



The Swedish pre-school class – one of a kind



MYNDIGHETEN FÖR
SKOLUTVECKLING

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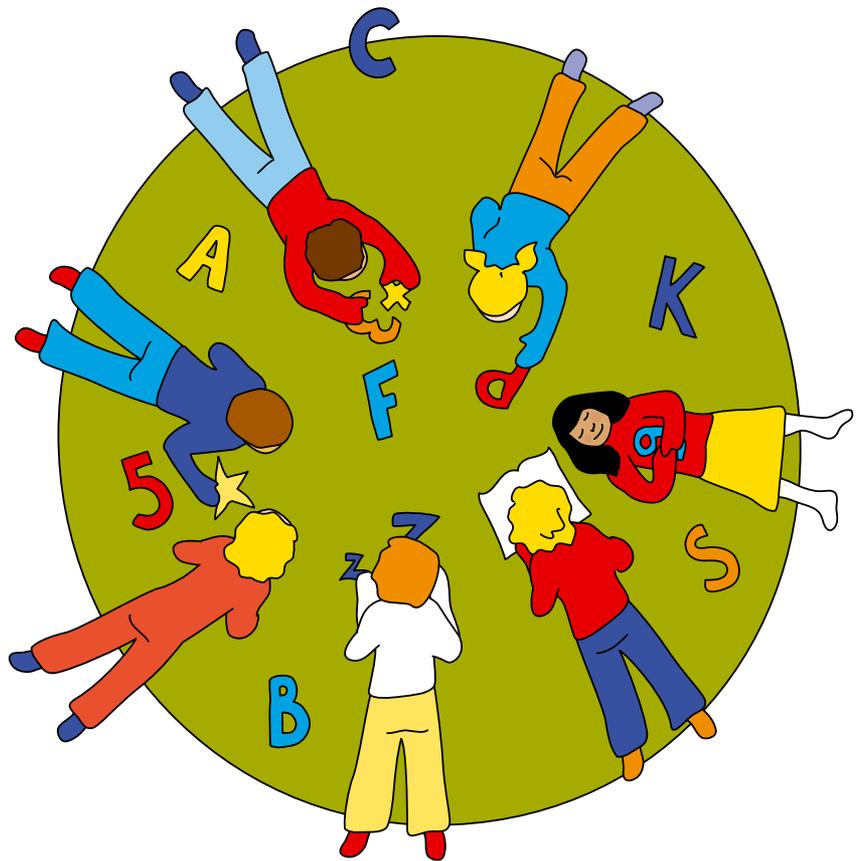
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The Swedish pre-school class – one of a kind

The pre-school class is a class of its own in more than one way. It constitutes the first step in fulfilling the goals of the curriculum for the compulsory school system, but still the pre-school class stands independent of the mandatory school system. It is now an integrated part of schooling, and has received a chapter of its own in the Education Act.

Since 1998 all children in Sweden have the right to attend a pre-school class, starting the autumn term in the year they turn six. The municipality where the family lives is responsible for offering the child a place and the pre-school class activities are free of charge for 15 hours a week. The pre-school class is, however, voluntary for the parents and their child. However, today about 95 per cent of all children aged six in Sweden participate in the pre-school class.





“There is for instance evidence supporting the idea that children are constantly learning new things, as well as the belief that playing and learning are two sides of the same coin.”

Life-long learning starts early

The pre-school class is essentially the first step of a ten year long education, but the process of lifelong learning starts much earlier. From our very first moment on earth we learn. It is not possible to live without learning. The question is what we learn and why, which knowledge is essential for our survival and which could we do without. The biggest questions are of course: How do we learn and what is knowledge?

These are all difficult questions to answer but the pre-school class plays an important role in the process of searching for the answers. There is for instance evidence supporting the idea that children are constantly learning new things, as well as the belief that playing and learning are two sides of the same coin.

Here it is important that the pedagogues trust their own competence as well as that of the pupils.

Pre-school pedagogues remind us of the importance of being aware of the individual circumstances and needs of each child. Now it is time to build a school where each pedagogue can learn from the other to create an environment for life-long learning.

Goals

The national curriculum (Lpo 94) was adapted to accommodate the pre-school class as they share common ground and visions with the compulsory school system. There is however a significant difference, while compulsory school has goals to be attained the pre-school class only has goals to strive after; such as helping the children to develop:

- A sense of curiosity and the desire to learn.
- Their own individual way of learning.
- Confidence in their own ability.
- A capacity to empathize with other people.

A bridge between two worlds

There were many ideas, intentions, dreams and visions behind the creation of the pre-school class and these have been described in a number of different documents, reports and propositions. However, they all share a central thought; the pre-school class should be a bridge between pre-school and compulsory school.

It should allow children to grow accustomed to school; the food, the schoolyard, the gymnasium and the school corridors which they share with other pupils. They will be introduced to reading and writing and many other exciting activities that make up the wonderful world called school.

“While compulsory school has goals to be attained the pre-school class only has goals to strive after.”

“Six year olds could now attend the pre-school class which was more geared to their needs and they were given insight as to what they could expect from compulsory school.”

The pre-school class sees the merging of two cultures; two different worlds meet and together create something unique. The pre-school class will be a place where obstacles and barriers are dismantled, where occupational status is nullified, inspiration found and where a common understanding of each others input and knowledge will flourish.

The pre-school class – a stepping stone

The most important task of the pre-school class is to reflect the perspective on knowledge and learning which permeates the pre-school class pedagogy. The pre-school class should function as a portal into the world of primary school and consequently will affect the daily work of the school. Forms of co-operation between the pre-school class and the school should be developed in order to enrich each pupil's all round development and learning. Education should be adapted to each pupil's circumstances and needs.

Things aren't always so easy

The visions and dreams for the pre-school class contain some high flying ideas that should be implemented in the daily work at schools around the country; however is not always so easy to implement these intentions. These teachers will have to tackle difficult concepts and answer important questions such as; what is lifelong learning, what is to be taught, by whom and when? These and many other issues are of central importance for schools.

New challenges towards life long learning

The pre-school class constitutes a unique opportunity for teachers and pupils to create a meaningful learning environment. Together they have the chance to break new, uncharted ground. There are those who feel apprehension for the changes that the pre-school class will bring, but there are also many who welcome this new challenge, and together with our six year olds will discover new roads on this lifelong journey.

Story behind the story

For as long as there has been day-care, pre-schools and the like, society has endeavoured to provide for the needs of six years olds. Parents and teachers have encouraged them to take more responsibility, six year olds were allowed to stay out longer, at home and in the pre-school yard, they were allowed and

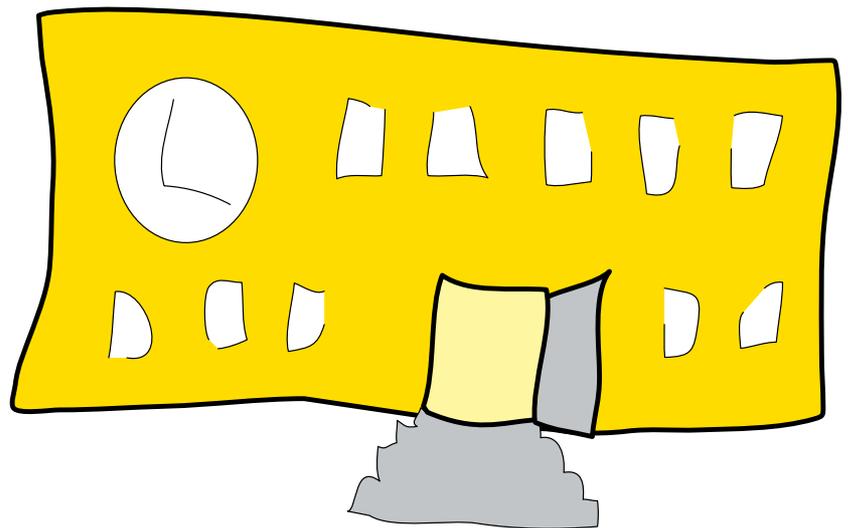
encouraged to be more advantageous, climb fences; help out in the kitchen and apply themselves to more difficult tasks. They were exposed to new pedagogical approaches such as; six year group, a-b-c groups, reading and writing groups, school preparation groups, cross curriculum groups; the purpose of these groups has always been to create a bridge between pre-school and compulsory education.

Formed in its own cast

The pre-school class became an integrated part of the mandatory school system early in the 1990s as a result of amendments made in 1991 to the Education Act, which made it possible for six year olds to begin school. There were also demographic reasons for this amendment, many years of smaller classes created a vacuum in schools with empty facilities and classrooms. There was a baby boom in the late 80s and now there was an opportunity for six year olds to avail themselves of the school environment which in turn paved the way for an organisational integration into the mandatory school system.

The benefits

Looking back, we are reminded of the pedagogical and psychological gains. Both parents and pedagogues became aware of the many gains of the reform. Six year olds could now attend the pre-school class which was more geared to their needs and they were given insight as to what they could expect from compulsory school.



Frantic activity

Everyday, all around the country from Arjeplog in the north to Malmö in the south, there is frantic activity going on in the pre-school classes, some have pre-school teachers who have genuine interest in implementing pre-school pedagogy, while others are more willing to accept a traditional schooling approach, with its rules and regulations. There is still a certain apprehension among parents and pedagogues alike as to what rights, responsibilities, opportunities and ambitions the pre-school should have.

Creating a new form of schooling within the parameters for an existing and functioning school system hasn't been easy.

To be knowledgeable and strong

Today we need the knowledge and the confidence to defend the exploratory pedagogy which permeates the pre-school class. We also need strength and enthusiasm to work with a type of learning that sees to the pupil's individual circumstances and needs as their starting point for their lifelong learning.

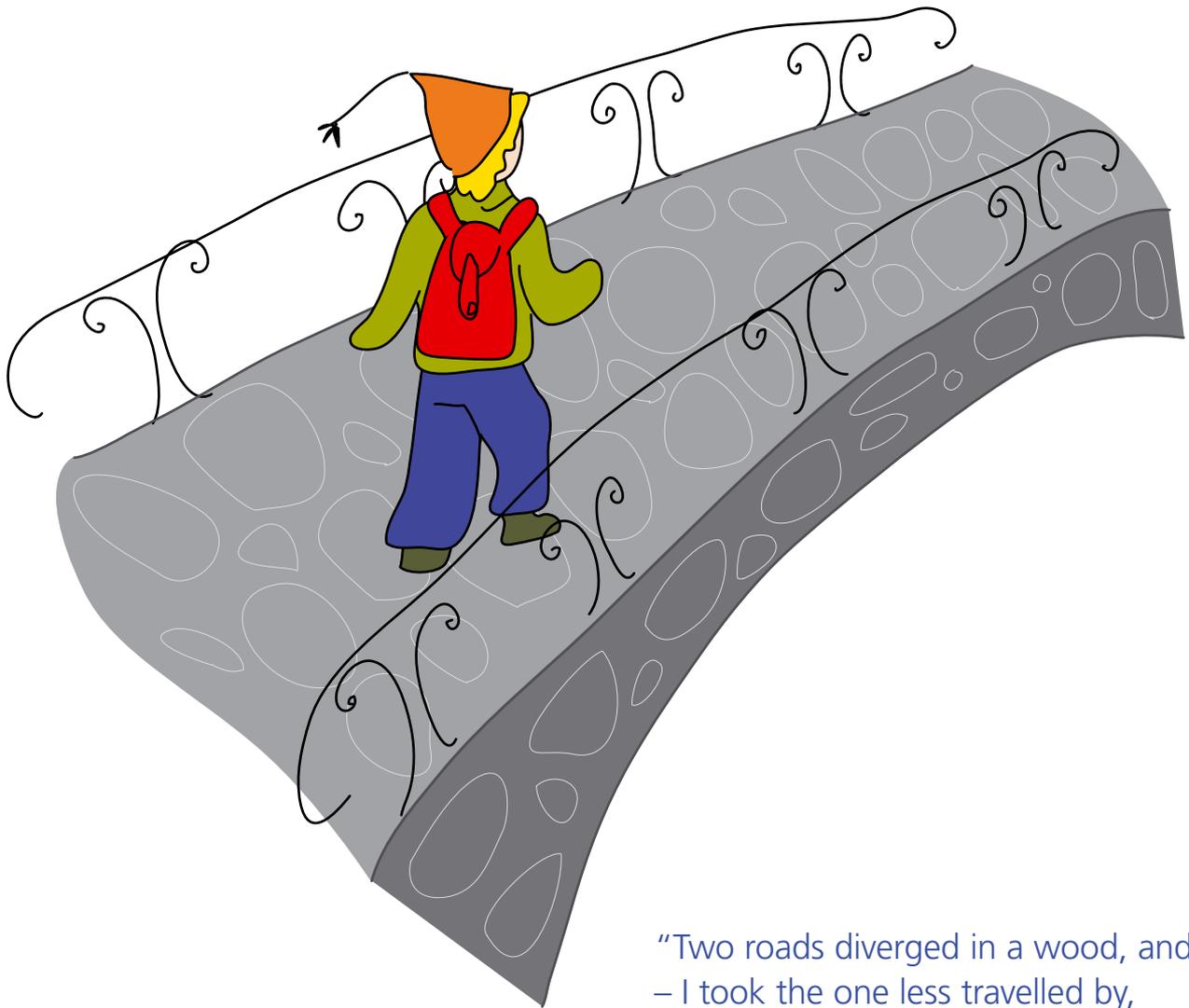
Working within a network with other pre-school classes is a way to become both inspired and stronger in the belief of common values.

Living the vision

Some areas that we feel are particularly important for the pre-school class are:

- Cognitive approach.
- The importance of broad-based involvement as an ingredient to successful development.
- Possibility for parents and pupils to influence the daily work.
- The importance of documentation as a means of facilitating the development of each pupil and finally life-long learning.

On the next pages you will find examples of schools that are forerunners in some of these areas. The pre-school classes that are mentioned in the features are different from each other as are the stories. They have something in common however, something very fundamental; they consider their role, their purpose, they reflect on learning, how the children learn and also they are constantly looking at the fundamental question: What is knowledge and how does it develop? In the features that follow the pre-school classes open a window into their thoughts, their ideas and they give us an insight into what they call; the world's greatest job.



“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I
– I took the one less travelled by,
and that has made all the difference.”

Part of the poem “The Road not Taken”
by Robert Frost

Emmahuset – cognitive approach



Emmahuset is a school in Hammarkullen, Gothenburg. Schooling at Emmahuset is characterised by an unconventional view of knowledge and learning, and differs widely from what we have come to expect from traditional schooling. Here pupils learn about maths and language while they bake, play and work with beads. Emmahuset have made manifest the concept of playful learning. Schooling here puts the child at the centre of things and sees to the individual circumstances and needs of each child, with a desire to learn being the main propellant for the school. The classes are integrated from 6–9 years old.

Annelie Pilzecker, pre-school teacher, explains in her own words: “Learning isn’t only about books and knowing hard facts, kids may lose this type of knowledge. This way, the kids learn for life, it’s all about learning by doing, this is the kind of knowledge that they will keep for life”.

Ingelin Nilsson, teacher in the compulsory school, agrees with Annelie and adds: “We believe that we learn through our senses. We endeavour to work with the large picture and believe that all individual development comes from this source. Social development, emotional training, motoric development and the acquisition of knowledge, it’s all part of the large picture.”





Husbygårdsskolan – the importance of broad-based involvement

The importance of broad-based involvement as an ingredient to successful development cannot be emphasised enough. It is the school head's responsibility to develop cooperation between the pre-school class, compulsory school and the leisure time centre. Research suggests that successful schools are characterised by visionary school heads who are open and share the goals of the school and furthermore that they are able to communicate the goals and rally the personal around fulfilling these goals.

Anna Söderberg is head of Husbygårdsskolan in Husby, Stockholm. Anna has succeeded in implementing a significant development of the school's organisation and also its pedagogical profile. Together with the personal she has created a positive working climate at the school which is always open to new ideas and eager to develop. Anna Söderberg is keen to talk about the environment at Husbygårds-

skolan: "Here at Husbygårdsskolan we have a learning environment that is adapted to the pupils circumstances and needs, rather than grouping them together by age or grade."

Husbygårdsskolan is characterised by a red thread from the pre-school class through to 5th class thanks to an active cooperation between teachers at all levels. The pupils have the same teacher from the pre-school class through their first year of compulsory school.

Lou-Lou Zachrisson is very positive about the work at the school, she says; "I started to work here because I wanted to work with this type of pedagogy, the work is influenced by the way we think in pre-school pedagogy such as playful learning. One of the greatest benefits is that I get to work with the students for two years, this allows us the continuity to get close to them and work with long-term goals and also gives me a chance to see the children develop."

Hammarbyskolan – the importance of documentation as a means of facilitating the development of each pupil



One of the hopes with the pre-school class reform was that the unique type of documentation that characterises pre-school activity would inspire the development of the pre-school class.

An important source of inspiration is the renowned Reggio Emilia pre-schools which were founded in Italy. Their type of documentation through paintings, sketches, photography and film have revolutionised the way of documenting work and progress at the pre-school.

Hammarbyskolan in Stockholm has been working with a thorough documentation project since their first Reggio Emilia project in 1993. Parents at the pre-school were interested in encouraging playful learning and also in keeping a thorough documentation.

The work of documentation takes time, but the benefits speaks volumes for both pupils and pedagogues. Pia Ericsson, pre-school pedagogue, explains: “Today we use technology to makes things easier, we use digital cameras and write the text at the same time, to save time.”

The children are also a central source of documentation, the walls, lamps and even the ceilings are covered with their artefacts.

The most important feature of documentation is that of providing a starting point for further learning and thus the school and the individual can progress hand in hand.





Örnsköldskolan – possibility for pupils and parents to influence the daily work

It is equally important for pupils and parents to influence the everyday work at school. It is the responsibility of the school to ensure democratic working methods where all pupils and parents can actively take part in developing the work of the school.

Örnsköldskolan in Örnsköldsvik achieves this by providing generous opening hours and flexible working methods, the school is open between 6:30 am until 6:30 pm. The pupils needs are of central importance and subsequently, they work, play, and eat at the opportune time.

Bibbi Söderberg, compulsory school-teacher, talks of the benefits. “I love working like this. I remember when I worked in a traditional school, how lonely that was. Here we work as a team, and there is always an adult available, whenever a child needs one.”

Lars Larsson, father of Alexander, has many warm words to say about the school: “I feel that the parents always have the opportunity to say what they feel and also to be a part of what goes on here, not just through formal meetings and the like, but more importantly through direct contact with the staff, who are always willing to listen.”

The importance of creating relationships – Klostergårdsskolan in Lund



At Östanvinden in Klostergårdsskolan, Lund, the pupils have the same teacher from the pre-school class through 3rd grade. We meet Pia Nordgren, compulsory school teacher, Christer Nilsson, pre-school teacher, and Hossein Karbassi of the leisure time centre.

Pia Nordgren gives some examples of the goals in the pre-school class: “One of the primary goals is for the children to create relationships, with us, other children and with their peers. We value the knowledge that exists in social interaction, an integral part of their social competency. One of our tasks is to open some doors for them, open up the world for them; show them some of what life has to offer. My hope is that later when they are acquiring an occupational identity they will see a world of opportunities.”

The pre-school class builds bridges; one such important bridge is that between the parents and the pedagogues.

Christer Nilsson explains: “We try to make them feel at home, invite them to sit down and have a cup of coffee, and quite often they join us. We feel that we have a good relationship with the parents. They do however have very different expectations, some are happy to have their children keep on doing what they were doing at pre-school, while others want more school-like activities.”

Sweden



The pre-school class was introduced in Sweden in 1998. It is voluntary for the parents and their child, but the majority of all children aged six now participate in the pre-school class. The very idea of the pre-school class is that it should function as a bridge between pre-school and compulsory school.

In this booklet we try to map out:

- How the goals for the pre-school class differ from those of the compulsory school.
- Some of the challenges with the pre-school class.
- Some areas of particular interest for the pre-school class.

We also present examples from five pre-school classes and how they try to "live the vision" of the pre-school class in everyday activities. How they meet this challenge differs a lot. They do, however, all share a common ground in the sense that they keep reflecting on their role and how the children learn.

