

# Democracy in research circles to enable new perspectives on early childhood education and didactics

*Annika Månsson & Lena Rubinstein Reich*

The aim of this article is to examine aspects of democracy derived from participation in so-called research circles, and to discuss participatory and democratic ideas arising in those circles as they relate to perspectives on early childhood education. This paper draws its argument mainly from material recorded from two research circles — one on *Gender* and the other on *New subject didactic challenges in preschool*. The analysis was based on the separate data from the two research circles and on a comparison between them. It is a theoretically governed approach based on Klafki's critical constructive didactics and Biesta's critical discussion on education and democracy in relation to the rise of neoliberalism. Larsson's three aspects of democracy in relation to study circles have been used: equal participation, horizontal relations and knowledge that inform standpoints. The diversity between the circles resulted in variations concerning form and content that could be discussed as related to democracy aspects.

Keywords: critical didactics, democracy, early childhood education, preschool, research circle

Annika Månsson, associate professor, Malmö University.  
*Annika.Månsson@mah.se*

Lena Rubinstein Reich, professor, Malmö University.  
*Lena.Rubinstein-Reich@mah.se*

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine aspects of democracy derived from participation in so-called research circles, and to discuss participatory and democratic ideas arising in those circles as they relate to perspectives on early childhood education. Our reason for this choice of subject derives from our roles as leaders of a number of research circles in our professional work as teacher educators. In this paper, we address the idea of democracy as it un-

derlies the general values behind research circles. The study thus focuses on both how some aspects of democracy relate to the content and form of two diverse research circles, and in what ways participation in research circles could enable critical reflections on early childhood education.

In this article both the terms *early childhood education* and *preschool* are used. In Sweden, preschool is the official name for education that caters to children up to and including five years of age, whereas early childhood education is a more general term and covers education up to eight-year-olds.

Research circles are related to the traditional Swedish study circle. The circles build on the ideas of participation and democracy (Holmstrand & Härnsten, 2003). Starrin (1993) points out the democratic aspect of participatory research and researcher supported learning processes. The author discusses above all applied participatory research. The research circle, however, is the concept and focus of this article. Participants contribute in research-like processes that may be viewed as emancipatory learning processes. Holmstrand and Härnsten (2003), who have critically studied research circles, explain that it is important to use the concept “research like” and hesitate to use the word “research”, as it presupposes more systematic investigations. Values such as influence and mutual understanding are presumed to contribute to insight and knowledge development (Rönnerman, 2005). Lundberg and Starrin (1990) describe research circles as an arena where researchers and practitioners meet with their respective competencies and tackle a problem that the circle participants find important. There are great advantages if the research is tied to the participant’s place of work and with a starting point in the reality of the participants (Härnsten, 1991).

Research circles are also based on a *Bildung* tradition. There is no equivalent English word so we use the German word *Bildung* from the 19th-century Humboldtian tradition with ideas connected to a view of knowledge related to democracy and ethics. There is a difference between education and *Bildung* (Liedman, 2002). Liedman describes it as a lifelong process, and the way to *Bildung* is both collective and individual. The learning process is social but it is also a personal concern with unique insights and skills. An educated person is an institutional product formed by, among other things, goal rationality and power, whereas *Bildung* implies more freedom from obligations and duties to the system, and comprises a critical potential that allows for notions about possibilities and changes (Gustavsson, 1996). This refers to classical *Bildung* ideas and the free, knowledge-seeking individual (Nordin, 2010) — knowledge that can be scrutinised, criticised and reformulated in communicative encounters. This view of knowledge can show the competence of the participants in the circle; it can avoid objectifying, and

consequently lead to an emancipatory and non-elitist view of man (Rönnerman, 2005).

We look upon the research circle as a bridge to the context of the preschool and school for teachers taking part in the circle. Democracy is one of the values inherent in the curricula for preschool and primary school in Sweden and most other Nordic countries. According to Peter Moss (2007), a professor of early childhood provision, this is very uncommon in most other countries. Moss compares the curriculum in England for children aged one to five years old, and describes it as “rather than broad principles, values and goals ... it comes across as a manual for technicians” (Moss, 2007, p. 9).

The research circle is often described as an encounter between theory and practice. Theory implies practice and practice implies theory. Practice-based theory (and research, we would add) should be reported to the practice from which it is generated (Holmstrand & Härnsten, 2003). This is an important part of the idea of the research circle, as it implies new challenges for the researchers and challenges traditional ideas about the nature of research. The research circle has its roots in the Swedish study circle tradition that has been an important factor in the democratisation process (Larsson, 2001).

## **Theoretical framework**

Critical constructive didactics is a concept Klafki (1997) uses to describe an orientation towards goals of growing competence for self- and co-determination and solidarity related to an endeavour towards a more democratic society, although there may be political resistance against such quests. Testing new learning and educational processes useful for these abilities might be in conflict with this resistance (Klafki, 1997).

Biesta (2003), another critical scrutiniser of education, discusses the concept of learning, relating it to political development and the rise of neoliberalism in many Western countries. He observes that the education process has changed, making the student a consumer and the teacher a provider. One problem is that the new language of learning facilitates an economic understanding of education, with a learner knowing what they want and a teacher (provider) who is expected to meet those needs. Another problem is that “this makes it difficult to raise questions about the content and purpose of education, other than in terms of what ‘the consumer’ or ‘the market’ wants” (Biesta, 2003, p. 7). He argues that this is a threat to democracy, for democracy needs issues and questions that are sometimes provocative and difficult, but need to be discussed and seen as a challenge to students.

The research circle can be looked at from different perspectives. In this paper, we concentrate partly on the form of the circle and partly on the substance and the relationship between the two aspects. Kroksmark (1997), among others, problematises concepts related to didactic questions and emphasises the relationship between the two concepts.

By “form” we mean the organisation and background of scientific and philosophical ideas behind research circles with regard to the form of seminar, participation, thinking process, intersubjectivity, and interaction. By “substance” we mean the content — the didactic ‘what?’ question — that is always part of an educative process. To analyse our data on research circles in terms of promoting democracy, we make use of Larsson’s (2001) study of democracy in study circles. Larsson (2001) developed seven aspects of democracy in relation to study circles with the purpose of looking at democracy and democratic theories that are relevant in an educational context and may be used as a conceptualisation for discussing Swedish study circles:

1. *Equal participation*
2. *Horizontal relations*
3. *Deliberations*
4. *Knowledge that informs standpoints*
5. *The recognition of diverse identities*
6. *Internal democratic decision-making*
7. *Action to form society*

(Larsson, 2001, p. 201.)

Each aspect highlights a prominent feature of democracy, but as Larsson (2001) points out the seven aspects are not supposed to cover a whole construction of democracy. Larsson argues to use them in a complementary way, and that “the chain of aspects will hopefully produce a well bodied and rich meaning of democracy when it is discussed in relation to a specific activity – in my case the study circles” (a.a., p 213). Out of the seven aspects of democracy we chose three as analytic tools of the research circles: Equal participation, Horizontal relations and Knowledge that informs standpoints. How the analyses of the three aspects were carried out will be returned to.

Equal participation is a prerequisite if education is to contribute to a democratic process, as according to Larsson if this condition is not met, “any kind of qualities in the process will be superfluous ...” (Larsson, 2001, p.

201). Horizontal relations, on the other hand, is about what happens in the actual process within study circles. Knowledge that informs standpoints relates to access to knowledge and the control of what kind of knowledge is available. To be able to form opinions of political importance, one needs access to relevant information. Yet, who decides what is relevant information? In the study circle, as well in research circles, an important issue is the control of what knowledge should be selected for study. “In the philosophy behind the study circles, there is an interesting possibility for participants to create their own knowledge and thus be knowledgeable in areas that they themselves consider important” (Larsson, 2001, p. 206).

### **Research question**

How do some aspects of democracy relate to content and form in two diverse research circles?

### **Method**

This paper draws its argument mainly from material recorded from two research circles, in which the circle leaders were also the co-authors of this paper. There was no intention of doing research of our own while the circle was in process. After the circles concluded, however, we were interested in looking closer at the various data they produced, and this paper is one such result.

### ***The research circles***

One of the circles, New subject didactic challenges in preschool, was part of a project (Persson, 2012). The idea of the project was to study what happens if student teachers, teacher educators and working/active teachers meet and study a joint problem, in this case new changes in the curricula for preschool or school. Could research help them understand, conceptualise and handle these changes? Would the varied composition of the research circles contribute to new ways of looking at the challenges and problems, and enrich the understanding of the phenomena studied? (Persson, 2012). The other circle was set-up by a research organisation, Malmö University and the municipality of Malmö, and the theme Gender was directed by this organisation.

### ***Research circle on New subject didactic challenges in preschool***

The national curriculum for preschool, as revised in 2010 (Lpfö 98/2010), emphasises a more knowledge-orientated approach than previous curricula. New subject didactic challenges in preschool was the theme for this research circle with the aim of studying how this approach was interpreted and talked about in terms of consequences for content in preschool and in the preschool teaching profession. This research circle had seven participants: two preschool teachers, two teacher educators, two student teachers at the end of their pre-service preschool teacher education, and the circle leader (a researcher/teacher educator and other co-author of this paper). The circle met for three hours once a month over one year, March 2011 – March 2012. The meetings were structured to give every participant a possibility to actively participate, and a joint text to read or some other task was decided for each meeting. Each circle meeting then begun with going through the minutes from the previous meeting, and then each participant, one at a turn, explained what they found interesting in the literature and related it to the overall theme of the research circle. The rounds led to discussions and dialogues, where preschool and central themes were discussed but from different reference points. After the first circle meetings with joint reading and discussions, participants raised ideas about what questions to ask and what studies to conduct that generated four studies by participants (Rubinstein Reich, 2012).

### ***Research circle on Gender***

The research circle comprised five participants: four preschool teachers (one a drama teacher but working as a preschool teacher) and the circle leader (researcher and co-author of this paper). The content of the circle was to a certain degree directed by the theme gender, but the research problems were chosen by the participants. The participants shared a common interest in questions of gender and equality. The circle met once a month for almost two years, with some breaks, 2009 – 2011 (Månsson, 2012).

In the first months, different texts related to gender were decided, both by the researcher and the participants, to be read by everybody for each meeting. Each participant, one at turn, detailed what they found interesting in the literature and related it to the overall theme of the research circle, and often related it to their own practice experiences and problems related to gender. The rounds sometimes led to discussions and sometimes did not, depending on the content of the texts. After some months, a discussion started with regard to what sorts of questions to be studied and what possible methods to

use. These discussions lasted for a rather long period, and the questions were discussed in the circle group and some questions changed many times.

## **Data**

The empirical data consisted of published and unpublished material from the two research circles. Two reports were published — one from each circle — and included introductions by circle leaders and presentations of the studies conducted by the participants (Månsson, 2012; Rubinstein Reich, 2012). The unpublished data consisted of written minutes and memos from circle meetings. In the *Gender* circle data also consisted of participants' individual practice-based documentation in the form of written observation material from their preschool practice. In both circles minutes from meetings were written. In one circle the participants took turns writing, while in the other the circle leader wrote the minutes. In both circles every meeting started with the reading of the minutes from the previous meeting. In addition, circle leaders wrote their own memos

## **Analysis**

The analysis was based partly on the separate data from the two research circles and partly on a final comparison between the two groups. It is an empirically close analysis with a theoretically governed approach using Larsson's aspects of democracy (Larsson, 2001). We thus consider the empirical material to be a theoretically inspired source for interpretation and reflection (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008). For the purpose of our study, to analyse research circles from the perspectives of both form and content, we chose the aspects that would relate to form (equal participation and horizontal relations) and to content (knowledge that informs standpoints). The data of each research circle was first described separately using the chosen theoretical concepts, firstly from the aspect of equal participation, secondly looking at horizontal relationships, and thirdly from the aspect of knowledge that informs standpoints. Then comparisons were made from the descriptions between the two circles and some themes emerged. In a second part of the analyses, we used Biesta and Klafki for the critical discussion on Early Childhood Education based on the results from the research circles.

## **Ethical considerations**

Overall, good research practice issued by The Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2011) has been taken into account. All participants in the two research circles were contacted after we had decided to write an article,

were informed, and gave their consent to the use of and reference to the data from the circles.

### **Aspects of democracy in the research circles**

We present our findings first in relation to each of the three selected aspects of democracy: equal participation, horizontal relations, and knowledge that informs standpoints (Larsson, 2001). We then make a concluding comparison of the two circles.

#### ***Equal participation***

One of the ideas behind research circles is that they should provide an opportunity. In this case it is to educate professionals (though not part of research projects or closely related to the university), and to take part in research discussions and be able to formulate questions based on their practice (Persson, 2009). In the *Gender* research circle, the teachers were offered participation in a circle for preschool teachers. All preschool teachers in one municipal area were offered this opportunity, and every one of them who expressed interest was offered the chance to take part. The participants had the same profession of preschool teacher, but there were other background differences such as previous acquaintance with gender knowledge and research. The aim of the circle was equal participation despite the differences in participants' backgrounds.

In the research circle on New subject didactic challenges in preschool, participants had more diversity of backgrounds and workplaces than those in the Gender circle. They joined the circle voluntarily and planned meeting hours and frequency according to the wishes of the group. In this sense, the conditions for participation were equal. Yet, from another perspective, the prerequisites for participation were not the same. The two participating student teachers were studying and finishing their study in parallel with the circle activities, and they also had to write their thesis examination and complete their final practicum session at the preschool. One of the student teachers wrote:

It feels very big to have been able to participate in this project, and has been both fun and challenging. The biggest challenge though has been to have time and to have enough of strength during a demanding period of the studies, and I experienced some frustration that the work of the study and writing in the research circle suffered due to my studies.  
(Our translation)



The citation indicates that the parallel teacher education studies had priority and influenced the participation in the research circle.

### ***Horizontal relations***

Horizontal relations are about what happens within the process itself; they address whether equal and co-operative relations are built within study circles (Larsson, 2001).

Initially, the aims of the circles and the background ideas of democracy and equal participation were introduced. The participants mentioned that they liked the idea of the seminar form and the rather loose borders of the project.

Sometimes there is a big gap between the researchers' world and the practitioners', between theory and practice, and these circles can be regarded as a means to approach the two and become a bridge between them. One participant from one of the circle explained:

To get a link to research from my practice in preschool has inspired and given me many insights about me as an active teacher and about the preschool, formed by and forming different norms in society ...  
My creativity functions better when practice and theory work together.  
(Our translation)

The experiences from the practice contributed to discussions wherein problems from the practice were integrated with theory. Research circles are described as a meeting place for theory and practice by Holmstrand and Härnsten (2003). There are democracy and didactic aspects of teachers' possibilities for didactic and theoretical reflections on their practice (Alexandersson, 1994).

In the *Gender* circle, some participants had had a longstanding interest in gender and had more knowledge of gender issues. One participant felt inferior:

Sometimes I felt I didn't fit in the group, but little by little I realised that I also had something to contribute from my thoughts and points of view. (Our translation)

However, the participant was sometimes silent in discussions. Although Larsson (2001) mentions examples of barriers like class, ethnicity and gender, these barriers are not discussed in this article and instead we want to

stress that other barriers, like differences in educational background and previous knowledge, might present an obstacle for horizontal relations.

In the circle *New subject didactic challenges* the first encounter of the participants, all of whom only partially knew each other, the relations could be termed hierarchical rather than horizontal since the degree of acquaintance with higher education environment and research differed widely. One of the participating preschool teachers had been working for almost 30 years without contact with higher education, whereas the teacher educators were very familiar with the environment. The same was true for the student teachers although their position as students had been subordinate, but efforts were made to treat everybody the same and to develop horizontal relations.

The structure and procedure of the work in the circle meetings contributed to more horizontal relations, at least in the first half-year of both sets of circle meetings. In the meetings of the New subject didactic circle often one participant would refer to a specific situation, e.g. mathematics during mealtime in a preschool. Then the other participants would relate with examples from their own experiences, and dynamic discussions arose. The diversity of the group in terms of professional background and work places formed a base for different kind of knowledge to develop into collective knowledge production (Holmstrand, 2008). The choice of texts to read was not decided beforehand but decided at each meeting and participants contributed suggestions. Scientifically-based texts were to a lesser degree chosen. The horizontal relations made it possible to build collective knowledge, new perspectives and critical standpoints. Yet, on the other hand, the absence of scientific texts lessened the contribution of theory.

The *Gender* circle, with its longer duration, had more time for study of scientific texts. Even some gender theses were read, discussed and sometimes referred to in the practice-based texts produced by the circle participants. One could nevertheless conclude that, to a large extent, horizontal relations developed within the circles, but it was questionable whether this aim of horizontality to some extent hindered participants' potentials and desire for new knowledge.

### ***Knowledge that informs standpoints***

A key issue concerns the control of what knowledge should be chosen for study. The initiative and autonomy of participants with reference to content is important and discussed with regard to power aspects, among other things, by Larsson (2001).

### ***The Gender circle***

The gender theme had already been decided on, as mentioned above. This theme had its challenges because gender research is a special and a rather new field of knowledge with many different theoretical positions. The ambition of the circle leader was to listen to the teachers' problems and discussions, and from these give suggestions for articles and books relevant to their problems (from the leader's point of theoretical view). Sometimes, however, the suggestions came from the participants.

Gender in the curriculum is mainly described as an aspect of equality. Yet, participants wanted to delve deeper into gender issues in preschool than equality questions only, as questions involving problem solving in both professional and personal issues came from the preschool practice.

Within this gender field a great diversity of research questions were initiated by participants and chosen on the basis of their experiences in practice.

Four studies were developed in this research circle, and two of them will be discussed in this article. One was titled *Clown culture*, in which the following were the research questions:

- Why would one particular boy challenge either me as a teacher or the subject we are talking about?
- How could I work (pedagogically) to change these situations? (Report from the research circle *Gender is a part of preschool*, 2012.)

The other study was titled *I know you are a girl – you have a boy's hair – but you are a girl*. With a starting point from the first mentioned study *Clown culture*. The intention in the following is to discuss the choice of research questions emerging from teaching practice and to relate these questions to the preschool curriculum.

This latter study resulted in many questions and discussions in the research circle on gendered identity relating to power questions in preschool and the teaching profession. The study emerged from one teacher's professional dilemma in various situations in her classes concerning some boys, specifically one of them who often interrupted her and answered with nonsense words. She had tried various ways of treating the situations but often experienced failure, so she wanted to find patterns in the challenging situations, to try to understand why they happened and search for strategies to cope with them in a constructive way.

This statement from the preschool curriculum illustrates how it deals with gender questions primarily on the basis of equality:

The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between the genders, as well as solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are all values that the preschool should actively promote in its work with children. (Lpfö 98 revised, 2010, p. 1)

This is a very basic and important issue. The study questions we have previously mentioned also problematise other questions related to gendered identity and power questions emerging from preschool practice, and although they are not curriculum objectives, they are not in conflict either.

In the research circle there is a possibility for participants to be knowledgeable in areas that they themselves consider important (Lundberg & Starrin, 1990).

The basic ideas of participation and equality in the research circles brought out the social aspect as an inclusive part of the form of the circles, as well as their openness to a diversity of questions. Research, as an important dimension of these circles, could be looked upon as part of form, influencing the frames of discussion and content. Questions of science, research and various scientific concepts are likewise closely related to the question of content — in this case, gender. The theoretical basis for elucidating some of the problems was post-structural theory and positioning theory, and an article by Alison Jones (1994), gender researcher, was introduced in order to understand the ideas behind positioning and gender.

When searching for a solution to her problem with the boys, this teacher discovered, among other studies, Davies (2008), who studied preschool groups and female teachers' relations to girls and boys from gender perspective. Davies was introduced into the discussion and the teacher found that there were sometimes different positions available for boys and girls that were situationally bound. Raewynne Connell's (1995) work on masculinity contributed to other aspects of this particular problem. Problems and dilemmas relating to current theories and gender research were also explored, enabling ideas and hypotheses to be reformulated and new knowledge to emerge. Some Swedish research that deals with gender in preschool were introduced as well, for example Eidevald (2009), Hellman (2010) and Månsson (2000).

Now to refer briefly back to one of the other studies that focused on a rather controversial subject, *I know that you are a girl – you have a boy's hair* and its research question: is norm critical pedagogy an important means of making it possible to follow the curriculum? This study problematises the heteronormative ideals that currently dominate society and consequently the

preschool. The subject raised a lively discussion. Judith Butler's understanding of gender categories was relevant but also rather difficult to use during this circle time, but positioning theory was useful in understanding how subject positions and norms are repeated and created (Martinsson, 2009). This choice of problem is an example of questions emerging from preschool experiences, as the question is rather controversial and may be provocative but is one that could be managed in discussions in a research circle.

The gender field is a complicated one with many and various theoretical approaches (Lykke, 2009). It is a challenge to present and discuss different gender theories in a rather limited time; there is a great risk of handling complicated issues in insufficient depth. Transforming and relating scientific knowledge and theories to experienced-based knowledge is a dilemma that requires deep knowledge of the subject.

The Bildung idea of the free seeking of knowledge (Liedman, 2002) may be seen as being in conflict with the specific task of the circle in developing scientific knowledge and knowledge of the research process. This balance between the autonomy of the participants and the circle leader's role is a challenging question that should be discussed and problematised, and not least with regard to its didactic aspects.

### ***Research circle on New subject didactic challenges in preschool***

Did the participants in the *New subject didactic* research circle create their own knowledge, and to what extent did they control the knowledge picked out for study? The set theme of the circle, *New subject didactic challenges in preschool*, already included an overall research question, and one could thus claim that the control of the selected study was only to a limited degree in the hands of the participants. The power to define the knowledge area was elsewhere. One could even talk about a hidden agenda set by the state. This meant that the circle participants did not formulate their own research questions. The group decided to focus mainly on conducting small-scale empirical studies, partly also due to limited time.

The small-scale empirical studies revolved around the implementation of the revised curriculum. One of the student teachers conducted an interview study asking a number of student teachers at the end of their education how they understood and viewed subject didactics in preschool. The two teacher educators conducted a joint study based in two preschools to investigate how teachers talked about the quest for knowledge and knowledge-oriented tasks in preschool. Another study by the two participants who were working as preschool teachers was based on a questionnaire asking parents about their

views on the content in preschool class. There was a difference between the studies in terms of relation to research. One of the studies was only based on empirical data while the others were related to relevant research.

The empirical studies were developed and scrutinised in the circle meetings, and through these analyses a collective knowledge process emerged from the discussions of study findings. Recurrent issues were identified. In the revised preschool curriculum (Lpfö 98/2010) the content is named by school subjects e.g. mathematics, natural sciences and technology, a matter that appeared to be of great significance in the analyses of the data. Preschool teachers, parents and student teachers seemed to let their own school experiences guide them in their understanding of the new subject didactics in preschool. This appeared to imply that content like technology needed to be taught and conveyed to children and this was how learning would occur. On the other side, results in the four studies showed a strong opinion among preschool teachers and student teachers that preschool didactic should be different from school. “Teaching is not for preschool” was the underlying motto. Though basically a positive attitude to the clarified knowledge quest for preschool – fear dominated amongst preschool teachers and student teachers interviewed. They feared that preschool would be too much like school. An understanding of what features preschool subject didactics contained emerged.

Critical issues and questions were raised and critical standpoints were formulated in the research circle. The collective knowledge process that emerged from the discussions contributed to define and understand the subject didactic challenges in preschool due to the revised curriculum. Theoretical perspectives that could have deepened the understanding were not introduced, partly due to lack of time, and partly to the narrow assigned theme.

### **Form, content and democratic aspects — comparing the two research circles**

We have described and analysed the two research circles on *Gender* and *New subject didactic challenges in preschool* in relation to three aspects of democracy: equal participation, horizontal relations and knowledge that informs standpoints (Larsson, 2001). Some distinct differences emerged when we compared the two circles: the themes, duration and the approach to assessment. These differences seemed to affect both form and content (substance) with consequences for the relational process and knowledge production within the circles.

<b><i>Gender in preschool in preschool</i></b>	<b><i>New subject didactic challenges in preschool</i></b>
<i>Wide assigned theme</i>	<i>Narrow assigned theme</i>
Practical-based questions	Questions related to theme
<i>Duration: two years</i>	<i>Duration: one year</i>
Research questions	Small-scale empirical studies
<i>Circle goal: no assessment</i>	<i>Circle goal: no assessment</i>
Assessment related to the production of a report	Assessment related to student teachers' exam work

Figure 1. Some differences between the two research circles

The differences between the two types of themes seem to have had the greatest impact on both content and form.

### ***Assigned themes***

The assigned themes of the two research circles differed. Gender was a wide open and complex subject that invited participants to formulate their own research questions. They could control what knowledge to study and could choose research questions based on their own professional and personal experiences. Ultimately, they had clear ownership of the creation of knowledge production. The theme *New subject didactic challenges in preschool*, on the other hand, was a narrower one, and an overall research question was already imbedded in that assigned theme: what challenges do the new subject didactics pose to preschools? Within the research circle, however, there was an openness that allowed for critical standpoints to be raised (Holmstrand, 2008). In comparison, one can assume that these critical issues might not be raised in ordinary in-service education courses aiming to implement the revised curriculum. In those courses, the content is provided to preschool teachers, as consumers who have very limited opportunity to address the issue from a more critical viewpoint.

Larsson (2001) concludes his discussion on aspects of democracy by answering the question of whether study circles actually promote democracy and the power of the civil society. He draws the conclusion that “study circles contribute more to fostering the prerequisites for democratic action than to social and political action” (Larsson, 2001, p. 213). The research circles

might be said to promote the power of civil society through prerequisites for democratic action by providing participants room for critical standpoints to be raised and control of knowledge production to be fostered.

Therefore, a wide and complex theme like gender may allow, on the one hand, the research areas to be self-chosen, but, on the other hand, the content might become too individually oriented, thus diminishing the creation of a collective process and knowledge production.

### ***Duration of research circle***

According to Klafki (1997), enough time to discuss is needed in order to enable the development of critical perspectives. The two circles differed in duration: the *Gender* circle lasted two years and the *Subject* circle one year. Thus, the longer duration of the circle seems to be important in order to get in-depth and critical perspectives on the theme studied. The *Gender* circle allowed for more theoretical studies, knowledge around the research process, and discussions as compared to the *Subject* circle, where lack of time was one reason to focus only on small-scale empirical studies with less time for in-depth discussions.

### ***Assessment***

According to Larsson (2001), an important condition for equal participation and horizontal relations in study circles is that participation is voluntary and without coercion. No tests or examinations are given because they could create coercion and a vertical relation between the judged and the judge (Larsson, 2001). Although the goal of both research circles in the study was for there to be no assessment, it in fact slipped into each of them and thus to some extent might have affected the autonomy of the content.

In the *Gender* circle, assessment was somewhat present because the participants (to a larger extent than expected) were engaged in the production of a written text outline that would be printed. In the *Subject* circle, another kind of assessment arose. As mentioned earlier, the two participating student teachers, concurrently with their circle participation, were in the final semester of their studies and were writing their thesis examinations. The choice and content of their small-scale empirical studies in the research circle became increasingly affected by the demands they had relating to their examination work. Although their judge (examiner) was not part of the research circle and the coercion came from the outside, it still indirectly affected the content.



Two main aspects of importance emerge from this comparison of the two circles. One is the development of the horizontal relations that enable the creation of collective knowledge built on dialogue and mutuality in the encounter between participants and circle leader/researcher. The other is the possibility of attaining knowledge that can inform standpoints, characterised by ownership of questions to study and access to knowledge/research that will allow for being critical and taking standpoints.

## **Reflections on possible didactic implications on early childhood education**

### ***To do and act democracy instead of teaching it***

The basic ideas of research circles, grounded in values of equality, participation and openness to diversity, stimulated participants in this study to raise current and sometimes controversial questions, representing values that in institutional contexts might be found to be problematic. Values like complexity and uncertainty can bring to the fore the relationship between power and knowledge: “power functions through knowledge and what is deemed as knowledge is a function of power” (Moss, 2010, p. 268). This practice-based knowledge seeking reference to classical Bildung ideas has more freedom from obligations and duties from the system (Kroksmark, 2003). The research circle is a way of practicing democratic relationships through dialogues and arguments expressed by openness to new ideas, possibilities and contesting dominant notions. Participation in a research circle could be viewed as a way of *doing* democracy instead of *teaching* it. This practice of democracy seems to be a productive form of developing a democratic professional who can use and develop the ideas of participation by everyone — teachers as well as children, dialogues and discussions in early childhood education. It is a way of thinking based on Deweyan’s ideas of democracy as opportunities for participation, sharing ideas and being listened to. Langsted (1994) highlights the importance of listening to young children, arguing that the wish to listen to children and involve them — the cultural climate of the institution — is more important than structures and procedures. To us, this cultural climate is what has prevailed in our research circles; it could be seen as a model for teachers to act as “practitioners of democracy” (Moss, 2007), to maintain a curiosity for children’s questions and an open mind towards discussing a variety of answers and welcoming multiple perspectives, which are all part of the early childhood didactic.

### ***Research circles as answers opposing the new marketing view of education***

The values embedded in the practice of research circles could be discussed as a challenge to the universally dominant discourse of education today that focuses on standardisation, measurement and reproduction. Specific learning outcomes reduce the possibilities for complexity and diversity of learning. Biesta's (2003) argument against this discourse of education and the concept of learning highlights the question of subjectivity and the agency of the learner in the learning process, a process that gives individuals opportunities to show who they are and to express their standpoints. The two research circles described in this paper might be discussed as educational and organisational examples of social learning processes, where individuals have had opportunities to "come into presence" (a.a. p. 9) as a result, among other reasons, of small groups and a permissible climate that yet offers challenges. This is the form of the circles and it also includes a content dimension (Klafki, 1997). The social aspect is included as part of the form with issues such as: what strategies are used in the group? Are hierarchies built or are they levelled out? Issues such as these are reflected in discussions where different individual notions meet, are confronted and sometimes modified.

The values of the research circle, based on influence and mutual understanding, provide opportunities for encounters among a variety of individuals. This multiplicity and openness for "the other" (Biesta, 2003) make it possible for new learning experiences and new directions of professional practice. The circle values can be viewed from an educational didactic perspective. This way of regarding knowledge building as an interpersonal process with an acknowledgement of many different voices and no specified outcomes is a perspective in opposition to the new emphasis on more school-like subject thinking in preschool. Even if the Swedish preschool curriculum still does not have specified subject goals, assessment and measuring increases and implies a threat to the ideal of a more child-focused preschool. Klafki (1997) uses the concept "critical constructive didactics" to develop ideas behind the word "constructive". He stresses that the constructive indicates an interaction between theory and practice, and that this didactic comprises a possible practice for change towards a human and democratic school.

We believe that research circles and their background ideology can contribute ideas that can be applicable in preschool practice. Teachers can transfer the circles' values to children's learning groups and further develop the participatory and democratic aspects of the early childhood education didactics in preschool.

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