
Power in Preschools: How to Support Teachers in the Unpacking Process

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New norms and values introduced into preschools through curricula changes require teachers to adapt their teaching. However, in making adjustments in order to increase children's agency, teachers can lose sight of how they wield their own power. In this project, a professional development facilitator worked with five Swedish teachers. Although the preschool teachers considered their primary role to be carers who resisted interfering in children's explorations, the initial analysis suggests that they were wielding considerable power in their interpretations of what was occurring. Consequently, it has become important for the professional development facilitator to unpack with teachers the power that they wield in order to develop their teaching. This project description discusses initial ideas for doing this.

Teachers' Understandings of Children's Agency

Preschool as an institution is framed by and organized by the institution's norms and values and therefore has a profound effect on children's possibilities for childhood (James & Prout, 2001). As norms and values change within a society, and thus within an institution, then childhoods will also change. In Swedish preschools (Emilsson, 2007) as elsewhere (Broström et al., 2014), the government policy, as represented in curricula (Skolverket, 2011), has advocated an increase in children's agency in their learning. Previous research had shown that teachers generally had a tight control over what occurs (Emilsson, 2007). This has seen to be problematic and instead it is currently being suggested that "by supporting play without dominating or disrupting it, teachers can aid children's learning and development" (Sandberg & Arlemalm-Hagser, 2011). In this way, Swedish preschools are

considered to contribute to young children becoming citizens who can understand how to take actions in society.

From a mathematics education research perspective (for example Edo, Planas, & Badillo, 2009), the teachers' role in activities is crucial for learning. However, in navigating between old and new norms and values, teachers may struggle with what their roles should be, particularly if they are unaware of the power issues, or how changes in their teaching might affect power relations. For example, Ebrahim (2011) identified four strategies that children in four South African early childhood centres used to enact their agency "resistance, avoidance, ignoring and collaboration" (p. 124). Of these strategies, only collaboration might be considered by teachers as a positive contribution to children's learning of mathematics. Yet if increasing children's agency is to be promoted in preschools, then teachers may need to rethink their own perceptions of how children can enact their agency.

Following the emphasis in the Swedish preschool curriculum on activities for children (Skolverket, 2011), our approach is to develop the teachers' knowledge and skills in regard to using mathematics activities that support children's engagement. However, as discussed in the next section, as the project developed it became clear to the professional developer that in trying to promote children's agency teachers were not recognising their own wielding of power. This led the professional developer to also consider her own use of power when working with the teachers. At the core of this power issue is how pre-school teachers interpret children's actions and act on those interpretations and how the professional developer brings these to the fore.

The Project and How Shifting Norms and Values Change Power Relations

One of the authors, Dorota, is involved in a research project with five pre-school teachers from two preschools in a small town in southern Sweden. The children that the teachers work with are between one and three and half years old, The teachers decided to video-record different situations so that they could observe and reflect on possibilities for discovering and making visible children's own ways of learning. The teachers watch the videos with the professional developer,

sometimes in small groups and sometimes with everyone together and discuss what children are doing.

As the teachers wanted to observe the children and what they did, often activities are set up for the children but in ways in which the teacher has limited involvement. Children had several opportunities to engage in the same activities. One of the outcomes for the teachers of video-recording the children several times doing the same activities was that they could see that children often focused on different aspects of the activity.

For example, in an activity to do with light and shadows, which can be considered as connected to understandings of spatial orientation, the children needed some time to become aware of and utilise the on/off button on the torches before they were able to focus on projecting their shadows on the wall. The teachers were surprised that the time and repetitions were not a hindrance to children's learning as they did not become bored in the way that the teachers had expected. The teachers became aware that by controlling how many times they allowed children to do the same activity, they affected the likelihood that children would learn.

At other times, teachers did not seem aware that they exercising power through their observations. For example, during one episode, a young boy put the torch at the top of a cardboard roll focussing the light into a narrow spot. The other children called for light. He consequently went and turned the room light on. The teacher saw this action as a destruction of the shadow-making activity. From the professional developer's perspective, it was by making this interpretation the teacher had wielded their power to determine which children were legitimately using their agency, by making shadows, and those who were not, as in the boy who turned the room light on. This raised the issue of how to make teachers aware of their use of power in situating some of these young children as learners and others as not which could then limit the legitimising of children's agency (James, 2007).

The Issue of Power

The focus of the project for the professional developer, at least, has moved from the teachers' pedagogical skills, to investigating how

power relations can change. One of the reasons for considering different power relations is that the teachers' awareness can affect children's own actions and the outcomes from these. There are issues to do with how children are considered active participants in activities by positioning their exploring and learning in positive or negative terms. The possibilities for mathematical learning are framed by materials, tools, and equipment chosen by a teacher. In these ways, children are given access to discover the processes of learning. In order to begin an exploration of power with teachers, it is important to acknowledge what the professional developer considers to be power relations because this definition affects how she will work with teachers. This is because it is her use of power that will affect the teachers' learning possibilities (Meaney, 2004).

The concept of power has taken different routes in mathematics education (Valero, 2004). One example has to do with the way that mathematics itself is considered to be powerful. An attempt to overcome the hegemony of Western mathematics has been the introduction of ethnomathematics, which takes into account the use of mathematics in different cultural contexts (D'Ambrosio, 2010). In one way, this can be considered an alternative stance to traditional school mathematics. In the Swedish preschool curriculum, the mathematical understandings that preschools should offer to children through activities are based on Bishop's (1988) six categories of mathematical activities (see Utbildningsdepartementet, 2010). This provides one possibility for discussing with teachers how different conceptions of mathematics may be considered by society as more or less powerful forms of knowledge.

Another way of considering power is related to the relationships between people (see Meaney, 2004). Foucault (Gordon, 1980, p. 198) stated that "[i]n reality power means relations, a more-or-less organized, hierarchical, co-ordinated cluster of relations". Therefore, power can be seen as a "...relational capacity of social actors to position themselves in different situations and through the use of various resources of power." (Valero, 2004, p. 11).

At the moment, the professional developer in collaboration with the other authors of this paper are working on how to support teachers to become aware of their perceptions of mathematics, of children, and what are legitimate learning behaviors that affect possibilities for taking children's agency in their learning seriously.

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