the Swedish state took some important initiatives in early childhood education and soon the preschool system became a significant pillar in the mechanism for ensuring that women joined the working forces, hence its role in Swedish family policy was established (Hartman,2005; Lundqvist & Roman 2008; PERFAR, 2014; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016; Tunberger & Sigle-Rushton, 2011). Today the vast majority of all Swedish children, regardless of socio-economic status, attend preschool (Hartman, 2005) and affordable childcare has become every family's right. See figure 1 for a chronological overview.

Figure 1: A chronological overview of the history of the Swedish preschool

Assembled from *The Politics of Preschool – intentions and decisions underlying the emergence and growth of the Swedish preschool*, by Barbara Martin Korpi, The Ministry of Education and Research (2002):

1836	The first toddlers' schools started in Nora and Stockholm
1854	The first baby crib, Kungsholmen's baby crib, opens in Stockholm
1896	Private kindergartens open in Stockholm after the German model (Kindergarten)
1899	The sisters Ellen Moberg (1874-1955) and Maria Moberg (1877-1948) opens a kindergarten in his orphanage in Norrköping. The sisters later ran preschool teacher training.
1902	The first Swedish child welfare legislation will
1935	Alva Myrdal's book "City Kids" comes out.
1943	After a government commission decided on government grants for schools and creches
1972	Children Preschool Commission becomes clear
1975	The municipalities are required to be responsible for a preschool for all six-year-olds
1991	The right of contribution to staff-run kindergartens are introduced
1995	The right of pre-school extended to one year of age
1998	A curriculum for preschool introduced and childcare moved from the Ministry of Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education, kindergarten becomes preschool.
2002	A maximum fee introduced.
2003	General preschool for four- and five-year olds are introduced.
2006	Freedom of establishment for schools and recreation centres
2010	General preschool for three-year olds are introduced.

Since the Curriculum for Preschool 1998, hereafter referred to as Lpfö 98, was introduced, the ambition of what parent engagement in the preschool is, was further defined and it was decided which rights parents have in terms of information, participation and influence. Moreover, the curriculum dictate that the responsibility of establishing contact and relationships between the home and the preschool, be placed on the preschool. However, the preschool teacher education was not reformed to accommodate this change and the understanding of what parent engagement is, was left vulnerable to interpretation (Flising, Fredriksson & Lund, 1996). Against this background and for the purpose of this thesis, parent engagement is defined as,

“motivated parent attitudes and behaviours intended to influence children’s educational well-being” (Christenson, 2004; Fantuzzo, Tighe & Childs, 2000, as cited in Uusimäki, Yngvesson, Garvis and Luukkainen, 2019).

Assuming this type of engagement refers to an interaction between the child’s home and preschool, parent engagement in preschool is thus an engagement concerning the well-being and development of the child, defining the interconnected relations between adults and children, as well as the negotiation of meaning and understanding therein.

1.3 Parent engagement in Swedish preschools

The Swedish national goals for ECEC are drawn up by the Swedish Parliament and the Swedish government. Preschool (children 1 – 6 years) and preschool-class (children 6 – 7 years) are regulated by the (a) Swedish National Agency for Education and the Education Act 2010, which sets out the general objectives for the education system as a whole, and (b) the Lpfö 98 where all principles, goals and values for early childhood education and care are specified. This curriculum was first introduced in 1998, revised in 2010 and translated to English in 2011. The Lpfö 98 has since been revised and will take effect on the first of July 2019. The most recent revised version has not yet been translated into English (National Agency for Education, 2018). According to the 2016 translation however, the role of the preschool is to: “supplement the home by creating the best possible preconditions for ensuring that each child’s development is rich and varied. The preschool’s work with children should thus take place in close and confidential co-operation with the home. Parents should have the opportunity within the framework of the national goals to be involved and influence activities in the preschool” (National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 13).

In Swedish educational culture it is assumed however, that although the majority of children spend up to 8 – 10 hours a day in preschool where early learning educators are responsible for the children’s pedagogical as well as social activities, the parents are responsible for each child’s upbringing and development. According to the Swedish National Agency for Education and EACEA, 84% of all children aged 1 – 5 years, 97% of all children aged 4 – 5 years and 98% of all children aged six are currently enrolled in the preschool system (National Agency for Education, 2016; EC, 2018) and although long-established, the domain between home and preschool in Sweden today is still one of constant negotiations between understanding various terminology-, personal background- and home-culture as well as views on how to raise and educate children (Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2017). This negotiation of parent engagement often results in a lack of clarity between the expectations and the reality of both parents and teachers.

Children, parents and teachers adhere to the same steering documents dictating their preschool practice. However, how this is translated into lived experience differs greatly depending on the participants different belief- and ideological templates. Children and adults, in their various roles, price tolerance and diversity of belief differently from one another. From a narrative approach, it cannot be possible to claim that only one is correct or that one holds more value than the others; the individual templates stem from the individual lives and are incorporated into a greater picture, where how we construct meaning from experience, is subjective and personal. Thus, as it’s overarching goal, the Lpfö 98, highlights not only the fundamental values and tasks of the preschool, but as previously mentioned, the importance of maintaining a close and confidential partnership with the home. The Lpfö 98 states that, “the guardian is responsible for their child’s upbringing and development” (p. 13), meaning that the parents should have the opportunity to, within the framework of the national goals, be engaged in their child’s well-being and development in preschool. According to Lpfö 98, a prerequisite for this however, is that children and parents are extended the opportunity of engagement and that the preschool is clear about its goals and what its work involves (National Agency for Education, 2016). This indicates that if a child is to receive a rich and varied life in preschool, the teachers as well as the parents must *strive toward establishing lasting relationships where not only the child’s well-being and development, is central, but where the child is also included in the dialogues concerning the child’s well-being and development.*

Since the introduction of Lpfö 98 in the year 1998, establishing relationships between home and preschool has been an area of responsibility assigned to the preschool and its staff. Thus, the guidelines dictate that in order to achieve such relationships, the teachers and work team are to divide the areas of responsibility as follows:

Teachers are responsible for:

- each child, together with their parents, receiving a good introduction to the preschool,
- for ensuring that parents receive opportunities to participate and exercise influence over how goals can be made concrete in pedagogical planning,
- for the content of the development dialogue, its structure and how it is carried out, and
- for involving guardians in assessing the work of the preschool (Lpfö 98, 2016).

The work team should:

- show respect for parents and be responsible for developing good relationships between staff of the preschool and the children's families,
- maintaining an on-going dialogue with guardians on the child's well-being, development and learning, both inside and outside the preschool, and holding annual development talks and,
- take due account of parents' viewpoints when planning and carrying out activities (Lpfö 98, 2016).

Source: Swedish National Agency for Education, Curriculum for the Preschool Lpfö 98, revised 2010, p. 13.

This suggests that a mutual engagement between the preschool and the home is central in the welfare state's task to provide Swedish children with the necessary prerequisites to maintain well-being and a healthy development within the sphere of ECEC. In a behavioural perspective, the above is what is in this thesis considered to be the development of one organism in relation to its environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), or development through proximal processes, to be specific, the principle asserts that behaviour evolves as a function of the interplay between person and environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Therefore, when investigating relations between human beings, both person and environment must be ascribed equal importance and emphasis. This emphasis on person and environment is central in Swedish preschools, as they are duty-bound to follow the national curriculum and must therefore actively promote both understanding and communication between the parents and the

teachers. The purpose of this is to build trust between the home and the preschool, in order to ensure a safe environment in which children are respectfully and as individuals. Furthermore, the task of the preschool is to also help families by supporting them in their role of bringing up and helping their children to grow and develop; further promoting the theory that the systems of a child's world is interconnected (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; National Agency for Education, 2016). In summary, the task of the preschool is thus, "working in cooperation with parents so that each child receives the opportunity of developing in accordance with their potential" (Lpfö 98, p. 4, as cited in Harju-Luukkainen, 2018).

As we have seen in this introductory chapter, since the establishment of the Swedish preschool, there has been a strong emphasis on engagement between home and preschool (National Agency for Education, 2004; 2016; PERFAR, 2014) and efforts are continuously made in order to manage the gap between the two (Lundqvist & Roman 2008; PERFAR, 2014; National Agency for Education, 2010; Tunberger & Sigle-Rushton, 2011). The ideological drive behind this is primarily to ensure that the preschool can execute its tasks as well as possible to ensure that the child and his or her parents feel safe. However, as we have highlighted, precisely what it is that defines and constitutes the aforementioned gap between interpretation and understanding, as well as how to bridge it, are central questions within educational research - particularly within the sphere of early learning (Karlsson & Perälä-Littunen, 2017) and herein lies the heart of this study.

In order to build on existing knowledge and identify that factors that affect the above, this thesis will look at the stories of the nine participants organised into three case studies each case representing a child, his mother and his teacher, with the overarching purpose of identifying where the children's- and adult's stories blend and where they contradict, both within the case and also across the three cases. This will be done both in regard to steering documents- and to the human voice through the conceptual lens of proximal processes - the latter which will be discussed in detail in chapter two, *theoretical framework*.

1.4 Research problem and relevance

Above we have seen that the domain between home and preschool in Sweden today is one of constant negotiations between understanding various terminology, personal background and home-culture as well as views on how to raise and educate children (Persson & Tallberg

Broman, 2017). In order to broaden this understanding, we add to this the policy perspective, defining the responsible agents for the Swedish preschool. These are the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket) and the Education Act (Skollagen 2010).

The Lpfö 98 statement about preschool responsibility, "for ensuring that parents receive opportunities to participate and exercise influence over how goals can be made concrete in pedagogical planning" (National Agency for Education, Lpfö 98, 2016, p. 13) however, is as open to interpretation today as it was when implemented in 1998. Thus, exactly what *the meaning* of 'receiving opportunities to participate and exercise influence' is (Harju-Luukkainen et al, 2018) and how this effects the development and well-being of the child, is not yet defined in any steering document or policy. Furthermore, the comprehension of what is best for the child in an ECEC perspective is largely driven by the different ideologies of citizens and of institutions in the welfare state; an accepted view is that parents and preschool teachers should maintain close communication encouraging parent engagement in order to preserve the child's best interest, whilst also adhering to the steering documents. In reality however, *how* this is to be achieved is a matter of interpretation on both the home- and the preschool's behalf and little or no investigation has been done into the Swedish context of children's and parents' understanding of what parent engagement *is* and why it is important for child well-being and development.

When exploring education, Jerome Bruner tells us that "there is nothing so practical as a good theory" (Dion, Samuelsson & Hundeide, 2010). However, research in the Swedish context is so sparse, theorizing the phenomenon is challenging. There is no mistaking the emphasis that the curriculum and policy documents place on parent engagement, a fact indicative of the importance of the inclusion of the child's and the parent's perspectives as stated in Lpfö 98. This brings us to the constant boundary work between the home and preschool. To exemplify, one of the primary curriculum-based policies in the Swedish system, is that each preschool works on *parent-active-schooling-in* period of approximately two weeks, where the parent accompanies the child to preschool and stays with the child for a predetermined period of time, each day. This period of time increases successively, until the child and the parent feel sufficiently safe and confident enough to venture that the child is ready to be left in the new environment without the parent. This principle "governs parents to take a more self-regulating

role in preschool from the beginning" (Markström & Simonsson, 2017), meaning this period of time together in the preschool is to lay the foundation of a long-term and mutual bond between home and preschool. This will be elaborated next, under 'purpose of study'.

1.5 Purpose of study

As Swedish children are usually introduced to preschool between 15-18 months of age, teachers are in accordance with Lpfö 98, responsible for ensuring that each family has a good induction period to their child's start at preschool (National Agency for Education, 2016; OECD, 2017). Although the curriculum allows for a level of flexibility in regard to interpretation, which in turn allows for the various municipalities and the individual preschools within the municipalities to adapt this induction to better suit their preschool's individual ideology and cultural template (Markström & Simonsson, 2017), this induction is assumed to be at the root of the child's well-being and development in preschool. This period of time allows parents and teachers to become familiar with one another for the benefit of the child, extending also an opportunity to the parent of becoming acquainted with the setting, potentially laying the foundation for understanding the child's soon-to-be extended environmental context.

Many studies have shown that positive engagement between the child's ECEC microenvironments have been of great benefit to the child's well-being and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1984; 1989; 1993; 1995a; 1995b; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1993; 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2005; 2006; Markström & Simonsson, 2017; Murray, McFarland-Piazza & Harrison, 2014; Patel & Corter, 2012; Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2017; Vlasov & Hujala, 2017) and a dominating discourse in educational research regarding parent engagement in ECEC is that the home and preschool should enter into an cooperation and act as close parties in the best interest of the child" (Markström & Simonsson, 2017). In reality however, how this is to be achieved is a matter of interpretation on both the home and the preschool's behalf. Furthermore, Markström and Simonsson (2017) bring our attention to previous research by Månsson (2015) whom have taken the point of departure from the perspective of the child and whom have studied how preschool children adapt emotionally and socially to the new environment. However, little or no investigation has been done into *children's understanding* of what parent engagement is and how this understanding reflects in their well-being or development.

With the parent being the primary caregiver and the child being the central agent in the preschool-environment, is it contradictory that such a small place has been allocated these perspectives at the metaphoric table. In response to the above, the pending thesis proposes to examine the construct of children's, parents and preschool teachers *understanding* of parent engagement in the Swedish preschool by investigating the phenomenon of parent engagement through the child's proximal processes, those of process, person, context and time (PPCT). By applying this approach, the study will investigate each element individually in terms of their interaction (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). The reason for this is that the same textual document can mean two entirely different things to two or more different people, given those people's different belief systems, personal ideologies and different ways of constructing and understanding meaning from lived experience (Wallace, 2009).

1.6 Research questions: the central targets of enquiry

There is an overall heavy emphasis on establishing strong teacher-parent relationships in the Swedish National Curriculum for Preschools and as we have seen thus far, parent engagement in preschool is considered important for reasons such as promoting child well-being and development, as well as socialization and learning through play (Widding & Berge, 2004; Johansson & Pramling, 2006; Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006). Against the backdrop of a home - preschool partnership perspective and through the conceptual lens of PPCT, the central research questions to be answered in this study are:

- 1) How do the three primary perspectives (child, parent, teacher) of the preschool – home partnership interconnect?
- 2) What does parent engagement in preschool mean to the child?

1.7 Limitations of study

The empirical results reported herein should be considered in the light of some limitations. The study comprises of three children, three mothers and three teachers, from whom narratives have been collected and placed in relation to one another. This study does not aim to provide a general view of-, nor does it hope to in any way claim a truth about the collective Swedish attitude-, interpretation- or understanding of parent engagement as stated in Lpfö 98. Central to this thesis are the children; how they understand parent engagement as compared to the adult understanding will provide an insight into children's lived experience as agents whose lives are,

from a very young age, divided between home and preschool, parents and teachers. The study therefore is in its very essence limited to nine voices. Below follows an outline of the various limitations in terms of 1) their possible impact on the quality of the findings, and 2) the thesis ability to provide answers to the stated central targets of inquiry.

The thesis investigates how the children's understanding relate to that of the adults within the same spheres or systems, meaning the thesis is representative of only nine voices. This is the first limitation. The second limitation is geographical and socio-economic. The three participating preschool divisions belong to the same network of principals and are situated within close philosophical/ideological and geographical vicinity to one another.

Furthermore, the sub-cultures of the town are limited in its variety of the inhabitant's ethnicity, religious beliefs and economic status, thus the participating teachers and parents represent similar worldviews and have similar conditions for housing, work and child care. This limitation is imposed deliberately in order to ensure homogeneity among the three case study triads where the a) the children are all boys between the ages of 4 – 5 years, b) the parents are all mothers of two boys; married and work full-time, and 3) the teachers are all female qualified preschool teachers with 10 – 20 years' experience in the field.

The reason for this homogeneity was to investigate differences within perception and understanding between socially like-minded individuals within the same sub-culture. The third limitation is time. Whilst the authors emotional and intellectual journey of this thesis has been a long one, spanning over almost two years, once the three-month literature review was complete, the data collection took place over a period of just two months. The reason for this was to reserve sufficient time for analysing data and writing the thesis.

1.8 Conclusion

The thesis follows a traditional structure. In this introductory chapter we have looked at the background- and history of the Swedish preschool, where a brief chronological overview-, relevant information in regard to development of the Swedish preschool- as well as the section regarding home and preschool as stated in the curriculum, have been provided. Next in chapter one, we will define the research problem and the relevance of the study, providing a purpose of

study, as well as central targets of enquiry- and limitations of study. Thereafter, the thesis is presented through a further five chapters which are divided as follows; chapter two, the theoretical framework for the thesis, the Bronfenbrenner Ecological System's Model is presented, outlining the various systems of the model as well as the concept of 'process' and children's proximal processes in a developmental perspective, placing these in relation to the study - a figure of the system is also provided for a better overview of how the systems interconnect; chapter three offers an extensive literature review, where an explanation of the Bronfenbrenner model and how this relates to four strains of literature, both in a national- and international context, is provided. The four strains of literature are divided into micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystems, representing research on the aforementioned proximal processes which correlate to the areas of family-, immediate community-, institutional community and political- and social structure; chapter four discusses the methodological framework and gives a thorough description of the methods applied in the study.

This chapter will also discuss the participants and provide an outline of ethics-, ethical implications- and the authors personal ethical stance in regard to the study; chapter five presents the stories and offers a discussion of findings, before concluding with chapter six, where limitations- and recommendations for future research are discussed. Finally, a reference list and appendices conclude the paper.

Chapter Two

2.1 Theoretical framework

According to Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny (2017) there is an increasing focus on the role of parents in children's ECEC and the significance parent engagement in preschool may have on children's development. International educational research highlights "the importance of understanding children's learning as embedded in the social, cultural and family contexts in which it occurs" (Alanen, Brooker and Mayell, 2015, as cited in O'Toole et al., 2017) and the overall consensus is that children will, in a well-being-, development- and learning perspective, do better with parents who are actively engaged in their pedagogical development (Borgonovi and Montt, 2012; Desforges and Aboucaar, 2003; Emerson, Fear, Fox and Sanders, 2012; Goodall and Vorhaus, 2008). Thus, designing pathways in order to develop the communication between home and preschool is considered a significant factor in children's developmental outcomes (Hayes et al., 2017). Having defined what is meant by the importance of parent engagement, we now move on to discuss the backbone of this thesis. This thesis rests against the theoretical framework of the Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) who is best known for his ecological systems theory of child development, a theory which demands that a child's world is considered on a multitude of levels. In its very essence, the theory investigates a child's development within the context of the system of relationships that constitute a child's environment. The theory defines *six layers* of environment, each which are considered imperative in understanding the wholeness of a child's development. When exploring the understandings that a child possesses, it is important to keep in mind the contextual and cultural differences present in his various environments or systems (See figure 2). The first and perhaps most important of Bronfenbrenner's definitions, is the one summarizing the process upon which the theory is built,

"the ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 21).

The bioecological model dictates that changes in one system or environment, will cause a ripple effect in the other systems as the systems are all interdependent. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) refer to the model as “an evolving theoretical system” (p. 793) and the newer version of the 1979 model is referred to as the ‘bioecological’ model, rather than the traditional ‘ecological’ model.

Distinctive for the bioecological model, is that it incorporates both temporal concerns, as well as biological components (Bronfenbrenner 1993; 1994; 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1993; 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris 1998; 2006), providing the researcher with a notably more dynamic model from which a multi-layered approach, where the child is at the centre, can be assumed. Bronfenbrenner considered that at the very heart of this multi-layered approach, is the child “as an active agent in his or her own world” (Bronfenbrenner & Morrison, 2006). Against this background, this study will apply the original model, adding the PPCT model for dynamics, thus advocating that in order to study a child’s understanding and experience of a phenomenon, we must look beyond the child’s immediate environment and include a larger scope of the child’s life. The following sections will each begin with definitions from the bioecological model, outlining and describing each of the systems.

2.2 Micro-system: home and preschool

“A pattern of activities, social roles and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p.1645).

Children find themselves in various systems throughout their day, and the most immediate is the smallest, the child’s microenvironment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morrison, 2016). Within a child’s microsystems, such as home and preschool, the child’s immediate relationships are fostered with relations spanning to other immediate relationships or organisations that the child interacts with (such as parents, siblings, grandparents and preschool) throughout the day. In a cognitive development perspective, how these participants of these relationships interact with the child will have an effect on the child’s development; meaning that since personal characteristics are also included in Bronfenbrenner’s definition of a micro-system, the more encouraging and nurturing these relationships and places are, the

better the child will be able to develop healthily (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; 2006). This is indicative of the importance of understanding “the nature of individual school and home micro-systems when exploring parent involvement and engagement with children’s education and highlights the dynamic, mutually interacting nature of the four elements of the PPCT model (Hayes et al., 2017, as cited in O’Toole et al., 2017). The role of the home and the preschool is thus to house the child’s innermost intimate relationships within one or more microsystems.

2.3 Meso-system: relations and communication

”A mesosystem comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates. Such as school, peer group and family, and acknowledging their impact on the individual” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25).

The mesosystem is in its very essence ”a system of microsystems” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). This means that a child’s relationship in whichever context he or she finds him- or herself in, is impacted by the child’s other relationships in the other contexts, creating “a chain of activity that individuals drag with them across micro-systems” (Slesnick, Prestopnik, Meyers and Glassman, 2007, p. 1238). This dragging of relationships across micro-systems inevitably means that a child applies his or her learning from one context to another, making visible the linkages between the micro-systems within the meso-system. From the perspective of a child, it is the engagement between home and preschool that is perhaps the most visible, providing powerful linkages between the settings within which the child spends the majority of his or her waking day from a very young age (O’Toole, 2017). According to Bronfenbrenner & Morrison (2016), the bioecological systems model ascertains that children’s lives develop through a web of mutual relationships, thus providing the researcher with a comprehensive conceptual lens through which the processes of parent engagement in preschool and the effects on child well-being and development can be explored.

2.4 Exo-system: the curriculum and preschool policies

“The exo-system comprises the links and processes taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not contain the developing person, but in which events occur that indirectly influence processes within the immediate setting in which the developing person lives” (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 24)

Both decisions made and support networks developed in areas and forums that may possibly never be accessed by either the family or the family's children, are still likely to impact on their individual experiences. These decisions and networks form the integral part of the exo-system, including other people- and places that the child itself may not often interact with. Thus, an exo-system refers to settings that do not involve the child as an active agent, but in which events take place that "effect or are affected by what happens in the setting containing the developing person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These events include but are not limited to supports through preschool, the curriculum for preschool, preschool policies and ideologies, communities and neighbourhood, parent workplace- and employment situation, as well as extended family members.

2.5 Macro-system: Swedish National Agency for Education

The 'macro-system' consists of the wider pattern of ideology and organization of social institutions common to a particular social class or culture to which a person belongs, such as patterns of racism, cultural norms, etc. It refers to similarities within a given culture or subculture in the form and content of its constituent micro-, meso- and exo-systems, as well as any belief systems underlying such similarities. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Bronfenbrenner's fourth level is the macrosystem. The largest and most remote set of people and things to a child, but still which has notable influence over the child. The macrosystem includes things such as the relative freedoms permitted by national government, cultural values, national- and global economy, political climate, wars and so on. Thus, the macrosystem consists of the very overarching pattern of the other systems; the micro-, meso-, and exo-system specific characteristic of (any given) culture, subculture, or other social context(s). It serves the scholar to know that in an educational research perspective, it should be emphasized that when studying parent engagement in preschool, the various sub-cultures within systems can differ greatly, yet simultaneously consist of a relatively homogenous internal makeup (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Perhaps the most important complexity to bear in mind when considering the macrosystem however, is that within each of the other systems that comprise the macrosystem, lies a multitude of developmentally-instigative belief systems, resources, parental habits-, beliefs- and ideologies, patterns of social- and cultural interchange, as well as hazards, life styles, opportunity structures and life course options (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Härkönen, 2007), suggesting that the macrosystem by its very nature, forms the very blueprint of the wholeness of the child's life (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

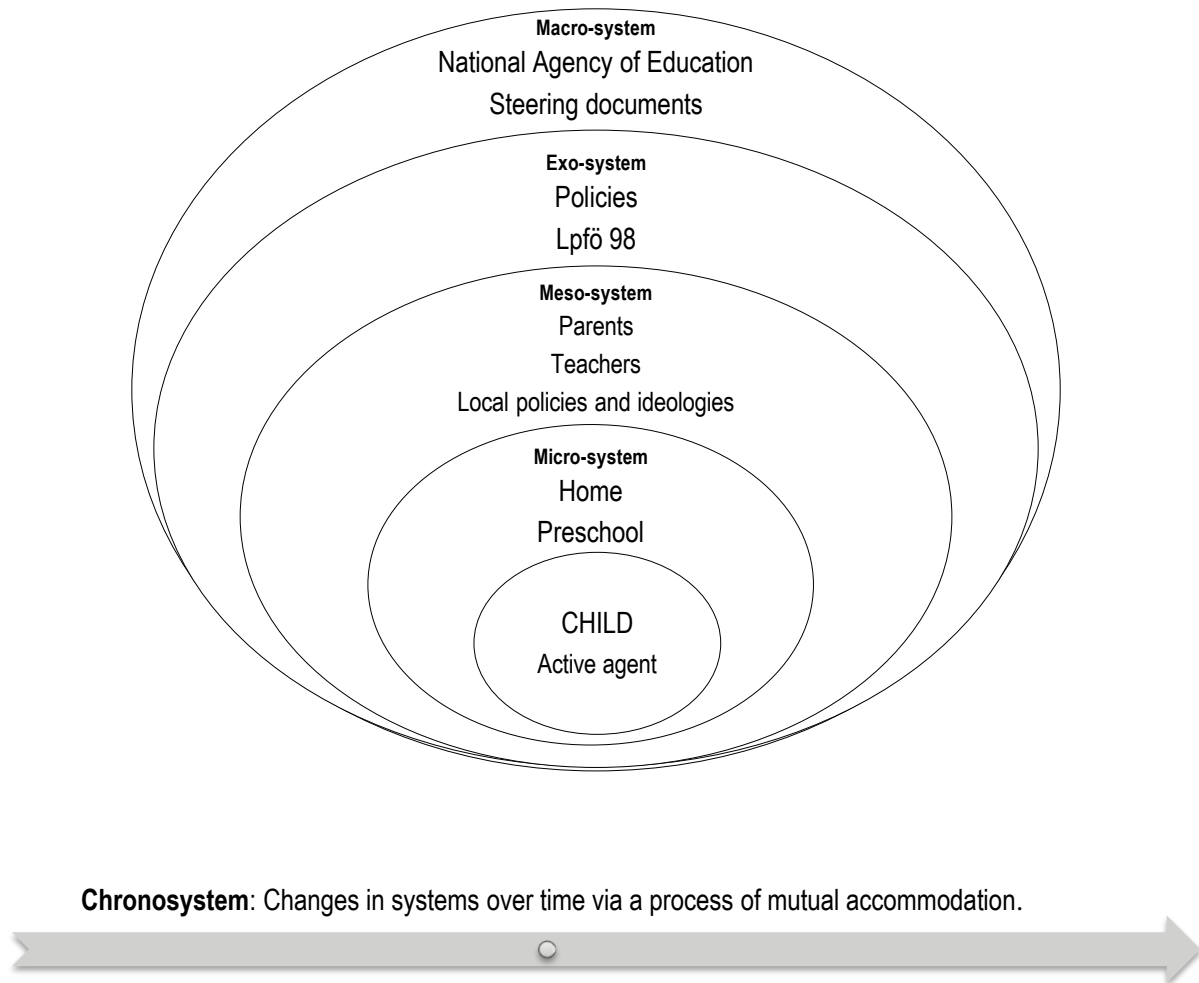
2.6 Chrono-system: changes in systems over time

“The chronosystem adds the useful dimension of time, which demonstrates the influence of both change and constancy in the child’s environment. The chronosystem may thus include a change in family structure (...) in addition to immense society changes such as economic cycles and wars” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The bioecological model demonstrates the diversity of interconnected influences on a child’s development, by studying the various systems that define a child’s life according to the four proximal processes of process, person, context and time (Bronfenbrenner & Morrison, 2006). The chronosystem’s overarching function is thus to identify the “changes in the other systems over time, by process of mutual accommodation” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), meaning that the chronosystem includes both the shifts- and transitions in a child’s development within the various processes. For the purpose of this study, this extends also to any socio-historical contexts that affect the child, or other people who may affect the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In summary, by applying the theoretical framework of the Bronfenbrenner model, this study places the child in the centre, layering the systems of the child around the him like metaphorical rings on the water. Hence, we are able to map the contexts of the child’s world, from home and family; immediate community; institutional community; political and social structure and changes in these, over time. This is useful when establishing the child’s perspective, which as we have seen, is susceptible to external factors.

Figure 2: The Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory



(Adapted from The Bronfenbrenner Ecological Systems Theory model, 1979; 1992).

2.7 Parent engagement through the lens of Proximal Processes

The qualities and areas of a child and his or her environment is in a state of constant interaction influencing how the child grows and develops and, “human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects and symbols in its immediate environment” (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 620). Therefore, when seeking to gain understanding about a child, the child must be studied in a multiple environment context. The motivation for

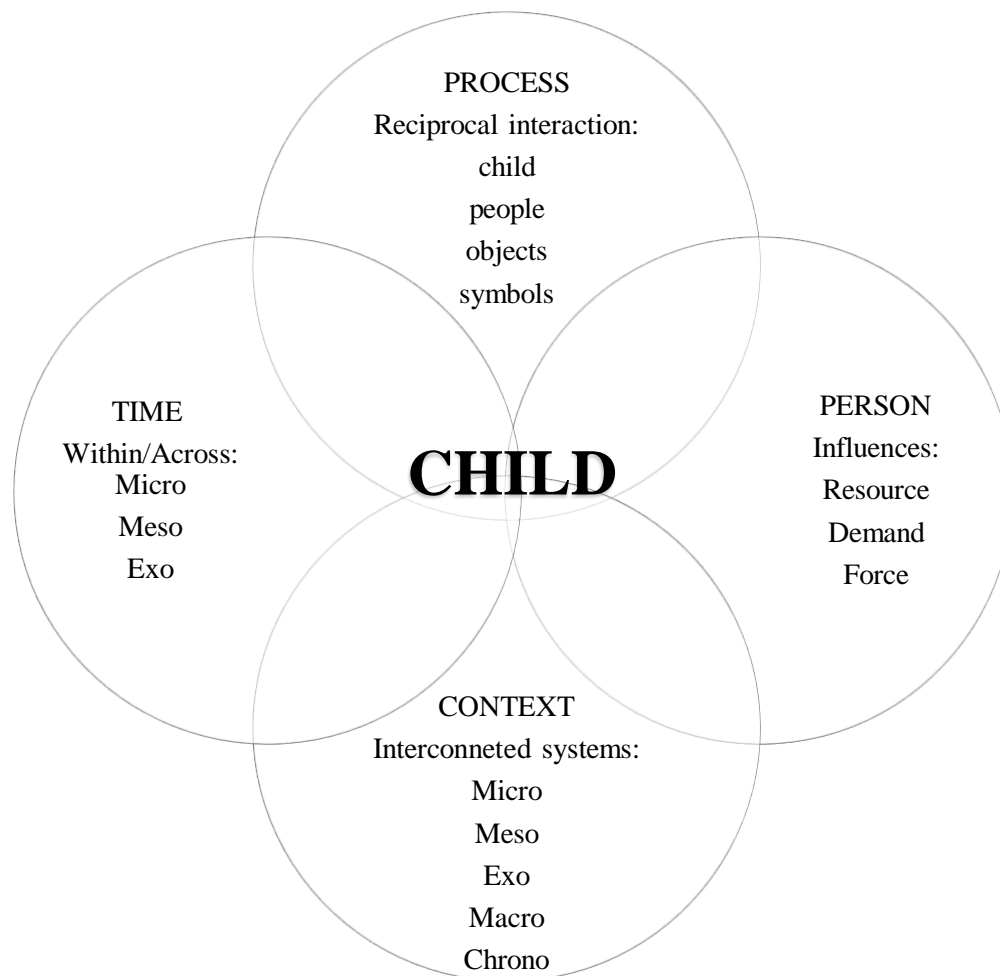
this is that a child typically finds him or herself immersed in various and differing ecosystems; from the smaller home ecological system, to the significantly larger educational system and also the largest and broadest system of culture and society. Typically, all of these systems will work with- or against one another, forming and influencing every aspect of the child's life (Bronfenbrenner, 1992).

Against this background, this thesis seeks to approach the child from the conceptual lens of relationships, here referred to as 'proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). These proximal processes (hereafter referred to as PPCT) are process, person, context and time, meaning that, "human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects and symbols in its immediate environment" (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 620), a child's process, person, context and time are indeed affected by the "reciprocity of exchange" (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; 2006). Furthermore, the concept of 'proximal processes' (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) surface the significance of both interactions and relationships in a child well-being and development perspective, highlighting the interconnectedness of a child's micro-systems.

By applying the Process – Person – Context – Time model (PPCT) to the original Bronfenbrenner model (as seen in figure 3, p. 17) in this study, we are able to place a greater emphasis on the child as an active agent (the biological person) and from that lens explore the three primary perspectives that interconnect (child, parent, teacher) in order to, better understand what parent engagement in preschool means to the child. The PPCT model will thus provide us with a greater wholeness when analysing the findings derived from the interviews with the children.

The PPCT model builds upon four concepts. Below follows a figure making visible the main interactions between the model's concepts, which in turn constitute the very platform the theory. See figure 3.

Figure 3: Process – Person – Context – Time model (PPCT)



2.7.1 Process

Humans are evolving biopsychological organisms (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and child development is dependent entirely on processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interactions between the child and the people-, objects- and symbols that constitutes that child's immediate external environment (Tudge et al., 2009). According to Bronfenbrenner & Morris (1998), in bioecological theory the reciprocal interaction between an individual and his or environments, incorporating also persons-, objects-, and symbols is defined as a proximal process. The emphasis of the developmental process is thus on the bi-directional nature of the child's relationship to its environment.

2.7.2 Person

Each child possesses his or her own personal characteristics which all play an integral part in the child's social interactions and development, extending across not only childhood, but the entire lifespan. Bronfenbrenner (1998) identified three main characteristics that have significant influence over the child's proximal processes and these are, a) demand characteristics that act as personal stimuli, such as age, gender and a person's overall physical appearance; b) resource characteristics that represent non-tangible values such as emotional-, psychological- and material resources and c) force characteristics that relate to individual differences in temperament, tenacity and motivational factors. In the latter, Bronfenbrenner (1989) also rationalises how a child's relationship with the environment is reciprocal, where the suggestion is that a child can change its environment and the environment can change the child.

2.7.3 Context

Context involves the five interconnected systems of the original Bronfenbrenner Ecological Systems Theory model and describes the child's micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chronosystems (see pp. 14 – 17).

2.7.4 Time

Through the conceptual lens of proximal processes, 'time' is constructed on the levels. These are the micro-, meso- and macro-levels. According to Tudge et al., (2009) in "Uses and misuses of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development", 'times' can be summarised as follows: micro-time refers to specific time-intervals within a proximal process; meso-time refers to the frequency of which the processes occur in the person's environment, meaning over the course of hours, days, weeks or longer; macro-time focuses on changes in systems over time via a process of mutual accommodation, thus representing also the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1998; Tudge et al., 2009). In this chapter we have seen that the theoretical framework of the Bronfenbrenner Ecological System's Theory and the more updated dynamic bioecological model highlights the importance of understanding a person's development within environmental systems. It further explains that both the person and the environment affect one another bidirectionally. In the following chapter, we will look at previous investigations and research into the same phenomena, both in a national and international perspective. A literature review follows, highlighting discourses- as well as surfacing the gap, in the existing literature.

Chapter Three

3.1 Literature review

This literature review adopts a systematic approach in accordance with the principles of Ridley (2012). Throughout the reading process of the review, literature on the effects of parental engagement in preschool have been identified as limited, with the majority of the trajectories within parental engagement in an ECEC perspective, involving academic-, dogmatic- and sterile approaches only. Neither of which consider the child's perspective, nor the symbiosis between home and preschool from a parent/family perspective. Thus, there is a need to surface the void. This review aims to do this through conducting “a systematic/methodical search of literature catalogues, in order to identify from those scholarly literature that is relevant for the thesis topic; and a systematic/methodical and critical written analysis of what that literature tells us about that topic” (PDA183, Literature review guidelines, 2018).

The aim of the review is to synthesise existing research findings from a number of studies on the topic of parental engagement in preschool and use these to inform both practice and policy in the field (Bryman, 2016; Ridley, 2012). Hence, the overarching aim of the literature review is to set the “context of the study, clearly demarcates what is and what is not within the scope of the investigation, and justifies those decisions” (Boote & Beile, 2005, p. 4).

Turning now to the structure, in this first part, the current and most influential global literature of parental engagement in preschool will be presented, providing the context for international research for parental engagement. Through this, the aforementioned void in the Swedish literature will be surfaced and discussed thematically in relation to the theoretical framework of this thesis and the four proximal processes of process, person, context and time. Furthermore, and for the purpose of this literature review, the reader is reminded that parental engagement is defined ‘as motivated parental attitudes and behaviours intended to influence children’s educational well-being’ (Christenson, 2004; Fantuzzo, Tighe & Childs, 2000).

The research questions guiding this review are, 1) how do the three primary perspectives (child, parent, teacher) of the preschool – home partnership interconnect, and 2) what does parent engagement in preschool mean to the child?

Following the international context, which is provided under 3.2, this literature review seeks to marry four strains of literature in a Nordic context, or at the very least, ensure a betrothal between them. The four strains of literature are grouped in accordance with four of the five ecological systems of the Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory upon which the pending thesis rests. The fifth system, the chronosystem, has deliberately been excluded from this literature review and will feature only in the final thesis once the findings of the study are concluded. The four strains of literature addressed are 1) family, 2) immediate community, 3) institutional community and 4) political and social structure. All four strains correspond to Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory accordingly. See figure 3 below:

Figure 4: The Bronfenbrenner model and the four strains of literature.

Micro-system: home and preschool. Literature focusing on activities, roles and relations in a defined setting where the child interacts directly with others (child to adult, adult to child and adult to adult).
Meso-system: immediate community. Literature focusing on interconnections among two or more microsystems (i.e. interactions among family members and teachers).
Exo-system: institutional community. Literature focusing on the distal systems that influence the individual indirectly through their impact on meso- and microsystems (education policies, steering documents).
Macro-system: political and social structure. Literature focusing on norms and values of cultures and subcultures (belief systems, ideologies, societal structure, national and internal resources).

3.2 International context

In an international educational research, it is agreed that parent engagement in an educational perspective is the primary pillar upon which good educational practice is built (Borgonovi and Montt, 2012; Desforges and Aboucaar, 2003; Emerson, Fear, Fox and Sanders, 2012; Gileece, 2015; Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011; Johnson, Arevalo, Cates, Weisleder, Dreyer and Mendelsohn, 2016; Kavanagh and Hickey, 2013; O’Toole, 2017; Ma, Shen, Krenn, Hu and Yuan, 2017). Furthermore, the literature highlights significant correlations between parent engagement and children’s mental health and well-being (Gileece, 2015; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011) emphasizing the importance of understanding children’s learning as embedded in the family-, social and cultural contexts in which it occurs (Alanen, Brooker and Mayell, 2015). However, whilst this has led to an increased focus on the parents’ role in children’s learning within the global debate (Hayes, O’Toole and Halpenny, 2017) it has not illuminated the

significance of the parent's role insofar as the child's aspects of well-being and development are concerned. With a heavy emphasis on children's performance and how parent participation in matters such as homework, teacher-parent evenings and so on, affect children's learning development, recent international research is limited to parent being actively involved in the actual academic education of the child (Borgonovi and Montt, 2012; Desforges and Aboucaar, 2003; Emerson, Fear, Fox and Sanders, 2012; Goodall and Vorhaus, 2008), overlooking perhaps the less dogmatic values such as understanding and meaning.

Moreover, there is a global consensus across education policy statements and practice guidelines that parents are not only a child's primary care-giver, but also most important educator (OECD, 2012). It has been widely recognised in the literature that there is a need to support parents, "including their role in supporting their children's learning and development" (Kernan, 2010; OECD, 2012). In the *Review of research, policy and good practice* prepared by Kernan (2012) for the ICDI, a primary concern is "policy recommendations concerns strengthening the relationship between the home and the ECEC setting and school in order to enhance children's learning and development. In fact, throughout the international field of ECEC, good communication and coordinated partnership between parents and staff is seen as essential to high-quality care and education of young children" (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2008; OECD, 2012; Urban, 2009, as cited in Kernan, 2012). However, the vast majority of the existing research is focusing on dogmatic variables concerned with *children's outcomes* and which factors within the home-to-preschool partnership cause ripples of positive- and/or negative effects on the child. According to the OECD however, there is a global growing interest in the area of parental engagement in ECEC (OECD, 2001, 2006, 2012) and with a strong emphasis being placed on research-based evidence for success within ECEC, a large number of comprehensive research reviews regarding the effects of parental engagement in ECEC have been published in the past decade.

Against this background and for the purpose of this review, the two common most discourses that will be highlighted are, 1) cognitive outcomes, such as literacy and language and, 2) how ECEC research findings should be translated into policy and practice.

The above two discourses in the international context are in stark contrast to the ongoing current debate in Nordic countries, which in recent years has been particularly concerned with research primarily on partnerships between ECEC 8as well as attitudes and behaviours within these partnerships), on the background of parents being encouraged to assume a more active role in their children's pedagogical day in preschool (Hakyemez-Paul, Pihlaja & Silvennoinen 2018; Hujala et al. 2009; Venninen & Purola 2013;). Evidence for this assertion is made visible through the growing number of systematic reviews of research that have been published in the ensuing decades.

The first category, the research concerned with cognitive outcomes (including but not limited to factors such as literacy and language) considers primarily the “critical factors affecting children's educational outcomes across the world include families socio-economic and cultural status (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2014; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010), parental involvement in their child's education (Christenson, 2004; Fantuzzo, Tighe & Childs, 2000), and the type of expectations that families have (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010)” (As cited in Uusimäki, Yngvesson, Garvis & Harju-Luukkainen, 2019). This indicates that during the twentieth century, factors such as socio-economic background is considered one of the primary variables when discussing student performance (Uusimäki, Yngvesson, Garvis & Harju Luukkainen, 2019) and that together with academic, dogmatic and sterile variables, as well as social status indicators (Yang, 2003; Uusimäki et al., 2019), this research dominates the existing literature.

The second category, how ECEC research findings should be translated into policy and practice, also possess a strong position within the debate. According to Uusimäki et al., (2019), Sirin (2005) comprised 58 articles between the years 1900 to 2000 in order to execute a meta-analytical literature review on the topic of ECEC, further strengthening the relevance of socio-economic status on student performance (Okpala et al., 2010; Engin-Demir, 2009; Yang, 2003; Battle and Lewis, 2002) in the academic debate. Positive parental involvement has been identified as a significant factor in influencing both academic and social development and outcomes for young children (Flouri, 2006; Gilleece, 2015; Hill et al., 2004; Hoover Dempsen & Sandler, 1995; Sheldon 2007; Shumow, 1998; Sibley & Dearing, 2014; El Nokali, Bachman & Votruba-Drzal, 2010), furthermore influencing policy makers and teachers across the globe.

3.3 Swedish context

With ECEC being one of the primary cornerstones of Swedish family policy, there has always been a strong emphasis on good relationships between preschool and the home (Lundqvist & Roman 2008; PERFAR, 2014; National Agency for Education, 2010; Tunberger & Sigle-Rushton, 2011). An increased interest surrounding the subject of parental engagement in preschool in a Swedish context has emerged in recent years and scholars have made substantial progress in developing the knowledge base in the field of research concerning parental engagement in ECEC. Recent years have witnessed an overall heavy emphasis on establishing strong teacher-parent relationships in the Swedish National Curriculum for Preschools, and parental engagement in preschool is seen as important for reasons such as promoting a healthy development of the child, as well as socialization and learning through play (Widding & Berge, 2004; Johansson & Pramling, 2006; Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006). However, little or no emphasis is placed on the child's perspective within the academic debate.

As well as being asserted by the UN Convention of The Rights of the Child, the ambition of a healthy development of the child is further supported by the Bronfenbrenner Ecological Systems Theory. In his book, *The Ecology of Human development, experiments by nature and design* (1979), Urie Bronfenbrenner describes human development as a “lasting change in the way in which a person perceives and deals with his environment” (p. 3). Bronfenbrenner argues that “the ecological environment is conceived as a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like Russian dolls” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 3) and that “the innermost level is the immediate setting containing the developing person” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 3). Thus, the goal of this literature review is to synthesise the current research thus illuminating and differentiating between the research emphasis placed on a child perspective and the adult's perspective, in a home-preschool relationship sphere - and also to provide an overview of the research executed into the construct of children's- parents and preschool teachers *understanding* of parental engagement in preschool.

3.4 Family and preschool: micro-system

As Swedish children are usually introduced to preschool between 15-18 months of age, teachers are in accordance with Lpfö 98, responsible for ensuring that each family has a good introduction to their child's start at preschool (National Agency for Education, Lpfö 98, 2016; OECD Family database, 2017). When compared to other nations, parents in Sweden share the

task of childcare with professional early years educators in preschool, which means that this relationship between home and preschool is of great significance for the child's healthy cognitive development and self-concept (Chong & Liem, 2004; Nisbett et al. 2012; Phillipson & Phillipson, 2012; Phillipson & Phillipson, 2017). Swedish children are thus subject to the supervision-, care- and education of both parents and teachers in two different settings, that of the home and that of the preschool, making collaboration between the microsystems of preschool- and home all the more significant. Whilst an increasingly large amount of international research is currently highlighting many changes in society and education policy in which the significance of parents' democratic rights to influence their children's education through preschool/school and home cooperation is emphasized (Björnsson, 2005; Lightfoot, 2004; Vincent & Tomlinsson, 1997; Wernersson, 2006; Widding & Berge, 2013), research in the Swedish context are limited in their representation of perspectives. According to the OECD there is an increasing global interest concerning the area of parental engagement in ECEC (OECD, 2001, 2006) existing research primarily represents the teacher's voice (Hakyemez-Paul, Pihlaja & Silvennoinen 2018; Hujala et al. 2009; Venninen & Purola 2013;), leaving it overrepresented in comparison to the parent- and child's voice.

The educational values and beliefs in Sweden have their starting point in the UN Convention of The Right of the Child and the "welfare services which are based on equality and equity, children's health and mother care, and also on early childhood education and care for all children as a right" (Sommer, 2010, p. 1), and provide the basis from which all steering documents are shaped and legislated. An accepted view is that parents and preschool teachers should maintain close communication in order to preserve the child's best interest, whilst also adhering to the steering documents. Hence, the domain between home and preschool in Sweden today is one that is widely discussed in the academic debate, and although many studies have shown that positive corporation between the child's ECEC microenvironments, have been of great benefit to the child's learning and development (Patel & Corter, 2013; Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2017; Markström & Simonsson, 2017; Murray, McFarland-Piazza & Harrison, 2014; Reinhardt, 2016; Vlasov & Hujala, 2017), very few of these include the child's perspective. According to Markström and Simonsson (2017), a dominating discourse in educational research regarding parental engagement in ECEC, is that the home and preschool should enter into cooperation and "act as close partners in the best interest of the child" (Markström &

Simonsson, 2017). However, few researchers have taken their point of departure from the perspective of the child, *and/or* studied how preschool children adapt emotionally and socially to the new (preschool) environment according to themselves. Furthermore, little or no investigation has been done into children's understanding of *what* parental engagement is and why it *is* or *is not* important. The result of this, is a void in the Swedish educational research within the family sphere, where activities, roles, and relations in a defined setting (where the child interacts directly with others) is central.

Thus far, three primary discourses and these are responsibility, performativity, and efficiency (Karlsson, Löfdahl & Prieto, 2013; Markström & Simonsson, 2011; Markström & Simonsson, 2013; Markström & Simonsson 2017; Tallberg Broman, 2013), indicating that the primary focus of previous research have *not* included the perspectives of parent and child, instead focusing primarily on the teachers as individuals (responsibility and performativity) and the teachers as a work-team, meaning the preschool as a whole (efficiency).

3.5 Immediate community: meso-system

The Nordic tradition of inclusion have resulted in several research projects where parental engagement has been focal and by comparison, Finland for instance, initiated the International Parent- Professional Partnership (IPP) research study, which was conducted by Hujala et al. (2009). This initiative focused on the contemporary challenges of the parent-teacher partnerships in early childhood education from a cross-cultural perspective. The study explored the teacher-parent collaborations in ECEC services in five countries (Estonia, Finland, Lithuania, Norway and Portugal) and emphasis was placed on the teachers' views of parents' involvement in preschools. The results indicated that there exist discrepancies between teachers' approaches to parent-teacher partnerships between societies - as well as within each country. The study also found that parents differed in their capacity to establish and maintain relationships with teachers. In another study conducted by Hakyemez-Paul, Pihlaja & Silvennoinen (2018), with a sample of 287 educators (with both qualitative and quantitative data), it was identified that the Finnish preschool teachers generally possess a positive attitude towards parental engagement - and that a participants found the difficulties of parental engagement to often times be caused by poor motivation on the parents behalf, as well as lack of time on both parents' and preschools part.

The above research, conducted a) in a trans-national perspective, and b) in a Finnish perspective indicate that it is beneficial for Sweden to undergo similar research - *particularly* since the role of the parent in the Swedish preschool curriculum embodies the idea that Swedish society has a comprehensive and holistic view of the child (Uusimäki et al, print) and existing research in this area typically places emphasis on the teacher's voice, leaving it over-represented in comparison to the children's and parents' voices. Furthermore, many studies have shown that positive corporation between the child's ECEC microenvironments have been of great benefit to the child's learning and development (Patel & Corter, 2013; Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2017; Markström & Simonsson, 2017; Murray, McFarland-Piazza & Harrison, 2014; Vlasov & Hujala, 2017) and a dominating discourse in educational research regarding parental engagement in ECEC is that the home and preschool should enter into corporation and act as close parties in the best interest of the child" (Markström & Simonsson, 2017). In reality however, *how* this is to be achieved is a matter of interpretation on both the home- and preschools behalf and warrants greater investigations into the child's well-being in relation to his or her various systems.

3.6 Institutional community: exo-system

From an ecological perspective, it is vital to examine linkages among central settings in a child's life. Parent's involvement in children's education both at school and at home promotes the role of the parent in the Swedish preschool curriculum and embodies the idea that Swedish society has a comprehensive view of the child, meaning we talk about 'the whole child'. 'The whole child', refers to all aspects of the child, which in a preschool perspective, means that the child's entire day is carefully planned for, including meals, toilet needs, sleep, play and learning through play. These areas of the child's pedagogical day must also represent the parents needs in regard to their child, on a holistic as well as practical level (Markström & Simonsson, 2017). These distal systems that forms part of a child's life, have been investigated to some extent; including analysis and comparative studies of steering documents and policies where documentation of the child's pedagogical day is focal (Emilsson & Pramling Samuelsson, 2014; Harju-Luukkainen et al, forthcoming; Lofdahl, 2014; Löfgren, 2015; Sheridan, Williams & Sandberg; 2013). However, the documentation directed towards parents is based on theories of education policy aimed at involving parents by maintaining closeness between home and preschool through documented information sharing, leaving a void where the child's well-being and development is concerned.

In order to determine the associations between levels of parental preschool engagement and child outcomes on an institutional level, the human narrative must be included alongside the policy narrative (Tan & Goldberg, 2009) promoting a search *beyond* the individual child and *into* the child's nested environments instead. Global research into two of the largest cultural shifts of recent times, have been in the proportion of mothers with young children in the workforce and the increased involvement of fathers in their children's learning and care (Greenberger, Goldberg, Hamill, O'Neill & Payne, 1989; Greenberger & Goldberg, 1989; Hochschild, 1989; Marsiglio Amato, Day & Lamb, 2000; Pyke & Coltrane, 1996). However, in a Swedish context this research appears limited to the gender issue; focusing mainly on 1) gender equality in work and 2) gender equality in family life- and child welfare. Furthermore, several studies argue that gender equality has been advanced to some extent as women have been able to integrate paid work into their lives and that the choice of taking parental leave is often times more conditional for father's than for mothers (Ahrne and Roman, 1997; Albrecht et al., 1997; Andersson, 1993; Ahrne and Roman, 1997; Björnberg, 2002; Lindbergh, 1991; Sundström, Duvander & Hank 1998). From this research, it is largely concluded that the increased equality between mothers and fathers is more of a farsighted welfare policy for children than a policy for promoting gender equality – again, leaving (it) devoid of the child's perspective.

3.7 Political and social structure: macro-system

Policy makers as well as researchers normally view and present engagement between home and educational institutions in a positive light and some researchers have devoted their time to researching parents many roles in relation to educational institutions (Crozier, 2000; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Markström & Simonsson, 2017). However, critical research has posed the question of whether or not this engagement is in fact beneficial for all parties (Crozier, 2000; Markström, 2013a, 2013c; Osgood, 2012; Vincent & Ball, 2007). For instance, the large inequalities in both socio-economic and ethnic background are viewed as troublesome in an engagement perspective – largely due to differences in belief-systems and personal culture (Bäck, 2010; Bouakaz & Persson, 2007; Englund, 2010). Thus, as mentioned earlier, on a political and social level, the three primary discourses that have been identified remains the same: responsibility, performativity and efficiency (Markström & Simonsson, 2017; Karlsson, Löfdahl & Prieto, 2013), all three pertaining largely to the preschool and its staff – not the child.

Moreover, research shows that the many demands on teachers have changed and whilst some teachers find parental engagement very helpful, others see it as a source of conflict and trouble (Alasuutari, Markström, & Vallberg-Roth, 2014; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000). Whilst this engagement is promoted on a political level, it does cause friction on a social level, meaning that parents are becoming more and more like customers on the educational market. On the other hand, there are also demands on parents to take more responsibility and to be more active in their children's education (Simonsson & Markström, 2013) which is a positive development in regard to increasing awareness about the importance of parental engagement in ECEC.

3.8 Summary

Given the corpus of texts in this review, it is evident that research into the child-parent-teacher triad is needed in order to develop knowledge and understanding in regard to the complexity of what co-operation and collaboration actually means within a Swedish context. Whilst some Swedish studies on children's first meeting with preschool have focused on the child's perspective and studied how young children adapt socially and emotionally to the new environment (Markström & Simonsson, 2017; Månsson, 2013), of the research that has been conducted on parent involvement, the teacher voice has been thoroughly explored - also showing the misconceptions teacher sometimes have about working with families. It is crucial that research contribute to correcting such misconceptions by challenging them in order to ensure parents feel a co-contributor of their child's participation in preschool, rather than in a power relationship with the preschool. By engaging the child in research and respecting the child in accordance with the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child as a self-governed individual, the academic rhetoric can possibly begin to close the void in the literature and broaden the existing understanding of parental engagement to including the child's voice. Furthermore, it is clear from this literature review that in a Swedish educational perspective research has been limited to three primary discourses. As mentioned before, these are responsibility, performativity, and efficiency (Karlsson, Löfdahl & Prieto, 2013; Markström & Simonsson, 2011; Markström & Simonsson, 2013; Markström & Simonsson 2017; Tallberg Broman, 2013) indicating that the primary focus of previous research have *not* included the perspectives of parent and child, instead focusing primarily on the teachers as individuals (responsibility and performativity) and the teachers as a work-team, meaning the preschool as a whole (efficiency).

These reviews of research have contributed to the codification of what we know, what we think we know and what we do not yet know about the intimate sphere of a child's life, that of the family (parent and child), surfacing a void in today's existing literature. This chapter has attempted to provide a brief summary of the literature relating to the research problem and the key points that have been identified within the four overarching systems, are 1) research on the immediate environment, the family: literature focusing on activities, roles and relations in a defined setting where the child interacts directly with other, 2) research on the immediate community: literature focusing on interconnections among two or more microsystems, 3) research on institutional community: literature focusing on the distal systems that influence the individual indirectly through their impact on meso- and microsystems and 4) research on political and social structure: literature focusing on norms and values of cultures and subcultures. Thus, the final task of this literature review is to guide the pending study of parental engagement in Swedish preschool from the three perspectives (child-parent-teacher), ensuring that the child's voice is central in the narrative. The chapter that follows moves onto describing the methodology of the study, as well as the applied methods-, participants and ethical implications in regard to both methods and participants.

Chapter Four

4. 1 Methodological framework

It is commonly accepted that through research, knowledge grows. However, the methods of research continue to play an integral part in the ongoing debate about whether or not qualitative methods are at par with quantitative. It has been argued that in the study of human behaviour and of human learning, the research method must contain elements of interpretation (Bryman, 2016; Smeyers & Smith, 2014; Blix & Wettergren, 2015; Flam and Kleres, 2015). As education and educational research concerns itself with more than just collecting and analysing data, thus also focuses on a philosophical dimension (Smeyers & Smith, 2014), that makes space, or an allowance, for research methods that consider the human emotion.

In order to study the phenomena of parental engagement, the study assumes a transformative worldview, and a narrative design is applied in order to determine how the participants personally experience parental engagement (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The epistemological position of the researcher is interpretivist throughout and emphasis is placed on understanding the social world of preschool- and home through examining how the participants interpret this (Bryman, 2016). Furthermore, the ontological position is constructionist, and as we will see further on in terms of data, the social properties of the research and the participants are outcomes of the interactions between the stories of the participants (Bryman, 2016). The reason for this is that this thesis assumed from the onset that in the psychological meeting between people, where the definition of parental engagement (as first seen on page two of this thesis) is defined as “motivated parental attitudes and behaviours intended to influence children’s educational well-being” (Christenson, 2004; Fantuzzo, Tighe & Childs, 2000, as cited in Uusimäki et al., 2019. Print), personal narratives of lived experience are imperative in the process of establishing understanding of the studied phenomena. Hence, the two central questions guiding this section are, 1) how was the research executed and 2) why was the research executed this way? By answering these two questions, the chapter aims to cover not only the methods used to collect and analyse data, but also the theoretical framework that informs both the choice of methods and the approach to interpreting the data. Conclusively, a summation of the available methods and theoretical approaches for the research topic will briefly be discussed, as well as a justification for the choice of method(s) in the study. As a combination of methods were applied, this too will be justified. The concluding comments in regard to methods will thus

provide the reader with an explanation indicating both reliability and validity of the data, as well as a brief discussion in regard to any ethical considerations that have arisen from said methods. The chapter will also include a section on the participants as well as ethics and ethical implications of the study.

4.2 Methods

Historically stories have been a useful instrument for people in the process of understanding not only their own culture, but others' (Seidman, 2006) and "every word that people use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness" (Vygotsky, 1987, pp. 236–237, as cited in Seidman, 2006, p. 7). At the very heart then, of narrative enquiry, lies the search for understanding human behavior through the use of language (Heron, 1981; Seidman, 2006; Vygotskij, 1987), where being human "is the ability of people to symbolize their experience through language" (Seidman, 2007, p. 8). Thus, to understand human behavior means to investigate the reciprocity of language within a specific context and investigate the bi-directional relationships within this context. In his book *Interviewing as Qualitative Research* (2006), Seidman tells us that "the primary way a researcher can investigate an educational organization, institution, or process is through the experience of the individual people, the "others" who make up the organization or carry out the process" (Seidman, 2006, p. 10). Hence, applying interview as the primary mode of enquiry was well-founded and rests on Seidman's way of two or more interviews. This model of interviewing requires the researcher to engage with the participant on (preferably) three occasions in order better explore the participants behavior. This was particularly important given that three of the primary interview targets are children and as we will see in Chapter 5, children's ability to recall- and narrate their lived experiences is context dependent (Tulving, 1972; Tulving, 1983) an observation which is further supported by Seidman's (2006) theory that "people's behavior becomes meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them. Without context there is little possibility of exploring the meaning of an experience" (Patton, 1989, as cited in Seidman, 2006, p. 17). Hence, the empirical material was generated in four sets of data and thus rests on Seidman's (2006) way of two or more interviews, a) interviews with children in the preschool- and the home environment, b) interviews with parent, c) interviews with preschool teachers and d) observations of children.

Upon completing tasks 1 - 3 the audio recordings were transcribed. The next phase involved the analysis of verbal utterances and meaning-making. The dialogues in data sets a – c, were analysed by studying the transcripts and listening to the recordings repeatedly. This, in accordance with the concept of participation parity from Fraser (2003).

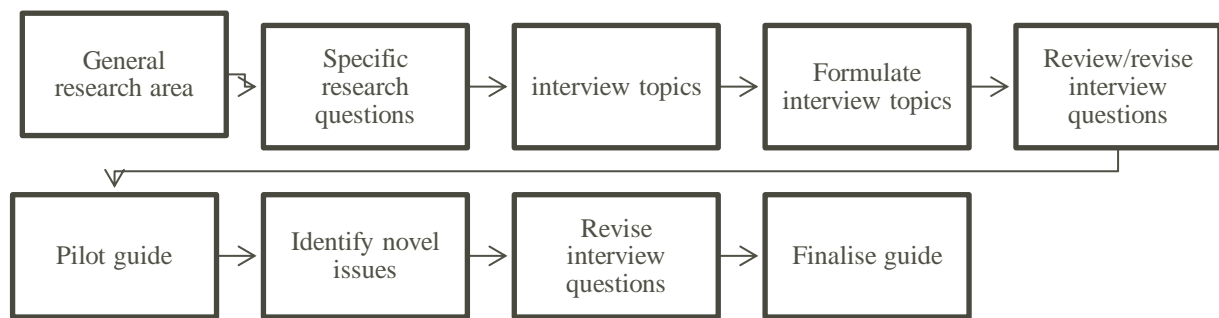
Researching with children-, with their parents and with their teachers, means working with tools that will allow the search for data to penetrate through the veil of stories told and into the experience as lived and the four qualitative research methods I have explored during this journey are, 1) semi-structured interviews, 2) observations, 3) case-studies and 4) story constellations.

The data is collected through interviews and observations which are done in in triads of *child – parent – teacher*. Each of these triads constitute a case, thus *child equals case*. The three cases are labelled according to the children’s pseudonyms, *Noah, Elliott* and *Mason*. The narratives collected from all nine participants are compiled then demonstrated and analysed in story constellations (Craig, 2007). Below follows an explanation of each one of the methods.

4.2.1 Narrative interviews

In undertaking the task of designing and executing an interview, the departure point was that of obtaining information regarding the children’s, parents and teachers understanding of parental engagement in the preschool, both in regard to steering document and practical as well as emotional day-to-day experience. Hence obtaining data that provided insights into how the participants viewed the preschools role in the children’s and their own lives in relation to the rest of the world (Bryman, 20116), was poignant. For this reason, a semi-structured interview that would allow freedom to move within the paradigms of each questions was determined upon. The aim of the semi-structured approach was to elicit data which in turn can be analysed against the background of intimate personal narratives (Bryman, 2016; Lemon & Garvis) and in order to capture what may be considered to be complex relations and meaning-making between adults and children, qualitative semi-structured interviews drawing out narratives from the participants, was one of the three main methodological routes applied in this study. When designing the interview guide, Bryman’s (2016) principles of formulating questions for an interview guide was applied. See figure 5.

Figure 5: Process of designing interview guide



Adapted from Bryman (2016: 470)

The aim on the narrative approach, is to shift the focus from ‘what happened’ to ‘what sense can we make of what happened’ (Bryman, 2016). Thus, the interview guide was divided into three topics correlating to the central inquiry of the thesis. These were:

- *Understanding*, in regard to the term ‘parent engagement’ itself.
- *Meaning*, in regard to *what* does ‘parent engagement’ mean to (you) *What is it?*
- *Practice*, in regard to *what* pathways and channels of communications exist and *how* are these utilised?

During these interviews, and against the background of the interview guide (see appendices 4 – 4, pp. 106 – 109) the children were encouraged to talk about their understanding of the purpose of preschool (why they are there) and their parents role (if any) in preschool, whilst parents and teachers (separately) were encouraged to reflect on their understanding of the current state of their own engagement, the role of the steering documents as well as what they believe the preschool may or may not mean for the child.

As cited in Craig (2007) “while theorists in a wide variety of disciplines - like Funk in theology - frame their intellectual pursuits in a wide variety of ways, they tend to have one important understanding in common: the belief that human experience is a narrative phenomenon best understood through story. That is to say, researchers in anthropology (Bateson, 1994, 2000; Geertz, 1995), linguistics (Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999), literary theory (Kermode, 1969/2000; Mitchell, 1980), philosophy (MacIntyre, 1981; Taylor, 1992), psychology (Bruner, 1990; Coles, 1989; Mishler, 1999), theology (Crites, 1971; Crossan, 1988), women’s studies (Eisler, 1987; Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1990), organizational theory

(Boje, 2001; Czarniawka, 1997), psychotherapy (Polkinghorne, 1988; Spence, 1982), geography (Lane, 1988; Sack, 1997), history (Carr, 1986; White, 1981), law (Balkin, 2001; Bruner, 1990), and medicine (Kuhl, 2002; Sacks, 1987), among many other disciplines, have come to recognize narrative as the most likely medium to capture the contingencies of human experience as lived in context and over time” (p. 173). Against this background and with wide support from multiple research disciplines, this study draws the conclusion that when investigating people’s lived experience, the inquiry depends largely on the human factor which is best told with their own voices as the lead instrument.

4.2.2 Observations

Observation is in its very nature a method of collecting data through observing a phenomenon. Classified by scholars as participatory study (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lowing, 2011), the researcher is expected to immerse him- or herself in the spatial context where the participants are, whilst taking notes and/or visually or audially record the observations. Furthermore, observation as a data collection method may be unstructured or structured depending on the nature of the study and the desired data. For instance, in structured observations, it is commonplace that the data is collected by the use of predetermined specific variables and according to a pre-determined schedule. This is particularly the case when the study executes multiple observations within the same study (Bryman, 2016; Dudovskij, 2018). Unstructured observation, on the other hand, is conducted in an open and free manner in a sense that there would be no pre-determined variables or objectives.

The obvious advantages of this method are that the researcher is granted direct access to the research phenomena in question (Dudovskij, 2018), which provides the researcher with a high level of flexibility in terms of establishing an information base regarding the phenomena that can be revisited by other- and future scholars (Dudovskij, 2018). However, every coin has two sides and the flipside of this one is that observations as a method are both time consuming and may also be compromised by observer bias (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2013; ; Dudovskij, 2018; Hartas, 2018). Moreover, it is important to note that observation data collection method may be associated with certain ethical issues. When observing children, it is important to note that fully informed consent of research participant(s) is never possible. This will be discussed in more detailed in the ethics chapter.

Observations is a method of qualitative research design that is best applied for questions based on *how* and *why*, and according to Bryman (1988) can be explained as a method of data collection in which researchers observe within a specific research field. Observations are sometimes referred to as an unobtrusive method and participant *observation* involves the *observer* being a member. In educational research, where the researcher attempts to gain access to the children's pedagogical environment in order to better understand them- and their learning experience (Yon, 2003) accessing the children's life within the preschool- and home environment in order to *see, hear and notice* their behaviour and attitudes - is imperative for recording the children's behaviour within said setting. Against this background, observations have been selected as one of the methods for data collection, through which the ambition is to observe *how* the children position themselves in relation to the adults depending in which system, or nested structure (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), they find themselves. In this study, the observations of the children are executed during the interviews in which the researcher and child spend time together in different environmental contexts, sometimes with- and sometimes without a parent or a teacher present.

4.2.3 Case-studies

In his book *The Ecology of Human development, experiments by nature and design* (1979), Urie Bronfenbrenner describes human development as a "lasting change in the way in which a person perceives and deals with his environment" (p. 3). In accordance with Bronfenbrenner's systems theory, the pending thesis advocates the belief that it is necessary to observe children's behaviour in their natural settings - while they are interacting with familiar adults such as parents and teachers - if their perspective and voice is to be understood as well as heard. Bronfenbrenner argues that "the ecological environment is conceived as a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like Russian dolls" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 3) and that "the innermost level is the immediate setting containing the developing person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 3). Thus, the perspectives of the participants will be collected by establishing three case studies, each consisting of a child-parent-teacher triad, where their interpretation *and* understanding of parental engagement in preschool through observations and narrative interviews, is established. The reason for this, is that case studies entails the detailed and intensive analysis of a single case and the process, activity, one or more individuals and so on therein (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Activity as well as time define the case study and throughout the process detailed information is collected over a predetermined period

of time (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Furthermore, case studies as a method is efficient in terms of studying the complexity of single case, where “the case is an object of interest in its own right, and the researcher aims to provide an in-depth examination of it “, (Bryman, 2016) - which ultimately is the goal of the data collection stage of this research.

4.2.4 Story constellations

Similar to other versions of narrative enquiry, story constellations apply the three interpretive tools of *broadening*, *burrowing* and *restorying* (Connelly & Clandinin, 1991) in order to evolve field texts such as interview recordings and field notes into scientific texts (Connelly & Clandinin; 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Craig, 2007). Thus, the story constellations approach has the ability to unveil the human voice through stories which in an educational research perspective, places the researcher in the privileged positing of simultaneously developing context-based and interpersonal relationships with both the story and the person telling the story (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Craig, 2007). The three interpretative tools of story constellations can be described as follows:

1) Broadening: the tool defining the temporal and contextual horizons within which the owners of the stories find meaning (Craig, 2007). This tool is what allows us to see beyond the innermost layer of the micro-system and into the grander exo-, and macro-system.

2) Burrowing: the tool that encourages the reconstruction of events from the perspective of the story’s active agent whilst also “supported by the perspectives of those who immediately surround them” (Craig, 2007, p. 179). This tool is what allows us to investigate relations within the micro-systems, in order to identify the effects on the meso-system.

3) Restorying: this tool ascertains the knowledge landscapes of the individuals as well as the collective (Craig, 2007). This interpretive tool will be applied only on the child-level in order to identify if the stories change from the first interview, to the second and third in accordance with the theory of the chronosystem.

In the story constellations approach, teachers’ narratives of experience relate to one another like “nests of boxes” (Crites, 1975). Ayers, for instance, elaborated the relationships between and among these interacting narratives.

“...there is, of course, not a single story to tell, but a kaleidoscope of stories, changing, flowing, crashing against one another, each one playing, light and shadow, off the others in an infinity of ... patterns” (Ayers, 1995, p. 155).

Narrative enquiries place its focus is on the human experience; allowing the researcher and later on the reader, to think about the human experience in a narrative perspective (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Moreover, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write that “as we tell our stories as inquirers, it is experience, not narrative, that is the driving impulse...narrative inquiry is a way to study experience...narrative is the closest we can come to experience” (p. 188). With a strong focus on story-telling, narration brings forth details of something that may be hard to obtain under more controlled circumstances (such as surveys, questionnaires, structured interviews) and this millefeuille of ever-shifting narratives, each with its own unique code of meaning, context and understanding, consist of several plotlines which often times provide the researcher with several diversions within the narrative that must be taken into consideration when arriving at the stage of deciphering- and re-telling the narratives.

In the case of children, telling a story is not a linear event; distractibility and inattention being primary concerns (Boak, Griffin, Ripple, and Peay, 1999). Multiple meanings are intertwined, depending on the setting and context. “This is how more than one plot can provide a meaningful constellation and integration for the same set of events and different plot organizations can change the meaning of the individual events as their roles are reinterpreted according to their function in a particular plot” (Craig, 2006). Thus, the stories collected from the above methods will form what is referred to as ‘story constellations’ – “a fluid form of investigation that unfolds in a three-dimensional inquiry space, story constellations consist of a flexible matrix of paired narratives that are broadened, burrowed, and restoried over time” (Craig, 2006). The reason for this is to ensure that these ‘nested structures’ *of* and *between* the home and the preschool are equally investigated- and represented in the data analysis. In this way, the story-constellation is also illuminated as a method of analysis.

It is important to note here that central to the study are the three case studies comprising child-parent-teacher triads. Below follows an explanation of the motivation of the selection of

participants for the study and the significance of applying the aforementioned methods when collecting voices by soliciting human values and qualities. The adaptability of this narrative inquiry approach is then made visible through introducing three story constellations separately, then laying sketches of the individual story constellations side-by-side. When analysed in a conjoined fashion, these sketches illustrate how the particularities of place and human agency play out differently in differing contexts (Craig, 2006). Moreover, Bronfenbrenner's *nested structures* of the ecological systems theory places heavy emphasis on the interconnectedness of the systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which is why a constellation of the stories told from all three perspectives is necessary in order to provide a whole picture of the understanding-, meaning- and practice of parental engagement in preschool.

4.3 Participants

The three participating children were selected through a gatekeeper at a local preschool on the background of number of years in preschool, command of language and willingness to engage in conversation with the researcher. The children were approached prior to commencing the study, in order to ensure that there was a level of familiarity between child and researcher. The parents were selected based on gender (all mothers – this to avoid possible gender discussions between male and female parent-participants) and finally the teachers, whom are all selected based on formal education (all are qualified preschool teachers with 3,5 years of higher education) and number of years in the field (between 10-20 years). Thus, the children are all male (by incident), the parents and teachers all female (by deliberation).

4.3.1 The children

The construct - Children's understanding of parental engagement in the preschool setting:

What ideas, thoughts and emotions, if any, do a child have in terms of the symbiosis or interconnectedness of the two systems (preschool and home)? How does this contrast or blend with the parents' and teachers' perspectives?

With the children being central to this thesis, the study adapted the aforementioned two or more interviews approach by Seidman (2006). A series of three separate interviews with each participating child was executed, however, since the third and final interview in this set-up is to “encourage the participants to reflect on the meaning their experiences holds for them” (Seidman, 2006, p. 17) and children between the ages of four and five are often times not sufficiently cognitively developed to reflect on meaning of experience and then verbalize it to an adult (Bruner, 1991; Piaget, 2002), the third ‘interview’ as such was a quick ‘how are you

feeling about our two meetings and what we talked about'. The consent given by parents is thus a consent for two interview occasions, with the third informal meeting acting as a post-interview debriefing event for the child (Bryman, 2016). This third and final exchange took place in the preschool yard while children were relaxed and in play. The reason for this was that in order to avoid that the child's ability to deliver a narrative of an event or relationship, was compromised by the power of suggestibility in the repeated questions (Kulkofsky & Klemfuss, 2008), all measures were taken to alleviate any pressure or stress the child might experience from being approached regarding the same issue several times.

Previous research in narrative enquiry with children, tells us that "the importance of narrative skill in memory development have proposed that through sharing memories in conversations with caregivers, children learn to talk about past personal experiences in socially valued ways while at the same time acquiring a coherent form that aids in the retention and retrieval of past events" (Hudson, 1990; Nelson & Fivush, 2004, as cited in Kulkofsky et al., 2008, p. 1442). Children tell stories; big stories and little stories. Sometimes with many words rushing out very fast, sometimes incoherently. Sometimes very clear and concise and sometimes, in silence, conveying their stories only with their body language and facial expressions. All of these stories, however, are told under the influences of family, religion, social, cultural, and economic discourses (Bamberg, 2011; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Ryan, 2008) and can vary depending on whom the child tells his or her story to, and in which setting and context (Bamberg, 2011). Moreover, another perhaps equally important factor to consider, is the *relation between the child's narrative ability and suggestibility*. This relation is an important contributor to memory development and should not be overlooked when a child is constructing- and delivering a narrative (Kulkofsky, Klemfuss & García Coll, 2008). The reason for this is that a child can be influenced, coached and/or manipulated (Bamberg & Demuth, 2016; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vranješević, 2017), depending on the balance (or imbalance) of the inevitable power-relationship between the adult and the child.

According to many studies in developmental research, a child's narrative skill development is mostly emphasized in research and literature which focuses on *a child's capabilities of retaining memory*. This is particularly the case when a child is asked to reencounter lived experiences, otherwise called *autobiographical memory* (Fivush & Reese, 1992; Hudson, 1990;

Kulkofsky, Klemfuss & García Coll, 2008; Nelson, 2003; Nelson & Fivush, 2004). A child of preschool age, can in many cases deliver well-developed narratives, many which include more than simply a list of events past, and which place significant focus on both physical- and temporal context, providing interpretative information that can convey both the child's meaning- and significance of the narrated event (Bruner, 1991; Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997; Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Thus, the "importance of narrative skill in memory development have proposed that through sharing memories in conversations with caregivers, children learn to talk about past personal experiences in socially valued ways while at the same time acquiring a coherent form that aids in the retention and retrieval of past events (Hudson, 1990, Nelson & Fivush, 2004). A large body of empirical research supports the above theoretical position. For example, it has been consistently demonstrated that children who engage in more elaborate memory conversations with their caregivers are better able to provide information about previously experienced events (Haden et al., 1997; Harley & Reese, 1999; Leichtman, Pillemer, Wang, & Korieshi, 2000; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1993). In the findings, the participating children's ability to engage in these conversations during the interviews, will be linked to the parental attitude to including the child in family conversations in regard to matters that concern the child and/or the immediate family within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) micro- and meso system, demonstrating also the importance of the PPCT model in a child's ability to construct meaning from experience and continuous development.

During the in total six children's interviews – whereof each child partook in two interviews each, two in the preschool setting and one in the home setting – as well as the subsequent observations of the same children in their home- and preschool environment, careful consideration was placed on observations of the child's positioning within their stories, where the child demonstrated that the stories were indeed products of complex mental activity, regulated by developmental processes (Kulkofsky, Klemfuss & Garcia, 2008). Furthermore, the children's stories acted as tools of information, shedding light on how a child's self-expressive imagery is converted to verbal communication through narratives (Bruner, 1991; Graves, 2008; Fivush et al., 1992; Hudson & Fivush, 1990; Kulkofsky, Klemfuss & Garcia, 2008; Nelson & Fivush, 2004). During the time spent with the children, their stories regarding parent engagement were inevitably derived from their own subjective experience, informed of thoughts, hopes, wishes as well as anxieties.

4.3.2 The parents

The construct – Parents’ understanding of parental engagement:

What does parental engagement mean to a parent? How does the parent execute this engagement and what human (or otherwise) qualities are central to the parent when considering what parental engagement in preschool is and whether or not such engagement is important for the child and for the family- and/or preschool?

The first interview which took place face-to-face and spun over the course of an hour, established the context of the participants experience, whilst the second somewhat shorter interview, allowed the participants to in their own time and by email, “reconstruct the details of their experience within the preschool- and home setting in which the parental engagement occurs” (Seidman, 2006, p. 17). The reason for the follow-up interview being per email, was simply to avoid the parent feeling in regard to time. This was the case too, for the third interview, which was executed per telephone. This applied to both parents and teachers.

4.3.3 The teachers

The construct - Preschool teachers understanding of parental engagement:

How do preschool teachers execute the stipulations of the curriculum and to what extent do their own- and the preschool’s ideologies and philosophies dictate this execution? Furthermore, what qualities in parents do teachers consider to be important and/or helpful, when discussing what parental engagement is and how this is to be established, maintained and improved.

Interviews as a method is primarily born from the researcher’s interest in other people’s stories. Listening to and interpreting other people’s stories is a way of knowing and of building knowledge (Seidman, 2006) and although the purpose is “not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypotheses, and not to “evaluate” as the term is normally used” (Seidman, 2006, p. 9), but rather to establish meaning and understanding of people’s experiences.

The teacher interviews took place in the preschool and was pinned strictly against the background of the ruling steering documents, this in order to theorize the teachers as a profession representative of the Swedish educational institution that is preschool. In contrast, the children and the parents were not theorized, but rather left as agents central to the child’s overall perception of the role of preschool in the child’s life and the role of parental engagement within this. The interview questions for the parents were thus focused on understanding of and intention as well as actuality. The distinction between intention and actuality was imperative as

well-meaning parents do not always have the capacity in way of time or other resources, to live up to their own ambitions in regard to their children and the children's time in preschool. Central to the theorizing of the teacher's position and non-theorizing of the parent and child, was establishing the number of hours per 24-hour period, as well as number of meals spent in preschool as opposed to in the home.

4.4 Ethics

When discussing ethical practice in qualitative research, particularly with observations, we can start by making the distinction between *consequentialist approaches* and *deontological approaches*. The former focuses on the actual outcome of the research, on whether participants were harmed or injured during the research, while the latter focuses on the (human) rights of the participant - for instance the participants right to such things as respect and privacy (Murphy and Dingwall, 2001). Case-studies comprising observations and interviews are methods which concern themselves with the submergence of the researcher into the social setting being studied and the results of this are most commonly a research report describing social phenomena in a scientific manner. Below follows some of the legal and ethical implications to consider – particularly when researching with children - as outlined by the United Nations and the Swedish Research Council, as well as a brief description of the implications of consent versus assent. Additional attention is given to the ethics surrounding the non-participating children in preschool who act as moral and social support for the participating children.

4.4.1 United Nations

Article 3.1 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of The Child, states that “In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration” (OHCHR, 1990). Thus, when researching with children, the researcher must protect the best interest of the child and protect the child from experiencing any discomfort, emotional or otherwise.

4.4.2 The Swedish Research Council

According to the Swedish Research Council and the CODEX as stated by the *Ethical Review on Research*, the act concerning research involving humans was introduced in January 2004. The act states that ”It is fundamental that research only be approved if it can be conducted with respect for human dignity and if human rights and fundamental freedoms are constantly heeded.

A person's welfare should be prioritized over the needs of society and science. A subject is therefore allowed to, for instance, withdraw his/her consent to participate in a research project at any time, effective immediately” (CODEX, Centre For Research Ethics, 2018). Furthermore, The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, good research practice rests on the four principles of reliability, honesty, respect and accountability (ALLEA, 2017).

4.4.3 Consent versus Assent

It is important to note that prior to partaking in research, all participants must give consent. However, in the case of a child, obtaining this consent does not mean that consent has been gained from the child, however it does mean that consent to *approach* the child regarding the research *and* engage the child in a conversation regarding the research. Children are potentially vulnerable to the manipulations and exploitations of adults, and also have little or no control over the power relationship between child and adult (Research Ethics Guidebook, 2018). Thus, children can give *assent* through the expression of approval or agreement, but not *consent*. Furthermore, before engaging in interviews or observations with the child, each child was approached regarding the research so that he had the opportunity and space to decide for himself whether or not participation was desirable. The child was also in charge of whether or not digital audio recording was acceptable and for how long the interviews were to last. The child was under no circumstances pushed, persuaded or otherwise – to participate.

4.4.4 Confidentiality

Protecting the identity of participants is central in social research (Bryman, 2016), thus in an effort to manage confidentiality throughout this thesis, every consideration has been taken to ensure that the data provided in the work cannot be traced back to the participants, neither through reports, presentations or any other forms of dissemination (Bryman, 2016; Crow & Wiles, 2008). In order to achieve this, the thesis applies the use of pseudonyms.

4.4.5 Researcher's personal ethical position

In a report written for the European Commission (DG Research and Innovation, 2018) on the subject of ethics (in ethnography and anthropology) Dr. Iphofen writes, “reflexivity is required in which the researcher maintains self-awareness. The researcher must be aware of the consequences of their presence for what may be found out. The findings may be influenced by the researcher's presence either by producing thoughts or actions which are not normally engaged in, or by discouraging people from revealing as much as they normally would” (p. 11).

The above was taken into consideration, particularly since the study was concerned with researching with children as it has been argued that most informed consent is so minimally informed that the giving of consent itself becomes not only an ethical debate, but a political one too (Dingwall, 1980; Murphy & Dingwall, 2001; Atkinson et al., 2001). At the forefront of the researcher's personal research ethics, is the German philosopher Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804), who argues *that human beings must never be simply a means to an end*. In the spirit of the above and in tone with the researcher's personal ethics in regard to children and research, one particular consideration that was given was the matter of any feelings (positive or negative) that arose within the non-participating children when the researcher did not ask for their views, opinions or even drawings. To avoid emotional distress, confusion or the sense of 'singling out' a child, it was decided that all the children would be asked questions and in the event of drawing or playing, offered to join in. However, any data that emerged from this has not been applied in this thesis.

Chapter Five

5.1 The stories

As an aspiring researcher of the educational sciences, I explore matters concerned with language, identity, understanding and culture. For the purpose of this study, I have looked at the stories of the nine participants, where the overarching purpose was to see where their stories align and where they contradict in regard to both steering documents and one another. Through identifying these harmonies and contradictions, the thesis sought to investigate the construct of children's, parents and preschool teachers *understanding* of parental engagement in the Swedish preschool and from that perspective identify the discrepancies between the children's and the adult's understanding, thus broadening the academic debate in regard to how both parents and teachers can better prepare themselves for the micro-societies that their children's world's consist of (Feuerverger, 2011). The definition of parental engagement as applied in this study, was described as "motivated parental attitudes and behaviours intended to influence children's educational well-being" (Christenson, 2004; Fantuzzo, Tighe & Childs, 2000, as cited in Uusimäki et al., 2019. Print), thus the drive behind the above is two-pronged, a) the ethical stance that children should, in accordance with the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, have a say in all matters concerning them and b), that the work team of the preschool

should, in accordance with the curriculum, “maintain an on-going dialogue with guardians on the child’s well-being, development and learning” (National Agency for Education, Lpfö 98, 2010). Beyond this, children’s learning is also about sharing stories of lived experience; it is children discovering the world through aesthetic experience and creating avenues for future knowledge which result in learning events as the child develops (Dewey, 1938; Feuerwerker, 2011). This learning in turn forms part of their social world and intertwined systems as demonstrated by the interconnectedness of the Bronfenbrenner model and the conceptual lens of PPCT.

Before I tell these stories, it must be noted that when investigating terminology- and understanding and execution of terminology as dictated in steering documents within a sphere of life that directly concerns children, it is assumed that adults have *opinions regarding-* and *methods in which* they rate and label children’s behaviour and feelings toward a phenomenon or situation (Nilsson, Björkman, Almqvist, Björk-Willén, Donohue, Enskär, Granlund, Huus, and Hvit, 2015). This indicates that having a child’s perspective is not the same as taking the child’s perspective; the latter in which the child is provided an opportunity and forum to express themselves concerning a particular matter. The stories are thus told in two different settings, providing context for the child’s perspective. The first is the preschool and the second is the home. The reason for this is that children’s episodic memory, which is defined as, “the ability to recall specific past events located in a particular time and place” (Tulving, 1972; Tulving, 1983 as cited in Bauer et al, 2012) is dependent context dependent (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1984; 1989; 1993; 1995a; 1995b; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1993; 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2005; 2006), meaning that their ability to recollect psychological meetings between people as well as recount memories of particular situations are not linear, but may shift depending on the setting in which the child finds himself.

I entered into interview situations with three different boys between the ages of four and five having already interviewed their mothers and their teachers and was therefore equipped to in-situ exercise emotional reflexivity (Blix & Wettergren , 2015) and draw parallels between the stories as delivered by the children, to those previously delivered by the mothers and teachers. The following chapter will tell several stories, all of them starting with the voice of a young preschool boy with the departure point of the preschool context. As the stories evolve, the

proximal processes of the child (PPCT) will be illuminated and the adult voices blended in and referenced back to the curriculum. The reason for this is to investigate the symbiosis (or lack thereof) between the child and adult understanding of the investigated phenomenon. Through this, a story constellation will surface, making visible to the reader the symbiosis and interconnectedness between the perceived realities of the three perspectives, highlighting also story constellations as a qualitative research method (Craig, 2007). Conclusively, we will look across the cases and toward the end of the chapter offer a discussion which concludes the thesis.

Common for all the teacher's interviews is that I at each event was welcomed, shown to a room and invited to sit down with the teacher. Once the formalities were out of the way, I offered that I may start recording and once this was well-received and agreed, recording began. Each interview opens with my stating my name, affiliation purpose of research, and research topic for the record, followed by an invitation (by me) for the teacher to state her name also.

In the case of all three interviews, the further into the interview we got, the more we all relaxed. The teacher spoke, I paid attention to the tone of voice and facial expressions. I paid attention to the words used to describe a feeling or sensation, and I studied their body language. A common philosophy the teachers shared, was that they can become personal with parents, but never private. During the interviews this seemed very much to be the case with me too. Their stories stopping short of confessions at the threshold of the door to curriculum and correctness. It was useful here, to think of their narratives as the most typical form of social life (MacIntyre, 1981/1990, p. 129). The basic tenet of MacIntyre's philosophy is indeed that all social life is a narrative. In her book *Narratives in Social Science Research* (2004) Barbara Czarniawska writes that "This, in turn, need not be an ontological claim; life might or might not be an enacted narrative but conceiving of it as such provides a rich source of insight" (p. 3). Thus, we make the assumption that the human's social life consists of actions and events, whereby we create experience and meaning which we then narrate into stories that are storied and restoried over time (Craig, 2006; Czarniawska, 2004). The teacher interviews took place in the preschool and was pinned strictly against the background of the ruling steering documents, this in order to theorize the teachers as a profession representative of the Swedish educational institution that is preschool. In contrast, the children and the parents were not theorized, but rather left as agents central to the child's overall perception of the role of preschool in the child's life and the role

of parent engagement. This is further demonstrated in figures 7 - 8 (pp. 73 - 74), where the teachers' stories are on the periphery of the child's and mother's stories.

In contrast, the children's stories are narrated from two different starting points; the preschool- and the home context, where we look at understanding and pathways of parental engagement of both, in order to see where the child- and the adult voices blend and where they contradict. The two interviews were executed approximately one week apart. I allowed this time to pass between our meetings primarily in order to give the children time to ponder our previous time together and also to fade the connection between the two interviews (Seidman, 2006). This way I also work with the children over a period of almost a month, from our first meeting to our final one, something which according to Seidman's (2006) two-or-more interviews structure is helpful in that, "this passage of time reduces the impact of possibly idiosyncratic interviews. That is, the participant might be having a terrible day, be sick, or be distracted in such a way as to affect the quality of a particular interview" (Seidman, 2006; p. 21). Furthermore, I wanted to maintain the children's working memory² in regard to our conversations and not allow too much time to pass between our meeting as well as challenge their memory, in order to investigate whether the children's ability to recall their thoughts and perception of parent engagement with preschool and the teachers there in an effort to establish if the children's understanding was tied specifically to a particular time and place (preschool).

The stories begin mid-November 2018 and end mid-January 2018/19, spanning over two winter months in a small suburban community on the west-coast of Sweden. Any dialogue that appears throughout the storytelling, is verbatim.

5.2 Case 1: Noah

5.2.1 Preschool context

The young boy waited eagerly as I entered the preschool at the arranged time. 'Noah', the teacher said, 'look who is here for you'. The young boy gave me a huge grin and with his teacher right behind him, walked confidently toward me. Alert and softly spoken, Noah had

² Working memory is that part of our memory that we use to plan and carry out an action; that mental workspace where we manipulate information (Cowan 2010; Miller et al 1960).

been approached for the study particularly for his verbal abilities; albeit one year younger than the other two participants, he possessed a natural command of the language and willingness to engage in conversation. I'd spoken to him on several occasions in the preschool playground, asking gently every time if he was still ok with our arrangement. He was. His mother had prepared him this morning, his teacher too, reminding him that at 9 am I would arrive, and that he and I would chat about what parent engagement in his preschool meant to him. He said he understood. Upon greeting him 'good morning', I crouched down and asked him if he remembered why I was there. His teacher, clearly allowing him to take charge of the situation, stood silently a short distance behind him. He said he remembered. Surrounded by rows of children's photographs signaling each individual child's place in the hallway, we stood in the morning light and agreed that today was the day for our very important meeting. He looked excited. Eyes shining and happily giggling, he took my hand and led me into the main room where the other children had just finished breakfast.

We stood there for a moment, him holding onto my hand not for his sake but for mine – as if he wanted me to feel safe. I did. This gesture on his behalf, of taking my hand and leading me, early on demonstrated an ownership of identity and contextual belonging (Maxwell & Chmielewski, 2008; Wenger, 1998). With his warm little hand still firmly holding mine, I looked around. He let me take my time. There was a reading corner, a building corner a quiet corner, a crafts corner and a dress-up corner, and the walls were lined with texts that the children had penned, paintings and mind-maps that they had drawn, planetary systems they had crafted hung from the ceiling and the windows were adorned with various colourful artwork. I scanned the room just to see his teacher trying to make eye-contact with me, she had called for the second child to join us and he was just entering the room from the far door. I will return to the second child later, telling first the stories of Noah, his mother and his teacher.

Understanding

Noah and I walked to the left, entering a room with tables, large windows and several themed toys areas. We looked around and he started telling me about what we could do with the various toys. Taking his time to include me in the conversation, Noah made sure I was listening and that I had space to ask questions when needed. We soon set about building a construction of sorts, making small-talk as we went along. After a while, the door opened and three other children came in to join us, curious of my presence there. As we sat there, I watched Noah's

facial expressions and his body language; I studied his hands, his breathing, how he and the other children seemed to know exactly what to do with each piece that formed the construction, without ever having sat down to design- or plan it. I was impressed. Noah is a cheerful child and he had already told me in the hallway earlier on that he had been looking forward to our meeting and that he was ready to answer all my questions, so I felt that I had an open invitation and was now just biding my time to find a moment when he wasn't all-consumed by the construction at hand.

Sitting there in the morning light, the five children and I, find ourselves on colourful adventures through conversation, one which holds surprisingly many threads at the same time. Noah particularly excited about conversationally diverting, expertly so, on a multitude of tangents covering a wide array of topics simultaneously. These are important topics of great mystery, such as why some fish can fly, the colour of white and why giraffes would make for terrible racehorses. Whenever asked a direct question about his parents in relation to the preschool or teachers in relation to the home however, he pauses, hands still, and takes his time answering the question. His body language is relaxed; he appears confident and safe in this environment. His positioning of himself in the room, centre and closest to me out of all the children, demonstrates both ownership and trust.

Albeit a young child of four and a half, Noah demonstrated that morning a definite sense of meaning through a clear display of *belonging*; one similar to the concept I recall from studying the dynamics of a CoP. According to Wenger (2014), a community of practice is a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.

Meaning

Wenger (2014), argues that engagement, imagination and alignment are the three primary factors which create sensations of belonging - which in turn can result in an identity growth. This occurs in different ways, through both time and space (p. 181). Noah was, through his narration of his perception and understanding of his parents' role in his pedagogical development and well-being, demonstrating that this was (and I quote) 'the children's preschool, a place where they come to play and to learn'. He told me he knew that parents worked when he was there, but that since it was his preschool, he'd be there regardless of what

his parents were up to. Thus, Noah when asked about parent engagement in preschool, whilst in the preschool setting, was determined that they were tools he needed to deliver home there and to pick him up again.

Me: Why do you think children are in preschool?

Noah: To learn.

Me: And what do you do here all day?

Noah: I learn a lot of new things and play a lot.

Me: And do you think that your mum and dad have something to do with your preschool?

Noah: No, not really.

Me: So, whose preschool is it?

Noah: Mine. Ours. It's the children's preschool of course! (giggles)

Me: Why is it the children's?

Noah: Because we come here to play and to learn.

Me: And what do your parents do here?

Noah: They come to see us sing at Christmas, and they have to take me here and pick me up of course!

Noah's perception of the symbiosis between the two systems consisted primarily of the assistance the adults provided him with in order for him to attend to tasks in both systems. The proximal processes of person and context (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994) strengthening his conception of an interconnectedness between the relations in his microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). He informed me also that, children are too young to go to and from preschool themselves, and that he didn't believe that was allowed. Besides, his mum knows all the teachers and they talk, so she probably has to go there anyway, to talk to them about (in his words) 'things'. When I enquired into what these 'things' were, Noah shrugged and told me that it was obviously about him, but that he didn't mind about the details.

Practice

The above makes visible that Noah perceives the existence of a bridge between two microsystems in his life; the home and his preschool together form part of his mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and that his own development nestles between the interactions of the reciprocal relationship (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) between his home and his preschool. When interviewing his mother on the same topic, I was informed that albeit her primary concern was always the well-being of the child on his most intimate level, the family possess and overall confidence and trust in the preschool. Furthermore, the mother told me that although neither

she nor the father are particularly engaged in parent teacher association activities or even in turning up to parent nights, they are heavily invested in their children's well-being and development, considering that the daily communication between parent and teacher is by far more important than the collective efforts (such as parent evenings). The mother also placed great emphasis on the importance of talking with her son, rather than to him.

When interviewing his teacher, her emphasis was on the importance of the preschool not being a place for 'child storage', rather an educational care facility where the compensatory mission is primarily to provide the child with a meaningful day, nurturing development and lust of learning. This aligned with the mother's story that the child's well-being was the focal point of the preschool and that how the policies and curriculum were interpreted and carried out, should depend entirely on the children and their needs. The teacher was certain that the method in which she achieved this was by in accordance with the steering documents, "show respect for parents and be responsible for developing good relationships between staff of the preschool and the children's families" (Lpfö 98, 2010).

Albeit Noah is not consciously aware of this, we can speculate, based on his behaviour when discussing home and preschool, that a suggested finding in this narrative, is that this engagement between the systems, which is executed through face-to-face dialogue between teacher and parent in view of the child, contributes to his sense of self and well-being (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Haiden, Haine, Fivush, 1997). Aged four and a half, Noah may not have reached a level of cognitive awareness sophisticated enough to reflect on this occurrence (Bamberg, 2011; Piaget, 2002), however he is aided in his understanding of the scope of his world through the visible communication of the adults and their collective effort to "maintain an on-going dialogue with guardians on the child's well-being, development and learning" (Lpfö 98, 2010). The interconnectedness between the children's microsystem forming the overarching mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner 1979) of daily activities of the child was evident in Noah, his mother and his teacher. When placed in the preschool context, the stories blend in that they meet and the meaning and understanding of their lived experience is harmonious.

5.2.2 Home context

One week after our time together in the preschool, I knock on Noah's front door. It is time for our second interview. Noah greets me, again with the same enthusiasm as last time we met. It

was morning and at home was him and his mother. It was Tuesday, and they had the day off together as was their tradition every second Tuesday. Left to ourselves, Noah's mother disappeared into the laundry to finish some chores and Noah and I got comfortable on a sofa they had in the downstairs lounge. He brought me an atlas. We sat there for a while, looking at countries and discussing capital and lower-case letters, how to use them and why countries all started with a capital. Noah could read, spelling F-r-a-n-k-r-i-k-e (France, in Swedish) carefully, taking his time to both enunciate and pronounce, correctly. He asked me how come lions don't live in France and if I'd been there. I told him that Lions are native to Africa and that yes, I had. Curious about this lust of learning, I started asking him if he considered his home a place of learning. He didn't. I asked him what he thought his friends in preschool were doing right now and in order to answer that he informed me that he needed to know what time it was and what the weather was like before being qualified to answer that. I told him it was just past ten in the morning and it was cold but sunny. They are outdoors playing then, he said. With coveralls and hats, he added. They didn't have any particular plans this day, his mother and him. It was their bi-monthly Tuesday day-off when it was just the two of them and they liked to not have any particular plans, rather taking things as they come.

We spent over an hour talking about preschool, his purpose there, if he'd like to be there instead of home. No, he wouldn't. In fact, contrary to his attitude when in the preschool context, Noah showed no interest at all in preschool. Having moved from considering preschool his place of learning and somewhere he'd like to go daily even if his parents had the day off, to being quite indifferent to what went on there in his absence and what he would do on his return, was a stark contrast to the first finding – namely that of him considering the preschool a part of his mesosystem, hence a place where he with joy spent a large part of his life.

5.3 Case 2: Elliott

5.3.1 Preschool context

We met the same morning as I had met with Noah and upon seeing each other from across a room scattered with children playing dress-up, cars and reading books, we smiled at one another at which he ran over and hugged me. Elliott is one year older than Noah is and due to start school next year. I had approached him about the study in an almost identical manner to Noah and like Noah, Elliott had also confirmed on several occasions that he was comfortable with this participation and happy to engage in conversation with me. Together we played our way,

skipping along, from the main room to the room that had been allocated to us for the morning. With nothing but time, talk and toys, we entered into this investigation of Elliott's conception of understanding parent engagement in preschool and which level of (if any) meaning he related to this.

Understanding

We enter the room and I look around. Elliott's body language changes somewhat, he suddenly seems more distant. Of course, Elliot had slightly different prerequisites than Noah; he wasn't from this part of the preschool, nor had his teacher accompanied him to our meeting. He was from the next-door department and had come here to join us this morning for the interviews. I was quickly aware that he didn't really feel quite at home. Hoping that perhaps it was this sensation of not belonging to this group of individuals that held him back (Wenger, 2017) I offered to him that I too was new here and that maybe the two of us could be here together with the other children? He liked that. Slowly he seemed to relax, some of the tension in his facial expressions releasing into a vague smile, and he started humming a song. It was the ABC song. Wary of Elliott's mood, which I interpreted to be nervousness, I observed him for a while, searching for a way to approach the subject of why we were here. Doubtlessly he knew and being an articulate and alert child, it was fair to assume that he wouldn't be in the room unless he wanted to.

Time can sometimes seem elastic when with children; often times an adult's sense of time can differ greatly to children's and the concept of minutes and hours are reduced instead to the *things we do*, rather than *the time we have to do it*. Considering this, I avoided looking at my watch, focusing instead on Elliott's body language. Eventually I ventured gently, 'Elliott, do you remember why I am here?' 'Yes.' 'And how do you feel about talking to me about your parents and this preschool and your teachers here?' 'Fine. It's fine', he said and gave me a vague smile. The other children ignored my questions and busily continued building.

It is sometimes implied in qualitative research that children can't have their views and opinions heard unless they are verbal (Nilsson, 2015). However, that is not true in the case of Elliott. His body language is tense, and he does not seem at ease. I ask him if he wants to leave, he looks at me and mutters that he needs the toilet. When he returns, he walks straight over to where I am sitting on the floor and looks at me. My interpretation of this behaviour is that he is now

ready and is showing that to me by facing me. I ask him if he can help me figure this one toy out. He can. He tells he has the same at home, but that it's broken. This is my cue and I ask him what else he has at home, aside from toys – a family, perhaps? He tells me he does. A mother, a father, two cats and a brother. Sometimes his grandmother is there too. He tells me that sometimes she picks him up and that she knows the way here (to preschool) from her house. Thus, he makes visible through his story that one of his microsystems extend to at least one known grandparent, expanding the possibility of support in the process of well-being and development to at least three known adults outside of preschool (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). I recall from my interview with his mother that she mentioned a tight support system extending to grandparents and also other parents at the same preschool. I tell him 'that's nice' and try to turn the subject onto his parents and how he feels about the pathways been home and preschool.

Meaning

When faced with a direct question, Elliott answers short and fast. Yes. No. I don't know. He tells me that he doesn't really know why he is in preschool, that nobody told him about why. He says he knows his parents work and he thinks that's probably why, but he's not sure. To Elliott, preschool is a place he goes to wait for his parents to come back. He does this for up to ten hours a day. I know from my fact checking that Noah on the other hand, spends significantly less time there, and has every second Tuesday off with his mum. I ask Elliott if he ever has a day off with his mum or his dad. He says he can't remember. When I ask him if he thinks his mum knows his teachers' he says that maybe she does, he's not sure. He's seen them talk, but he doesn't know about what. I probe a little further, who dropped him off this morning? He doesn't know. Who will pick him up? He replies that maybe his mother will come today, but he's not certain. I ask him a series of questions and he's happy to comply. During his time here, what does he do? Elliott tells me he plays here, that he has friends here, but that ultimately, he doesn't learn anything here. He just waits for his parents to come for him.

Me: Why do you think children are in preschool?

Elliott: I'm here because... well, I don't really know. I think my parents are at work, maybe.

Me: And what do you do here all day?

Elliott: I wait for my mum and my dad.

Me: And do you think that your mum and dad have something to do with your preschool?

Elliott: No. I only play here, but it's boring sometimes. I don't like boring.

Me: So, whose preschool is it?

Elliott: The teachers and the children.

Me: And why is that?

Elliott: Because this is where we are in the day to play and things.

Me: And what do your parents do here?

Elliott: They pick me up. My brother used to be here, but he's in school now.

During our time together that morning, Elliott doesn't want to settle down. He has been excited about our morning, but now the morning is upon him he has troubling settling down into conversation. It occurs to me that perhaps in Elliott's reality, there is not a visible pathway of engagement between home and preschool, perhaps he is not conscious of a communication between parents and teachers? Wary of the power of suggestibility in narrative inquiries with children (Kulkofsky, Klemfuss, and García, 2008) I decide to, for now, focus on observing him in this environment waiting instead for him to pick up the conversation thread again. He doesn't. Instead he talks to me about the preschool, about the toys they have there. I decide therefore, that instead of asking about the pathways between his home and the preschool, I will place his parents in the current context and try to make visible to Elliott the symbiosis between home and preschool. I do this by verbally suggesting that we move the participants from one microsystem, to another, in order to provoke Elliott's imagination, where he himself can connect the dots between the two systems. I have no result. At this stage of our interview, he is either unwilling and stubborn, or he lacks the information to participate with me – the latter indicative of the overall significance he places on the actual engagement that I am enquiring about.

Practice

When interviewing his mother, she informed me that a natural pathway between the home and preschool had been created through a continuous dialogue between the home and school. That the teachers did, in accordance with the curriculum, “show respect for parents and be responsible for developing good relationships between staff of the preschool and the children's families” (Lpfö 98, 2010). Furthermore, the mother also said that the family as a whole placed great emphasis on “maintaining an on-going dialogue with guardians on the child's well-being, development and learning” (Lpfö 98, 2010) and that conversations regarding the children's day as well as any documentation from Unikum around the dinner table, was daily practice. It was also Elliott's teacher's understanding that Elliott did not only understand the digital platform Unikum, where information-sharing regarding the children's development and pedagogical day was focal, he also participated in the conversation (in preschool) regarding this. This perception

on the adults' behalf, is however, misinformed. In my conversations with Elliott however, this understanding and participation does not visibly transpire, Elliott appearing devoid of any knowledge connecting the two systems.

5.3.2 Home context

A week after our meeting in preschool, I walk up to the door of the family home and ring the doorbell. Elliott himself opens the door and gestures for me to come in. He looks happy to see me and is clearly excited about something he would like to show me. In retrospect, I see that at this stage I make a vital mistake: instead of letting him begin with showing me, I ask him gently if it is ok that I record this conversation too. He replies with a short and firm 'no!' His father, whom at this point is in the kitchen preparing dinner, calls to him that, 'oh come on Elliott, just let her record it – it's so hard to remember all the details later!'. Elliott is looking down at his feet, his body language closed and worried that I am turning his mood from receiving and open to shut and non-cooperative, I quickly offer that 'never mind, I don't need the silly recorder, let's see what you wanted to show me instead'. Elliott smiles again and quickly takes my hand leading me upstairs to his bedroom. The toy he wants to show me is in fact broken, it's the same toy that he picked up in preschool and told me that he had at home. Together we investigate it and as we sit there, me on the top stair of the stairwell, for ethical reasons deliberately maintaining his father within earshot, and him, on the threshold between landing and bedroom, we chat and look at various things he brings me from his room. Throughout the fifty minutes that I spend with him in his home, he expertly evades any question related to parent engagement in preschool and his understanding or thoughts regarding this. I conclude this second interview with Elliott without having further investigated his understanding of parent engagement in preschool.

5.4 Case 3: Mason

5.4.1 Preschool context

Mason is the same age as Elliott, he's turning six and has also been selected for the study due to his command of the language. I enter the preschool and walk up the few stairs that take me from the first entrance to the hallway where the children keep their coats and boots. Facing me is a large white board with some information on it. I remembered this from my interview with Mason's mother, she had suggested to the teachers they use this board to share other information than whether or not any staff were sick today or if the stomach fly was doing the rounds.

Mason's mother had asked that they use it to update in brief regarding what themes they were pursuing that week and whether or not the children had any projects going on. This, I thought, was a very effective way of creating, for the teachers and parents at least, a natural pathway of daily communication regarding the child's day. Today however, the board was blank. I looked at the coats and raingear hanging up and searched for Mason's name. I eventually spotted it just as I approached the entrance to the main room. Instead of being greeted by a teacher, I was met by a very young child who staggered over to me. '*Deh deh*', she said and smiled at me, saliva trickling out from under her pacifier. I smiled at her and bent down. '*Well hello there, good morning to you too*', I smiled. Delighted at this greeting, she started giggling loudly, her eyes sparkling. Behind her I spotted who I knew to be Mason's younger brother. He smiled at me, then returned his gaze to a TV screen that hung on the wall facing the sofa where the children sat.

The room was busy; the younger children were sitting on the sofa, looking tired. Some of them were rubbing their eyes. It was 8am and many had already been there for an hour. I searched for an adult and for Mason but found neither. I decided to ask Mason's brother. He pointed to the small kitchen adjacent to the room we were and said, 'over there'. '*Good morning, I'm Tina. I'm here to spend some time with MB*', I said loud enough for her to hear. The (presumably) teacher, who had two young children in her lap, turned around to face me and looking confused, she tried to reach out a hand from under the two bundles she was holding to greet me. '*Don't worry, your hands have more important things to do.*' She smiled at me, '*thanks*', she said and let out a big sigh before returning her attention to the two young children in her lap.

Understanding

Suddenly Mason came rushing out from another room down the corridor, he had two friends in tow, a boy and a girl. They looked to be his age, five. He looked startled when he saw me, but his surprise soon changed into a smile and he said, 'Hey!' He was full of beans and wide awake, 'Come, let's go this way!'. He skipped down the corridor, his friends in tow, and I did as I was asked. He seemed very 'ready'. I have searched for a better way of describing his attitude toward me when I arrived, but I vain. Ready, is what he was. Ready to talk, ready to answer questions, ready to work.

A sudden feeling of the need a more formal opening to the morning, overwhelmed me. It felt ethically wrong to be there, alone in a room with three children two of whom I have never met before. I asked Mason to ‘just hold on a moment’ and went looking for his teacher. Just as I was about to return to Mason, not having succeeded in locating her, she appeared from the preschool’s other department. After a quick chat, I returned to Mason and his two friends and found them standing up waiting for me by the door. Once inside, Mason shut the door and said, ‘best it’s closed so we can talk in peace’. From then on, he successively answered all my questions in ten minutes. His replies were fast, and he came across very correct, almost rehearsed. From this, I drew the conclusion that this was his way of demonstrating his readiness for this task, he was showing me that he was mature enough to contribute to my study by focusing only on responding to the words that came from me. The United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child has in article 12 emphasized children’s right to make themselves heard in regard to decision-making (United nations, 1989) and it was Mason’s decision that the interview be carried out this way and I was not in an ethical position to question that.

Meaning

Although children’s possibility to participate in decision-making can differ from time to time, it was clear that he wanted to claim ownership of this situation in this context (Bauer et al., 2012) and this was his way of doing that.

Me: Why do you think children are in preschool?

Mason: Because parents have to work to make money.

Me: And what do you do here all day?

Mason: I play.

Me: And do you think that your mum and dad have something to do with your preschool?

Mason: No, not really.

Me: So, whose preschool is it?

Mason and his two friends: OURS! (they exclaim this simultaneously)

Me: Why is it the children’s?

Mason: Because we come here to play with each other.

Me: And what do your parents do here?

Mason: I don’t know.

We spend an hour playing and I try to elaborate on Mason’s answers to identify any further understanding of his perception of his parents’ engagement in his preschool. The three friends

are tightly intertwined in both their verbal- and body language and it is difficult to ascertain whether or not Mason's replies are his own or a product of the current group dynamic. Mason had told me that he comes there to play and then primarily with the boy who was currently present. He also ventured that if the boy was absent from preschool, Mason's day would be boring and less meaningful. 'I only like to play with (name)', he told me, upon which the two boys moved even closer to one another. Mason also told me that he was certain that his parents worked when he was there, otherwise he would have been at home. Thus, Mason when asked about parent engagement in preschool, whilst in the preschool setting, appeared confident that his parents had placed him there so they could go about their day and that they would come for him again later when their working day was done. In this he did demonstrate that he understood the position of preschool in his life, as an integral part of one of his microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), but that this was his parents' choice, and not his. Sensing our time is coming to an end, I ask Mason if it would be ok that him and I talk a little more about a few things. He looks at me and replies that, 'yes, let's go sit on the sofa and talk'. He takes the lead and walks through a corridor, toward the room with the sofa and TV where I had entered when I first arrived. The TV is now on and the children are watching a cartoon. Mason catches sight of the TV and turns his attention away from me and onto the moving characters on the screen. Realizing that I have lost his attention, I make one final effort to guide him away from the screen, but to no avail. It's around 9am and our time together this morning is concluded.

Practice

I knew from having interviewed his mother and his teacher, that both adults considered there to be a strong engagement from the home to the preschool. Mason's mother was well educated insofar as the steering documents, expectations from preschool and also Mason's individual learning needs went. The mother had told me that she had pursued extensive dialogues with the preschool, both in terms of how she could be an engaged parent- and also what was expected from her. 'I ask them every day when I pick him up what they have been doing and how the day has been, maintaining an active dialogue with the preschool is important to us. When I asked her how she makes visible this pathway to the child however, she was uncertain – saying she perhaps had to reflect over at which level she actually included the child.

During the interview with me, the mother volunteered that that, 'perhaps I am more concerned with what the teachers need, in terms of participation, or even material, than I am with the

individual needs. I guess I see my interest in the teacher's well-being and day as an extension of his well-being, after all, if they don't have what they need, neither will he'. This reflected the teacher response, whom several times during the interview lifted the pedagogical value of parent participation on a verbal communication level. The teacher was greatly concerned with fulfilling her duties as outlined in Lpfö 98, particularly where the work-team's obligations were concerned, explaining to me that it was imperative that the staff "show respect for parents and be responsible for developing good relationships between staff of the preschool and the children's families, through maintaining an on-going dialogue with guardians on the child's well-being, development and learning" (Lpfö 98, 2010). Furthermore, the teacher and the mother both considered that progress for the child could be achieved through an on-going dialogue where the preschool "take due account of parents' viewpoints when planning and carrying out activities" (Lpfö 98, 2010), however it was not in either the parent nor the teacher interview explained to me how this is achieved.

5.4.2 Home context

It's early evening and I've been invited by the mother to join the family for dinner to execute my follow-up interview with Mason in his home. I ring the doorbell and I'm greeted by Mason and his little brother. Mason looking eager, he asks me to come inside and tells me that I'm sitting next to him at dinner tonight. I ask Mason if he remembered why I was there and if I could record our conversation, he replies that yes, he does remember and yes, I can. His mother was in the kitchen as we sat down at the table, the home was open planned so we were both aware that she could hear us, something she told me after the interview that she suspected affected his responses. Remembering Mason's attitude to the interview questions when part of the group dynamic in preschool, I consider this speculation to hold some value, however I have no way of determining this. While at the table, waiting for his mother to join us, we talked about his day in preschool, of which he was reluctant to talk and unwilling to share information. He said that he had played, but that he'd like to show me some toys in his room later. His little brother was at the table with us and Mason told me that he was quite little but that they'd played together today in preschool. Once we had talked about other things for a while and eaten a little, I turned the conversation back to his preschool. We talked about choice and where he would like to be during the day. Mason is clear about one thing; he'd rather be at home. His previous statements about wanting to be where his friend is, are no longer of importance to him. Mason's general attitude to the preschool when in the centre of his microenvironment, was identified as

indifferent. His focus was on his toys and his freedom of movement within his home, he also expressed some disapproval toward some of the pre-determined activities in preschool (such as drawing and crafting) and expressed that he would rather be at home and play with his parents.

In establishing three case-studies consisting of a child-mother-teacher triad, a three-dimensional narrative of the same phenomenon was effectively created, allowing for the stories to be told in all three voices. When interviewing the parents and the teachers, emphasis was placed on understanding of the term 'parent engagement' with emphasis on the child's voice. Against the background of steering documents such as the preschool curriculum, questions were drafted with the goal of encouraging information sharing and stories in regard to lived experience. Through listening to- and interpreting the children's and the adults' stories, we discover a way of knowing and of building knowledge (Seidman, 2006). The purpose is "not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypotheses, and not to "evaluate" as the term is normally used" (Seidman, 2006, p. 9), but rather to establish *meaning* and *understanding* of people's experiences. Searching for stories through interviewing to see where they contradict and where they blend, is a way of allowing the same narrative to be told again and again, but from different perspectives, which is what the above stories have demonstrated. The following section will discuss the findings of these stories and discuss these according to theme, looking across the cases.

5.5 Findings

Against the theoretical backbone of the Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, this study set out to investigate the construct of parents and preschool teachers understanding of parent engagement in the Swedish preschool and from that perspective identify the discrepancies between the children's and the adult's understanding. The reason for this, was to develop an understanding regarding of the expectations of parents - in relation to Lpfö 98 as executed by the preschool teachers - and how this may or may not affect the child's understanding of the connection between the two systems of home and preschool and the child's well-being. The three constructs that were investigated are as follows, 1) children's understanding of parent engagement in the preschool setting, 2) parents understanding of parent engagement and 3) preschool teachers understanding of parent engagement. When investigating these constructs applying only qualitative methods, the analysis of body language, tone of voice and facial expressions was of great support when collating the interview data in the

transcriptions. By applying emotional reflexivity (Blix & Wettergren, 2015), I was able to be attentive to my own emotional signals along with those of the children and adults, which provided an increased position of monitoring actions within an environment. Thus, in analysing the interview data, the three primary themes that emerged against the background of the above three constructs, were 1) understanding, 2) meaning and 3) practice as seen through the conceptual lens of children's proximal processes (PPCT).

Throughout this study, the stories of the nine participants have been investigated, harmonies and discrepancies between the children's and the adult's understanding have been identified broadening the academic debate in regard to how both parents and teachers can better prepare themselves for the micro-societies that their children's world's consist of (Feuerverger, 2011). When determining the findings of this study however, two concepts were necessary to take into consideration. These were the concept of spatial orientation³ and the concept of children's memory function⁴. An important aspect of the latter is defining and identifying the role of episodic memory⁵ (Tulving, 1972). Before proceeding, the reader is reminded of the definitions, summarizing the process upon which the Bronfenbrenner theory is built, that "the ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 21). In determining the findings of this thesis therefore, the assumption is that – and in accordance with the theory – changes in one system, or environment, will cause a ripple effect in the other systems. The systems are thus defined as interdependent. Furthermore, the importance of spatial components in defining memory became particularly visible during the time spent in the children's homes and as we will see across the cases, this is a common prerequisite for the findings.

³ A child's memory functions are prominent in several phenomena in a child's systems, including the "power of spatial location as a cue to recall" (Bahrick, 1975; Belezza, 1983, as cited in Bauer et al., 2012).

⁴ Children's ability to recall events vary greatly from child to child and a contributing factor to whether or not a child can indeed recall the events in questions depends to a large art on to which level they are included in conversation at home (Hudson, 1990, Nelson & Fivush, 2004).

⁵ "Episodic memory receives and stores information about temporally dated episodes or events, and temporal spatial relations among these events. A perceptual event can be stored in the episodic system solely in terms of its perceptible properties or attributes, and it is always stored in terms of its autobiographical reference to the already existing contents of the episodic memory store" (Tulving, 1972).

5.5.1 Finding 1: understanding

The nature of the child's most immediate system, that of the home, is that it fosters his relationships to other spheres of his life (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Common for all three cases were several factors, among these is the amount of the children's waking day spent in the care of adults other than their parents. All three children spend between eight and ten hours a day in preschool, consuming two out of three of the day's primary meals there. Considering this, and that the children find themselves in various systems throughout the day, waking up in one microenvironment and shortly thereafter being moved to another microenvironment, the study identified two expected findings in the early stages of the research. These were, 1) that there would exist a conception of symbiosis in the child's mind, between home- and preschool, and 2) that the child whose parent was on the surface very engaged, having perhaps read the curriculum and/or was very active with following the documentation on Unikum, would have a greater understanding of the purpose of preschool and the interconnectedness between the systems' than the child whose parent didn't.

Previously in this thesis, when discussing the cognitive development perspective of children and how the interactions of the participants of the children's lives affect a child's development, it was noted that according to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the more encouraging and nurturing these relationships and places are, the better the child will be able to develop healthily. Furthermore, it was described that the way in which a child acts or reacts to the people in their microsystems will inevitably affect effect how they child is treated in return (in this case, by parents and teachers). Looking across the cases, we will see how what we thought we know is contradictory to what we now know.

The mother in Case 1, claimed absolute trust in the system, and volunteered that she had never read the curriculum-, engaged in the preschool beyond the daily dialogues at drop-off and pick up, or ever consciously attempted to deliberately extend visible pathways between home- and preschool to her son, Noah. The mother assumed that if the child is not happy, he will express that and the preschool as a collective and the maintenance of a particular engagement as such, was not a priority – making it clear that her primary concern was her child's well-being and his well-being only. Symptoms of the state of this was sought by her from him- and from direct

communication with the teachers. Communication consisting of a few minutes dialogue once or twice a day.

The child in Case, 1 (Noah), was the only child to connect the preschool to the curriculum, stating verbally in various ways throughout his interview, that he was there to learn, and that the preschool was the children's place of learning. Noah identified the verb 'learn' as the lead verb for describing the purpose of the preschool. When in the preschool setting, Noah was not concerned with his parents' role in this part of his life, leaning only on the teachers for the support he needed throughout the day.

The mothers in Case 2 (Elliott) and Case 3 (Mason), claimed a high level of involvement, considering themselves to be actively participating in their children's pedagogical day. However, neither child's narratives reflected this. Both Elliott and Mason assumed the preschool to be a place where they were kept while their parents had other things to do; both of them identifying 'play' as the lead verb for describing the purpose of preschool. When in the preschool setting, both Elliott and Mason was waiting for their parents to come and take them home. Furthermore, the teacher in Case 1, was actively engaged in Noah's interview process and situation, communication to him both verbally and bodily his position of ownership of both identity and self in the preschool setting. The teacher emphasised this by being present upon my arrival and visibly allowing him space to take command of the situation. This blends with the preschool mission to ensure child well-being through assuming a holistic approach (see p. 24) to the child and the mother's assumption that the preschool will do what is best for the development and well-being (National Agency for Education, Lpfö 98, 2010) of the child. In contrast, the teacher's in Cases 1 and 2, were not present upon my arrival, one of them not making an appearance at all and the other appearing only to greet me and wish me welcome. From the researcher perspective his certainly signals trust, however it is uncertain whether or not this affects the child's positioning through an absence of teacher's emotional support.

5.5.2 Finding 2: meaning

The above findings indicate that only one out of the three participating children possessed a clear understanding of the symbiosis of the microsystems, demonstrating both ownership of self and a sense of belonging (Wenger, 2017). This child was Noah and his teacher's demonstration in the morning of the interview of visibly allowing him the authority to openly

assume control of his pending interview situation, also mirrored this sense of self and of belonging; there was a symbiosis between the two of them, and between his story and his mother's. However, two out of three participating children, Elliott and Mason, lack visible encouragement and nurturing in regard to the relationships and places that pertain to the microsystems that ultimately form their mesosystem. Bronfenbrenner (1979) dictates that the more encouraging and nurturing these relationships and places are, the better the child will be able to develop healthily-, grow- and develop learning happenings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dewey, 1938; Feuerverger, 2011; Lpfö 98, 2010). Within this growth and development lies the child's ability to learn- and to find meaning in his pedagogical day (Dewey, 1938; Feuerverger, 2011), something that when in the preschool setting, contrary to the parents and teachers' beliefs, was identified as absent from both OL and MB's relationships with their preschool.

5.5.3 Finding 3: practice

In Case 1, Noah's primary microsystem, his most intimate level of life, was dominating his well-being and sense of self (Wenger, 2017) and pushing the other systems to the periphery (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This was his way of practicing the ownership he possessed of his role in each microsystem, allowing for meaning-making and well-being to exist regardless of which microsystem he found himself in. As cited in Bauer (2012, p. 512) "Fivush (1984) noted that when kindergarten children told an interviewer about their day at school, they discriminated events based on location changes throughout the day". This was not the case with Noah when in the preschool setting. The children from Case 2 and case 3, Elliott and Mason respectively, did however make such discriminations against events, clearly stating that given the option to leave their doings in preschool and go home, they would.

A child's memory functions is prominent in several phenomena in a child's systems, including the "power of spatial location as a cue to recall" (Bahrick, 1975; Belezza, 1983, as cited in Bauer et al., 2012) and when I had asked the parents about the application- and use of Unikum in the family's life, the mother in Case 1 responded that they look at it together sometimes. However, the mother's in Case 2 and 3 explicitly state that they are actively engaged in reading the updates, avidly sharing these with their respective children. The children however, when approached about Unikum in their interviews, all claim to never have heard of it. Against this background, it can be suggested that in the case of Elliott and Mason, the amount of spatial-temporal information that is required in order to deliver a narrative in regard to how he

perceived his parents role in preschool, is very high (Bauer et al., 2012), meaning that Elliott and Mason was not able to reconstruct emotions, understanding or meaning in regard to my inquiry into exploring the different perspectives that interplay together (children, parents and teachers). Children aged 4 – 5 are however, statistically relatively apt at executing such a task, and to “routinely orient their narratives of personal past events to location or place” (Bauer et al., 2012). So how come Elliott and Mason seemed unable to do this? In an attempt to map where the stories entered a state of disharmony, a discrepancy between the overall child – adult perspective was identified: it appeared that while the conversations were taking place, they were taking place with the child on the periphery. Here, the difference between having a child’s perspective and taking the child’s perspective (Nilsson et al., 2015), became apparent. The latter being the one in which the child is provided a forum to express themselves concerning a particular matter, in this case parent engagement in his preschool.

The overarching finding therefore, is that in Case I, the adults in the two microsystems carried out these conversations *with* the child, meaning the child was included rather than informed, whereas in Case 2 and Case 3, the conversations were carried out *about* the child, meaning the child was informed rather than included. This results in either a) a lack of understanding-, or b) indifference. This qualitative difference between the child- and adult perspectives, imply that in Elliott’s and Mason’s participation in processes concerning themselves, is not enhanced to a level of understanding (Nilsson et al, 2015) and placed in a children’s right’s (UN, 1989) perspective, Elliott’s and Mason’s comprehension of parent engagement in preschool is assigned but informed (Hart, 1992). The cognitive and experiential capacity of children this age, as well as the level of interpretation of both verbal utterances and body language needed to fully comprehend the children’s opinions and emotions (Nilsson et al, 2015), suggest that Elliott and Mason identify themselves as on the periphery of this aspect of their respective lives. From an ideological perspective, this peripheral positioning may seem like a natural development, however whether the two perspectives are better or worse than one another, or whether they are better viewed as different ends on the continuum that is the child – adult relationship, where which perspective you take depends entirely on whether it’s seen from the perspective of the child himself-, the child’s relationship with preschool *or* the mother’s view of the child (Nilsson et al, 2015).

Before moving onto looking at these findings in the context of the exo- and macrosystem, as well as the sixth and final system of the Bronfenbrenner Ecological System's Theory, the chronosystem, we will first investigate the findings in the constellations as demonstrated in figures 5, 6 and 7. Moving from having a sense of the narrative horizons this study aimed to examine, using the story constellations approach, to surfacing the webs of significance (Craig, 2007) in the stories, has made visible the conversations that bring the participants to the topics of mutual importance.

This study sought to identify understanding by applying a narrative approach, and to within the narratives identify where the stories blend, and where they contradict. Therefore, these stories were placed in constellations, a version of narrative inquiry that uncovers the children's, the parents and the teachers' knowledge and understanding of parent engagement in context (Craig, 2007). "A fluid form of investigation that unfolds in a three-dimensional inquiry space, story constellations consist of a flexible matrix of paired narratives that are broadened, burrowed, and restoried over time. The adaptability of this narrative inquiry approach is then made visible through introducing three story constellations separately, then laying sketches of the individual story constellations side-by-side" (Craig, 2007, p. 173). The constellations are thus analysed and the sketches that follow will demonstrate how the understanding of the phenomenon plays out differently in the different contexts, and also depending on perspective.

It is this study's ambition that through providing satisfactory answers to the original inquiries, the child's voice be brought to the surface and made visible in the world of adult noise, the sketches are an effective instrument in achieving this task. Furthermore, this demonstration of sketches will also provide justification for "story constellations as a method and as a form of inquiry" (Craig, 2007). Below, the stories are illustrated in sketches. As the reader will see, within the three separate investigations, story-constellations distinctive to each case (Craig, 2007) reflecting the child, mother and teacher perspective in terms of their understanding of parent engagement in preschool, have emerged. Through these sketches, the thesis makes visible to the reader where the stories blend and where they contradict.

As cited in Craig (2007), p. 176), "the maze of narratives present in a child's life becomes evident when the idea of each person authoring his/her own life is interfaced with the notion of

all people serving as characters in other people's stories (MacIntyre, 1981). In this way, the stories individuals tell illuminate their personal thoughts and actions at the same time as the individuals make sense of their relationship with others and their stance in the world (Bruner, 1987).” Below, the stories’ interconnectedness are demonstrated in sketches representing the three cases. I used identical story constellations for all three cases, however as we will see the final constellations varied greatly. Within the separate inquires for each case, distinctive story constellations emerged (Craig, 2007) that mirror the child’s understanding of parent engagement in preschool and the relations therein. The sketches have their departure point in the child’s perception of engagement whilst in the preschool context (setting). The sketches consist of two layers, the first representing the two micro-systems of home- and preschool in the first (innermost) layer and the meso-system in the second (outermost) layer. The interconnectedness of the circles labelled ‘story of (initials of child)’, ‘story of mother’ and ‘story of teacher’ demonstrate the interconnectedness of the stories and the smaller circles (without text) demonstrates the child’s smaller stories which, which align (or not) across the two systems and stand in relation to the mother- and teacher stories. Thus, the symbiosis between the child-, parent- and teacher understanding of parent engagement on a micro- and meso-level is illuminated.

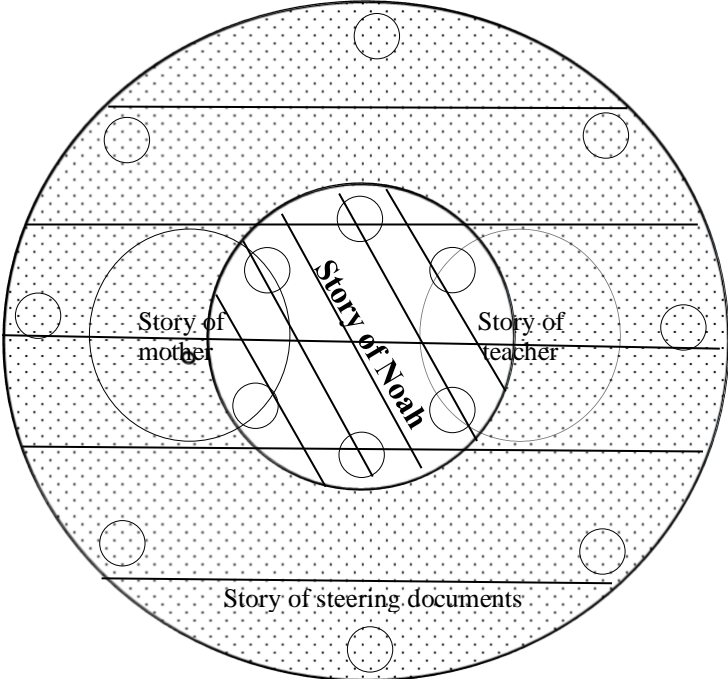
Each sketch is accompanied by a brief explanation of the constellations and with the human voice serving as an instrument of the individual truth, these explanations take the departure point from the child; lifting out their voices from under the white noise of bureaucracy and adult assumption, bringing into daylight children’s narration of experiences and meaning-making. These constellations can thus be viewed as an opportunity to challenge the adult voice, in terms of what they (the adults) know and what they think they know. Furthermore, it also challenges the idea of whether “we value what we measure, or measure what we value” (Biesta, 2009), suggesting a call for change in what we perceive parent engagement to be. As we will see from the sketches, there difference between the child being an active agent in his preschool life or on the periphery, is notable.

In these constellations, the smallest circles represent the child’s ‘little stories’, these are the narratives the child delivered throughout the interview which demonstrate understanding and interconnectedness between home and preschool, as well as his understanding of the purpose

of preschool; the larger circles labelled ‘story of mother’, ‘story of (name)’ and ‘story of teacher’ are the overall understanding and meaning in terms of steering documents and expectations that the three demonstrated during interviews; the presence or absence of an interlocking between these circles demonstrate the overarching interconnectedness between their understanding, with the vertical lines representing how they align with steering documents and local policies, or not. The diagonal lines in the circle of the child demonstrate the increased harmony between understanding within himself and his sense of position in the triad, regardless of context.

The higher the saturation of dots and circles, the greater the harmony. In the event of a non-transparent- or non-overlapping circle, a discrepancy between the three perspectives conception of parental engagement has been identified.

Figure 6: Story constellation 1: Noah, his mother and his teacher.

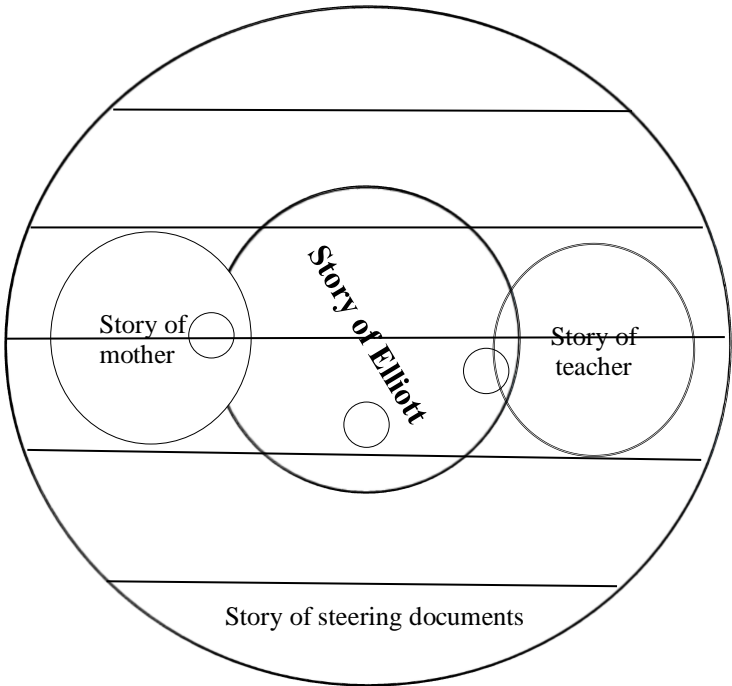


Adapted from Craig (2007)

Noah tells a story of understanding both the purpose- and task of the preschool. He assumes the preschool to be a place of learning. Noah also assumes the existence of- as well as demonstrates understanding for, the existence of an engagement between his mother and his teacher. He is not converend particularly with the details, assuming they will be shared with him upon request. In this constellation we can see that in the meso-system, the overarching role of the steering

documents, saturate the relationships; providing all three voices with a forum in which to exercise engagement. In the smaller micro-system(s), Noah’s story aligns with the preschool policies- ideology and curriculum. Furthermore, Noah’s stories are evenly distributed in the micro-system dominated by the mother (home) *and* the micro-system dominated by the teacher (peschool), indicating that he understands the purpose of the parent engagement as one intended to provide him with a safe environment where he can experience both well-being and a healthy development.

Figure 7: Story constellation 2: Elliott, his mother and his teacher.

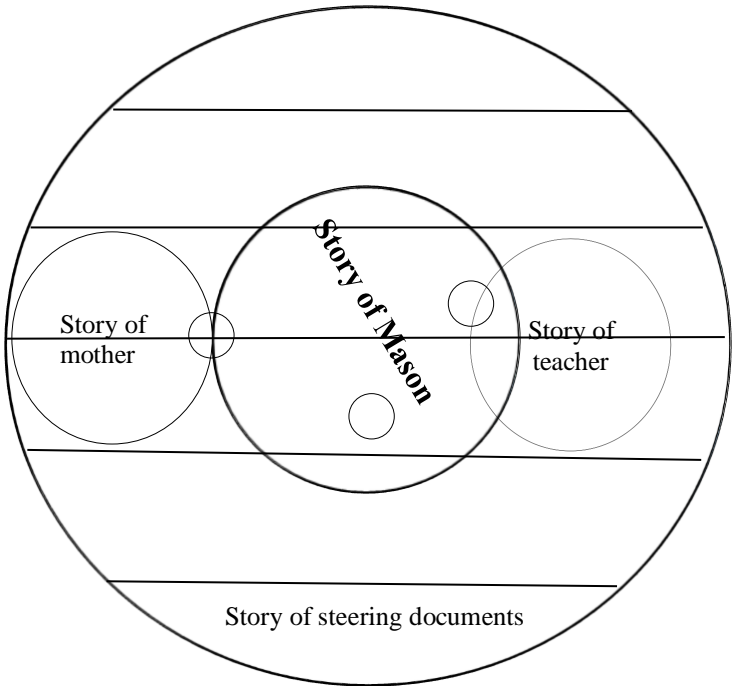


Adapted from Craig (2007)

Elliott tells us quite a different story. Elliott’s understanding of preschool does not align with neither steering documents, nor local policies – all of which place emphasis on preschool being a pedagogical institution where children come to learn- and to develop. Thus Elliott assumes preschool to be a place of child-storage and demonstrates indifference in regard to the existence of an engagement between his mother and his teacher. In this constellation we can see that in the meso-system, the overarching role of the steering documents are left bereft of meaning; resulting in a disharmony between the three stories making difficult the maintenance of a forum in which to exercise engagement. In the smaller micro-system(s), Elliott’s story does not aligns with the preschool policies- ideology and curriculum, nor does it demonstrate an

interconnectedness between child and parent understanding. The mother’s focus is beyond the innermost level of the child’s understanding, centred rather on the interconnectedness between adult - policies and vice versa. Elliott’s stories are unevenly distributed in the micro-system dominated slightly by the mother (home) and with a visible interconnectedness with the teacherthe teacher (preschool). The overlapping of the mother’s story however, and for the purpose of this thess, is indicative that Elliott is not included in the dialogue concerning his mother’s parent-engagement, rather he is on the periphery of his own story.

Figure 8: Story constellation 3: Mason, his mother and his teacher.



Adapted from Craig (2007)

Mason tells a third story. Again, Mason’s understanding of preschool does not align with neither steering documents, nor local policies. Mason however, is aware of the social and political structural drives that motivate children attending preschool, however has chosen to perceive it only as a place where he can play. Unaware of a greater purpose, Mason, like Elliott, perceives preschool primarily as storage. Mason demonstrated an interconnectedness between his own story and the mother and teacher’s, however no symbiosis between the three, as seen from the perspective of the child, has surfaced in the story constellation. In this constellation we can see that in the meso-system, the overarching role of the steering documents are yet again left bereft of meaning; resulting even here in a disharmony between the three stories. Hence, making difficult the maintenance of a forum in which to exercise to the child meaningful parent

engagement. In the smaller micro-system(s), Mason's story does not align with the preschool policies- ideology and curriculum, nor does it demonstrate an interconnectedness between child and parent understanding.

As we saw in the case with Elliott, the mother's focus is beyond the innermost level of the child's understanding, centred rather on the development of understanding between the adult to adult and adult to policy relationship. Furthermore, Mason's stories are unevenly distributed in the micro-system, again dominated slightly by the teacher (preschool) – this time with the mother (home) on the periphery, indicating that Mason does not possess sufficient understanding regarding parent engagement in preschool for him to value the symbiosis between the two.

5.3.5. Summary

Throughout their early years, children find themselves in a continuum of various systems and as we have seen throughout this thesis, the most immediate of these is the smallest, the micro-system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Herein, the child's immediate relationships are fostered, with relations spanning to all immediate relationships or organizations that the child interacts with, such as parents, friends, siblings and preschool. In a cognitive development perspective, how the participants of these relationships interact with the child will have an effect on the child's development; promoting the notion that the more encouraging and nurturing these relationships and places are, the better the child will be able to develop healthily (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Analyses of these stories within a bioecological framework through the conceptual lens of proximal processes (O'Toole, 2016) place heavy focus on child-experience (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2005; 2006), ultimately identifying this experience as the departure point in the task of identifying the findings. However, the analyses and findings are, like the relationships within the systems, characterized by bi-directionality, meaning that the child- and adult experience- and construction of understanding is in a constant state of interconnectedness. This was particularly illuminated in the case of the participating preschool teachers, where sharing stories of success within parent engagement, both past and current, contributed to the hypothetical growth of crucial relations needed in order to maintain strong and trusting bonds between

preschool and home (National Agency for Education, Curriculum for Preschool, 2011; Lundqvist & Roman, 2008; PERFAR, 2014; Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2017).

Furthermore, the findings indicated the participating children's ability to engage in these conversations during the interviews (Bauer et al., 2012; Feuerverger, 2011; Nilsson et al., 2015; Tulving 1972; Tulving, 1973) was linked to the alignment of parental attitude and the inclusion of the child in family conversations and information-sharing in regard to matters that concern the child (Haden et al., 1997; Harley & Reese, 1999; Leichtman, Pillemer, Wang & Korieshi, 2000; Reese, Haden & Fivush, 1993). Roberts (2006), argues that "Alignment involves making sure that our local activities are sufficiently aligned with other processes so that they can be effective beyond our own engagement" (p. 625), and against this background I was able to, at least in theory, transcend knowledge from one system of the child's life to another, thus better understanding the child's epistemology and understanding of interconnectedness of relationships within systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2005; 2006).

This alignment, however, is affected by the non-linear system in the Bronfenbrenner model, the chronosystem. This system can, by adding the dimension of time, demonstrate influences of both constancy and change in the environment of the child, and over the course of early childhood have the ability to demonstrate the diversity of interconnected influences on a child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1984; 1989; 1993; 1995a; 1995b; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1993; 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2005). It must be noted however, that this can only be achieved by studying the various systems that define a child's life (Bronfenbrenner, 1972). The chronosystem's overarching function is thus to identify the "changes in the other systems over time, by process of mutual accommodation" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), meaning that the chronosystem includes both the shifts- and transitions in a child's development (or lifespan). This extends also to any socio-historical contexts that may affect the child, or other adults that in turn affect the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

A total of six children's interviews were executed whereof each child partook in two interviews, one in the preschool setting and one in the home setting, as well as one concluding informal meeting in the preschool yard (Seidman, 2005). Together with subsequent observations of the same children in their home- and preschool environment (Bryman, 2014; Seidman, 2005)

careful consideration was placed on observations of the child's positioning in comparison to their parent within their stories. During the time spent with the children, their stories, which inevitably are derived from their own subjective experience, informed of thoughts-, hopes-, wishes- as well as anxieties, acted as tools of information, shedding light on how a child's self-expressive imagery is converted to verbal communication through narratives (Bruner, 1991; Graves, 2008; Fivush et al., 1992; Hudson & Fivush, 1990; Kulkofsky, Klemfuss & Garcia, 2008; Nelson & Fivush, 2004) providing context for the child's development within the larger more complex systems of the exo- and macrosystem.

As we have seen previously in this thesis, an "exo-system refers to one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25), meaning that how a child develops in the innermost systems of the model will inevitably impact on their individual experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1984; 1989; 1993; 1995a; 1995b; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1993; 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2005; 2006). Although the exo-system level includes places, situations and people that the child at the age of four or five does not personally interact with, these factors indirectly still affect the child (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). When exploring the phenomena of parent engagement therefore, it is crucial that the relationships and understandings that the study investigated "must be understood in relation to the point in the life-course in which they occur" (Elder, 1998, as cited in O'Toole, 2016), meaning that when the children's conception of parent engagement was investigated in a setting where the parents were not present, Noah, Elliott and Masons' stories differed significantly from that of parents and teachers – ultimately proving a complete misaligning in two out of three investigated cases. Against this background, the principal goal of this study's narrative enquiry and application of story constellations as a method when narrating the nine voices, was to identify where their stories blend- and where they contradict, which this chapter has done.

Below follows a discussion on how these findings relate to a) the various systems of the Bronfenbrenner ecological systems theory as well as the conceptual lens of PPCT and b) the two primary inquiry aims.

5.6 Discussion

This thesis had two clear aims: firstly, explore the three primary perspectives that interconnect – *namely that of the child, the parent and the teacher* – and secondly, to apply this exploration in order to better understand what parent engagement in preschool *means to the child*. The first aim of the thesis, exploring the perspectives of the children-, their mothers- and their teachers have been largely successful. Research evidence in the area of parent engagement, including the current work (as illuminated in the story constellations) provides substantial support for the theoretical framework *and* application of the systems theory, as well as the conceptual lens of PPCT, when investigating the lived reality of children, their parents and teachers in terms of parent engagement.

The strongest support from the data and literature yielded from this study perhaps, is for the idea that *relationships and context matter in combatting existing misaligning of interpretational outcome in regard to policies and steering documents*. Meaning that if parents and teachers do not have visible *and* transparent pathways of communication between them (Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001; Karlsson, Perälä-Littunen, 2017; Lundqvist & Roman 2008; Markström & Simonsson, 2013; PERFAR, 2014; National Agency for Education, 2010; Tunberger & Sigle-Rushton, 2011; Venninen & Purola, 2013) the domain between home and preschool will remain one of constant negotiations of understanding (Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2017), with the potential result being a continued lack of clarity between expectations and reality.

As we saw in the introductory chapter of this thesis, the curriculum states that the preschool must *strive toward establishing lasting relationships where not only the child's well-being and development, is central, but where the child is also included in the dialogues concerning the child's well-being and development* (National Agency for Education, Lpfö 98, 2010, however no formal directions are made as to *how* it is expected to be achieved.

This thesis has shown that the absence of *how* in this political text, affects the child's overall bioecological system on four levels. These four levels are the micro-, meso-, exo- and macrolevel. In the interest of discussion, these four levels are merged two-and-two, approaching the discussion from the top down as follows, 1) exo- and macro-level and 2) micro- and mesosystem. The reason for this is that in order to understand the relationships and impact of

these on a micro- and meso-level, we must first lift the contextual issues on a broader level, namely the exo- and the macro-level. Before proceeding, it must be pointed out that throughout this study, the overall approach has been one of *inquiry*, not of *proving* or *disproving* - thus the findings are not assumed to be representative of a general truth- or attitude. Furthermore, the thesis sought *only* to identify soft values, deliberately avoiding dogmatic variables. In discussing the findings therefore, the thesis assumes that both parents- and teachers do their best to establish positive pathways with one another, but that in the absence of formal opportunity to deconstruct some of the interpretative issues related to belief- and ideological templates, “they may resort to what Olson and Bruner (1996) call ‘folk psychologies’, bringing potentially naïve, incomplete or even erroneous understandings to their interactions with (parents), based on their own educational, economic, class, gendered and ethnic experiences (Ryan and O’Toole, 2014), as cited in O’Toole, 2016). This brings us to the first level, where focus is on the *exploration of the three perspectives that interconnect (that of child, parent, teacher)*.

The possible threat of these aforementioned ‘folk psychologies’ is that they serve only to sustain the existing void in both research and practice, where the risk of misinterpretation and misunderstanding culminate in parents’ unwillingness to become genuinely involved. By ‘genuinely’ I this regard, is meant an engagement which is reflected on the level of the child, where the child himself express *understanding and meaning* in his conception of the purpose of preschool and his parents’ role in the relationships therein. As with adults, it can be said of children that their knowledge reflects their understanding of the world (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1984; 1989; 1993; 1995a; 1995b; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1993; 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2005; 2006; Clandinin, 1992; Piaget, 2002), thus the children’s personal epistemologies can be defined as an individuals’ way of knowing and acting arising from their capacities, earlier experiences, and ongoing negotiations with the social and brute world, that together shape how they engage with and learn through work activities and interactions.” (Billet, 2009, cited in Lemon & Garvis, 2014, p. 12). Furthermore, Wenger (2014) argues that engagement, imagination and alignment are the three primary factors which create sensations of belonging - which in turn can result in an identity growth. This occurs in different ways, through both time and space (p. 181), which brings us to the second level. We know that the child’s life is dominated by his relationships *with* his parents and his teachers, as well as affected by the

relationship *between* the aforementioned. Against this background and with the emphasis of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory being on the importance for policy and practice when considering the development and maintenance of necessary bi-directional relationships in ensuring child well-being and healthy development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1984; 1989; 1993; 1995a; 1995b; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1993; 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2005; 2006; Markström & Simonsson, 2017; Murray, McFarland-Piazza & Harrison, 2014; Patel & Corter, 2013; Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2017; Rheinhardt, 2016; Vlasov & Hujala, 2017), this level is representative of the inquiry to better understand what parent engagement in preschool means to the child. Therefore, the single most central question has arisen throughout this study is, *if the adults responsible for ensuring the well-being and healthy development of the child do not share a common understanding of steering documents and policies, how can they develop bi-directional relationships that provide a sense of safety for the child?*

In the interest of limitation, this question cannot be answered in full here, however, the discussion can offer that it can be said of humans that psychologically, we tend toward default positions in behavior, meaning that we often times “go along with the status quo, regardless of moral or ethical concerns regarding institutional practice” (Milgram, 1963; Zimbardo, 1971, as cited in O’Toole, 2016), resulting in a void where communication is concerned. This void, can result in a system failure, where each family is concerned with only their own child (Markström & Simonsson, 2013), failing to conceive of the reality which is that for a child, the world is a collective place grounded in systems and the relationships within these systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). As a result, the parents and teachers who ultimately share this common task of fostering children in the Swedish state (Gunnarsson, Korpi & Nordenstam, 1999; Hiilamo, 2004; Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001; Karlsson & Perälä-Littunen, 2017; Söderbäck, Coyne & Harder, 2010; UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989), risk failing to meet their responsibilities on both a micro/meso-level *and* exo/macro-level. The former representing good parenting and the preschool’s obligation to create pathways of engagement, and the latter representing the interpretation of bureaucratic and political text in state governed steering documents as well as local policies. The overarching sense being that that ‘this is how it’s always been’, or simply, ‘it’s not my job to do it’.

In summary, the data collected from the stories were analysed through the conceptual lens of proximal processes, or PPCT (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) and yield the key finding that context is crucial to children's conception of parent engagement in preschool, perhaps even more important than the relationships within the engagement takes place. From this, we draw the final conclusion that understanding parent engagement will not quietly evolve from a place of misaligned stories and conceptions to a newfound place of harmony without the visible support and commitment from parents-, teachers- and policy-makers. Support for this can be found in this this thesis' literature review, which sought to illuminate the key discrepancies between key factors related to parent engagement and of the conception of meaningful involvement between adults, which in turn affect children's understanding and meaning making. In this section, it has been explained that it is within the knowledge of contribution and participation that the home and the preschool can work together in the interests of all children and collectively designing these crucial communication environments that maximise opportunities for bridging communication between parents, teachers and ultimately, children (Hayes et al., 2017), in order to ensure the well-being and healthy development of the latter. The chapter that follows moves on to consider how the above informs practice, offering also limitations and recommendations for future research in the area.

Chapter Six

6.1 Conclusion

It is assumed that “a lack of engagement with formal support structures like information evenings may be a function of busy lifestyles as opposed to disinterest in children's education” (Harris and Robinson, 2016), which suggests that Swedish family policy and welfare system, which builds on two working parents (PERFAR, 2014), may, in principle, be problematic from a parent time-perspective. The Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory dictates that conceptual as well as behavioural models that are typical for the macrosystem, are inevitably passed down from one generation to the next by channels of communication such as extended family and the various cultures therein, preschool- and school, school, workplace and also any kind of administration and promotion of activity that suggests to intermedate a child's processes of socialization (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). However, in order to do this, parents must allow time for it.

Whilst the above suggests that the macrosystem can be defined as the outmost layer for a child; that the metaphorical framework holds within its traditions, laws and cultural values, the value therein in a child well-being perspective is null and void in the absence of ‘enough time’. Since the macrosystem’s influence penetrates all the previous layers and, for instance “if in a culture it is believed that bringing up children is the parents’ task then evidently this culture will not offer much help to the parents in their educational efforts. This in its turn has its effects on the parents’ educational environment and their chances to cope with the task of education. (Paquette & Ryan 2001, as cited in Härkönen, 2007). This means that events and transitions over a life course affect- and are affected by, intrafamilial processes (Bronfenbrenner & Scarr, 1986), causing a ripple effect in the child’s overall development and well-being.

6.2 Limitations and recommendations

An inability to generalize the research findings have been identified due to the nature of the study and its design. The results were informative and provides the reader with a snapshot in time into the situation- and relationship between preschool and home from three perspectives (Bryman, 2016). The role of the limitations mentioned in chapter one however, was to confine and densify the research (Bryman, 2016) in an effort to avoid confusion in regard to the primary target of the study; to explore the different perspectives that interplay together in order to better understand the complexity of what parental engagement actually means to the various actors.

In order to broaden the scope of future research on this topic, it would be beneficial to execute- and include data collection from a greater geographic area or even be expanded to a multi-country analysis. This would be one way to overcome the aforementioned limitations in future studies (Bryman, 2016). Alternative methodologies to the one presented in this study, could be applied if the study was to be executed on a grander scale; for instance, mixed methods, including surveys-, observations-, interviews- and focus groups (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lowing, 2011). However, it is the recommendations of this thesis, that for future large-scale studies of the same topic, it is imperative that all explorations of home and parenting as well as children’s understanding be theorised in an effort to avoid the inherent risk of “viewing some parents, children and homes through a deficit lens, and misconstruing seeming disengagement as disinterest” (Brooker, 2015, as cited in O’Toole, 2016).

The study investigated nine voices across three case studies and whilst the findings may not translate to preschools in other municipalities, or even in other child-, parent- teacher triads

across the same municipality, the results may be symptomatic of an overall void in understanding between what we see on a document and how we interpret that into practice. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) can provide an appropriate conceptual framework through which to interpret processes of parental involvement, engagement and partnership (O'Toole, 2017), indicating that a study of similar nature but of grander scale may be widely applicable in helping with similar research not only in Sweden, but in other parts of the world where childhood is ECEC driven.

“It is primarily through observing, playing, and working with others older and younger than himself that a child discovers both what he can do and who he can become — that he develops both his ability and his identity.”

- Urie Bronfenbrenner.

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¹⁰ Author's translation.

¹¹ Author's translation.

¹² Author's translation.

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Appendix 1: Information letter



Project title

Parent engagement in Swedish preschools: A narrative inquiry through the conceptual lens of proximal processes.

Researcher: Tina Elisabeth Yngvesson BSc. (Hons), MSc.
Program: International Master of Educational research (IMER)
University of Gothenburg
gustinyng@student.gu.se
Tel: 0705632463

Why is the research being conducted?

There is an overall heavy emphasis on establishing strong teacher-parent relationships in the Swedish National Curriculum for Preschools and parent engagement in preschool is considered important for reasons such as promoting child well-being, healthy development and socialisation and learning through play. The central target of inquiry in this study is thus to investigate children- and adults' understanding of parent engagement in Swedish preschools through the conceptual lens of proximal processes, explore how this may or may not affect child well-being and development.

The importance of understanding children's learning as embedded in the social, cultural and family contexts in which it occurs contributes to the overall consensus that children will, in a well-being-, development- and learning perspective, do better with parents who are actively engaged in their children's pedagogical life. Thus, designing pathways in order to develop the communication between home and preschool is considered a significant factor in children's developmental outcomes.

The study will apply only qualitative methods, whereof the narrative interviews and observations are the primary data collection tools. Through identifying harmonies and contradictions in the children's and adult's narratives as constructed during interviews, the thesis has investigated the construct of children's, parents and preschool teachers *understanding* of parent engagement in the Swedish preschool and from that perspective identified where the stores align and where they contradict, thus broadening the academic debate in regard to how parents and teachers can better prepare themselves for the dialogues within the micro-societies that their children's immediate world consists of

This overall study aims to investigate the understanding of parent engagement in preschool from the perspective of the child, the parent and the preschool teacher. The study is conducted as part of the master thesis requirements for the International Master Program in Educational Research of the University of Gothenburg.

Tina Yngvesson

Master student

University of Gothenburg

Appendix 2: Letter of informed consent for child



Project title

Parent engagement in Swedish preschools: A narrative inquiry through the conceptual lens of proximal processes.

Researcher: Tina Elisabeth Yngvesson BSc. (Hons), MSc.
Program: International Master of Educational research (IMER)
University of Gothenburg
gustinyng@student.gu.se
Tel: 0705632463

Why is the research being conducted?

This study aims to investigate the understanding of parent engagement in preschool from the perspective of the child, the parent and the preschool teacher. The study is conducted as part of the master thesis requirements for the International Master Program in Educational Research of the University of Gothenburg.

What will your child be asked to do?

We would like your child to engage in conversation with the researcher and talk about how he/she feels about preschool as well as pathways and understanding between home and preschool. The child may be asked to engage in drawing and play in order to stimulate conversation.

The child will be interviewed once in the preschool setting and once at home. An informal meeting after the interviews are concluded will also take place (in the preschool).

Consent

I hereby provide consent for my child to be involved in the project. I agree and am aware that:

- My child's will be referred to by pseudonym.
- My child will be asked questions regarding relationships with and between parents and teachers, home and preschool.
- I can receive a copy of the findings by emailing Tina Yngvesson at tinyng@student.gu.se
- I can withdraw my child from the research project at any time.
- I can contact Tina Yngvesson if I have questions about the project or my child's participation.

Date:

Name:

Signature:

Appendix 3: Letter of informed consent for adult



Project title

Parent engagement in Swedish preschools: A narrative inquiry through the conceptual lens of proximal processes.

Researcher: Tina Elisabeth Yngvesson BSc. (Hons), MSc.
Program: International Master of Educational research (IMER)
University of Gothenburg
gustinyng@student.gu.se
Tel: 0705632463

Why is the research being conducted?

This study aims to investigate the understanding of parent engagement in preschool from the perspective of the child, the parent and the preschool teacher. The study is conducted as part of the master thesis requirements for the International Master Program in Educational Research of the University of Gothenburg.

What will you be asked to do?

You will be asked to partake in two interviews, one face-to-face and one per telephone. The interview will focus on parent engagement in preschool from the parent/teacher perspective.

Consent

I hereby provide consent for my participation in the project. I agree and am aware that:

- My identity and the identity of (my) preschool will be anonymous and confidential
- I will be asked questions regarding relationships with- and between parents and teachers, home and preschool, as well as questions regarding my child and his relationship to preschool
- I can receive a copy of the findings by emailing Tina Yngvesson at tinyng@student.gu.se
- I can withdraw my child from the research project at any time.
- I can contact Tina Yngvesson if I have questions about the project or my child's participation.

Date:

Name:

Signature:

Appendix 4: Child interview questions

Topic 1: Understanding

Why are you in preschool?

Where are your parents when you are in preschool?

Who brought you here this morning?

Who is picking you up?

Where did you have breakfast?

Do you think that your mum and dad have something to do with your preschool? If so: What?

Do you think your mum and dad knows your teachers? If so: Why?
Why not?

How does that make you feel?

Topic 2: Meaning

What do you do here all day?

Would you rather be here or at home? If so: Why?
How does that make you feel?

Who does preschool belong to?

What do the teachers do here?

Do you talk about what you do here at home? If so: With whom?

What do you talk about when you talk about preschool?

Do you think about preschool when you are not here? If so:

What?

Whom?

Topic 3: Practice

Have you heard of Unikum? If so: What is it?

Have you seen it?

How do you feel about it – any thoughts?

Have you ever seen your mum and/or dad talk to your teachers? If so: What?
Why?

Do your parents ask you about your preschool? If so: What?

How does that make you feel?

Appendix 5: Parent interview questions

Topic 1: Understanding

What is your understanding of early learning?

Have you read the steering documents? If so: Why?
Why not?

What is your understanding of parent involvement?

Do you think this sort of parent engagement in children's every day is important? If so: Why?
Why not?

Can you talk about how you forge relationships with teachers?

In relation to parental involvement. What do you value most from teachers?

Do you think this sort of parent engagement in children's every day is important? If so: Why?
Why not?

Topic 2: Meaning

What do you believe are the primary obstacles to parent engagement in preschool?

Can you as a parent in preschool aid in reducing these obstacles to close the gap between home and preschool?

Can the child assist in this? (i.e. bring home various art/craft/tasks for discussion at home)

How do you exercise parent engagement?

Do you think this involvement makes a difference to the child in understanding the connection between home and preschool?

Do you think it is important to the child?

In cases where you want to increase cooperation and engagement between home and school, is it mostly:

a) steering documents, b) teacher attitude or c) your attitude, that hinders that process?

Topic 3: Practice

Can you explain how (if at all) you share information about your child to the teacher?

Do you believe these methods to be valuable? Which is most/least valuable?

For whom is it valuable (parent, teacher, child)

Is the child aware of this information sharing? If so: Why?
Why not?

Do you have any thoughts on data security in preschool? I.e. Unikum.

Is your child inquisitive regarding this, or indifferent?

As a parent, how much of data security from a teacher perspective do you think is based on:

a) parental opinions and permissions, and b) children's opinions and permissions?

Have you ever been part of the parent – teacher association?

Can these associations achieve other results in regard to parent engagement? If so: How?

How important is the child perspective in these associations?

Can it be a forum to have children's concerns raised?

What has been your experience working with teachers who appear disinterested in pursuing stable and long-lasting relationships with the home?

Do you think parents overall in your preschool is invested in their child's life at preschool?

Do you think parents at your preschool view preschool a babysitting service, or an educational facility?

What do you think is the teacher's perception of this?

Appendix 6: Teacher interview questions

Topic 1: Understanding

What is your understanding of early learning?

Have you read the steering documents? If so: Why?
Why not?

What is your understanding of early learning?

What is your understanding of parent involvement?

Do you think this sort of parent engagement in children's every day is important? If so: Why?
Why not?

Can you talk about how you forge relationships with parents?

In relation to parental involvement, what do you value most from parents?

Topic 2: Meaning

What do you believe are the primary obstacles to parent engagement in preschool?

Can you as a preschool teacher aid in reducing these obstacles and closing the gap between home and preschool?

Can the child assist in this? (i.e. bring home various art/craft/tasks for discussion at home)

How do you implement parent engagement?

Do you think this engagement makes a difference to the child in understanding the connection between home and preschool?

In cases where you want to increase cooperation and engagement between home and school, is it mostly:

a) steering documents, b) parents' attitude or c) your attitude, that hinders that process?

Topic 3: Practice

Can you explain how you share information about children to their parents?

Do you believe these methods to be valuable?

Which is most/least valuable?

For whom is it valuable (parent, teacher, child)

Is the child aware of this information sharing? If so: Why?
Why not?

How do you work with data security with parents?

Do you find parents to be inquisitive regarding this, or indifferent?

How much of data security from a teacher perspective is based on:

a) parental opinions and permissions and b) children's opinions and permissions

What has been your experience working with parent committees?

Can these committees achieve more/better results?

How important is the child in these committees?

Can it be a forum to have children's concerns raised?

What has been your experience working with parents who may not want to be involved?

Do you think parents overall in your preschool are engaged?

Do you think parents see preschool as a babysitting service, or an educational facility?