

A changing concept of childhood?

The introduction of Froebelian practices into Swedish pre-schools

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The history of early year's education in Sweden began in the 1830s (see e.g. Johansson & Åstedt, 1996, p 15, Simmons-Christenson, 1997, p. 178). Following an initial unsuccessful attempt, an infant school (småbarnsskola) was established at the Grand Orphanage (Stora Barnhuset), Stockholm, in January 1836. It was followed by a series of infant schools, of which some was still in existence in the 20th century. This was the starting point for the history of Swedish pre-school which was to continue with the establishment of crèches (barnkrubbor) in the 1850s, charity kindergartens (folkkindergarten) 1904, and play schools (lekskolor) 1929 (Ekstrand, 2000, p. 60f, Johansson & Åstedt, 1996, p. 15f).

The purpose of the infant schools was noble. The object of these institutions was to educate and nurture poor children between the ages of two and six. This was accomplished through a traditional school-like education in the three Rs. During the latter part of the 1900th century the pedagogics changed. Education similar to the education of common schools was replaced by a curriculum based on the writings of Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) characterized by children's play and handicrafts. A curriculum that is similar to the pedagogics of the charity kindergartens and play schools, which were established during the first half of the 20th century. (Ekstrand, 2000, ch 4, 9).

The prominent feature of the explanations of this curriculum reform is the importance that has been attached to the 'discovery' of the child and the advent of a perception of children as innocent and vulnerable (see e.g. Hultqvist, 1990, Ekstrand, 2000, Tallberg Broman, 1991). The purpose of this article is to question this explanation, and show that the importance of the development of the concept of the child has been over-emphasized at the expense of other circumstances. This is to be done through a study on the perception of children in the infant schools in the 1900th century and the Swedish common schools (folkskolor) influence on pre-school pedagogics. To conclude these results will be used to discuss the importance of ideas in general to the introduction of Froebelian practices into early years education.

Pre-school curriculum and the 'discovery' of the child

The child in the writings of history

The significance that has been attributed to a general transformation in the perception of children and childhood must be understood in context.

Since Philippe Ariès groundbreaking study "Centuries of childhood" the history of the perceptions of children and childhood has been widely discussed. (Heywood & Hedenborg, 2005, p. 27). Ariès thesis was that our perception of childhood as a particular period in life, is only a social and historical construct. During a long period of time, according to Ariès, children were not thought of as a separate category of individuals. Children were considered as little adults, and the demands that were made on children were similar to those on adults. As from the 1700th century this concept of childhood gradually began to change and a modern concept of childhood emerged (Ariès, 1996, Hedenborg, 1997, p. 3f).

Even though Ariès sweeping statements has been exposed to criticism, his vivid description of a fundamental change regarding our perception of children have had a large impact on the literature of early years education. In several important studies a change in the concept of childhood is attributed an important role in the reformation of pre-school curriculum. (see e.g. Beatty, 1995, p. 29, Shapiro, 1983, pp. 2-16, Whitbread, 1972, pp. 29-31, Wishy, 1972, p 23). This emphasis is also to be found in the literature on the history of the Swedish pre-schools (Hultqvist, 1990, p. 30, Tallberg Broman, 1991, p. 65, Ekstrand, 2000, p. 231). Although there is a difference of opinion regarding exactly when this transformation occurred, it is understood in practically the same way. The change in the attitudes towards children constitutes an emergence of a romantic and sentimental attitude towards children, which implies that children are of a different kind than adults. It is also a change that is, according to the authors, a significant condition for the introduction of Froebelian practices into the Swedish pre-schools.

Conspicuous in this respect is a certain vagueness. Neither Hultqvist's, Tallberg Broman's nor Ekstrand's arguments are based on actual historical source materials. The conclusions they draw are instead derived from theoretical discussions that connect educational change with changes in the perception of children. These authors' conclusions are therefore quite indistinct. Tallberg Broman writes in general terms about the concept of childhood as a prerequisite of the educational change that occurred in the Swedish pre-school. Hultqvist regards the emergence of a new perception of children as a part of the sweeping social, cultural and economical transformation that occurred during the 1900th century. Ekstrand describes a novel pedagogical approach that originates from discussions on children and their mental capacities. (Tallberg Broman, 1991, p. 64, Hultqvist, 1990, p. 28ff, Ekstrand, 2000, p. 231).

This vagueness, and the lack of historical empirical research that it originates from, gives rise to questions regarding the significance of the concept of childhood for the

transformation of pre-school curriculum. The crucial question if there was such a change in the concept of childhood is answered below.

A changing concept of childhood?

Available sources suggest that the perception of children in the Swedish pre-schools was not subject to change during the Swedish 1900th century. In contrast to the thesis of the literature on the subject an investigation of the Swedish infant schools shows that ideas on children as innocent, sensible and, in the true meaning of the word, 'childish', is to be found already in the early years of the infant school.¹

It must be emphasized that this is not all that surprising. This concept of childhood has for example been found in the romantic literature from the late 1800th century Schiller to the Wordsworth of the 1850s. (Plotz, 1979, p. 75). In England has similar ideas, for example in connection with the production of toys and children's books, been identified in the late 1800th century. (Plumb, 1975). Pre-school pioneers in both England and the U.S. advocated such ideas during the early 1900-hundreds (Winterer, 1992, p. 292f, McCann & Young, 1982, ch. 9). In Sweden it has been noticed that children at the end of the 1800th century was regarded as being individuals of a certain kind with certain physical and physical properties. (Hedenborg, 1997, p. 214).

The fact that these ideas on the childish child can be found already in the early days of the Swedish pre-school, can be illustrated with the with "An outline of a manual for Infant schools", published in 1841, as point of departure (Forsell, 1841). Published by the leading infant school society of Sweden, The Society of Infant Schools of Stockholm, it was the most important manual in pre-school pedagogics, and was widely read (Ekstrand, 2000, p. 84ff). In this manual it is evident that that the 'discovery' of childhood, if there can be such a thing, already has taken place. According to Forsell, children are of a certain kind. Children are described as much more delicate creatures than individuals at a more respectable age. This is formulated in several different ways. Forsell compares children with willows, and remarks that it is a known fact that willows are best bent while young. (Forsell, 1841, p. 6). Children are also compared with clay. As long as the clay is soft, Forsell says, it is easy formed. This is also true regarding children. They are more easily are formed at an early age, than later in life. (Forsell, 1841, p. 7). This fact is also substantiated with a bible passage "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Forsell, 1841, p. 6).

This sensitivity, which can be utilized in the pre-schools education, also has a downside according to Forsell. The child's great potential for change and growth also implies a risk. If the child is not properly educated, it can grow in the wrong direction. Prisons, according to Forsell, are enough proof of this (Forsell, 1841, p. 8). Too much education can also have negative effects, as it might lead to precociousness and overexertion (Forsell, 1841, p. 10).

¹ This investigation takes as its point of departure the discussion that took place in these eight infant school societies –the infant school societies of Gävle, Göteborg, Karlskrona, Lund, Malmö, Stockholm, Uppsala and Örebro- during the second half of the 1900th century.

In addition to this sensitivity, children also have other particular qualities. Children are especially lively and have a desire for movement and constant stimulation, which is admitted, often turns them into quite a nuisance. (Forsell, 1841, p. 6). It is probably this quality which Forsell describes in an earlier draft on his manual, when he speaks of children's natural cheerfulness and vivacity (Forsell, 1837, p. 6).

In accordance with this perception of children, the childhood is regarded as a specific period in life. Children are according to Forsell of a certain kind, and consequently they live a certain kind of life. This concept of childhood is illustrated by the "The Infant School song" ("Sång för Småbarn Skolor") which is printed in Forsells manual. In three verses this song expresses familiar ideas on children and childhood. It is a song about how lucky children are to be living the playful life of children, and how the infant school is a place of refuge from the demanding life of the adults. But it is also a song about how children grow up. Adults, in contrast to children, cannot survive on games and songs alone. That is why children ought to be educated in infant schools so they can earn a living as adults and support their elderly and beloved parents (Forsell, 1841, p. 72, 157).

This sentimental way of perceiving the child and childhood is accordingly expressed in the educational activities of the infant school. Consistent with this concept of childhood the education of the infant child is supposed to not only be instructive, but also varied, merry, pleasant and encouraging. The infant school should, in other words, be the place where "the childish nature, consigned to its innocence" can be nurtured in a morally sound fashion (Forsell, 1841, p. 151f).²

Pre-school curriculum and the common school

As has been shown, the transformation of pre-school pedagogics in Swedish infant schools can hardly be explained by a change in the concept of childhood. Already from the beginning, the infant schools appear to have perceived children as creatures of a certain kind, characterized by innocence, sensitivity and a childish liveliness. The introduction of Froebelian practices into Swedish infant schools can however be related to a contemporary development of major importance: the expansion of the common school system.

The common school in the writings of history

During the second half of the 1900th century, the Swedish government worked hard to improve the common school, which was the system of mass schooling financed by the government that was founded in 1842. Common schools were built, the organization of the schools were improved and school attendance of the children was increased, which made the common school a concern for a larger share of the children of Sweden (Sörensen, 1942, chapter 3).

The relation between pre-school and mass schooling has been noticed in the research. The importance of mass schooling for the creation of the concept of 'pre-school' and the distinction between school and pre-school has been observed. (Vág, 1984). The

² "hvarest den barnsliga naturen, öfverlemnad till sin egen oskuld"

effects of the system of mass schooling on the relation between different kinds of pre-schools has also been paid attention to (Weber, 1971, p. 171).

Regarding the reform of pre-school curriculum, two accounts have been presented of the relation between school and pre-school. In the first of them the school system restrains the development of the pre-school curriculum. An example of this is the school system of England. It was characterized by an attendance of a large number of children in the ages between two and five which were accommodated in babies' classes of elementary and infant schools (Whitbread, 1972, p. 42, Brehony, 2000, s 60). In 1862 a system of "payment by results" was introduced. The intention of this system was to promote the efficiency of elementary education by making the grants of the elementary schools dependant on their pupils results in annual examinations. But in effect it also restrained the establishment of a reformed pre-school curriculum, because it forced teachers to begin teaching the 3rs as early as possible (Whitbread, 1972, p. 46, Brehony, 2000, p. 66).

The second of these accounts is that of the common school system as a hastener of reform (cf. Whitbread, 1972). The best example of this is the school system of Germany. As their English counterparts, the German schools were characterized by the attendance of young children. This custom came to be regarded as a danger for the quality of the education of the children. Consequently a law was passed which legislated that no common school education was to be given to children under the age of six or seven. The result of this legislation was a school system that encouraged the development of a new pre-school curriculum, which differed from the traditional curriculum consisting of reading, writing and arithmetics. The pedagogics of Friedrich Fröbel can, for example, be seen as an effect of this legislation (Allen, 2000, pp. 17-18).

Regarding Sweden, the common schools effects on pre-school curriculum has been noticed in Britten Ekstrands dissertation "Course of pedagogical events in the Swedish equivalent of infant schools" (Ekstrand, 2000). The influence of the school system is here described in line with the images of the school system as a catalyst of pre-school curriculum reform. As a consequence of the major importance that Ekstrand credits individuals and groups, Ekstrand emphasises the professionalizations process of the elementary-school teachers. According to Ekstrand it is the aspirations of these teachers that kept the infant school out of the common school system. (Ekstrand, 2000, p. 228). Another factor that Ekstrand observes is the combination of dissatisfaction with the aims of the infant schools and the expansion of the common school system. Once the leaders of the infant schools are dissatisfied with the infant schools, because the infant schools seems to have lost its original aims, it is the rising number of common schools which motivates a pedagogical reform in the infant schools. This is, according to Ekstrand, because of the fact that they claim that infant schools are of no use now when there are so many common schools (Ekstrand, 2000, p. 194).

The expansion of the common school system

The effects of the expansion of the common schools on pre-school curriculum are evident in an investigation of eight of Swedens most influential infant school societies. As in Germany the Swedish common school system encouraged the reform of pre-school curriculum. Available source materials suggest that the importance of the

common school consists in that it problematizes the infant school curriculum which, as I mentioned earlier, was similar to the curriculum in the common school. The reason for this is not legislation, as in Germany. Neither seems the professionalization process of the elementary-school teachers be something that problematizes the academic instruction in the infant schools. Instead three aspects of the expansion of the common school system appears as fundamental to the problematization of the academic instruction of the infant schools.

The most important factor in the development of the common school was the increase in the number of common schools during the latter part of the 1900th century. Despite the fact that the common school was legislated in 1842, which meant that every parish had to found at least one common school, not even half of the children of school age attended school five years after this historic decision (Marklund, 2005-12-08). During the second half of the century circumstances improved, and at the time of the new common school regulation in 1882, the common school was an established part of the Swedish society (Richardson, 1984, p. 40). A condition for this was the Government subsidy reform of 1871. An earlier complicated system, which often punished the parishes who founded schools, was replaced by a system which encouraged the foundation of new common schools (Sörensen, 1942, p. 69-83).

The importance of the increased number of common schools was that it appeared to reduce the need for infant schools. Starting in the 1860s the expansion of the common school system appears to the board of directors of the infant school as the principal reason to reform the infant schools. Since the common schools could offer education to the children of the cities to an increasing extent, the infant schools curriculum based on reading, writing and arithmetics seemed without purpose.

This view was formulated explicitly in six of the eight infant school societies that are analyzed in this study. The majority of the board of direction at Gävle infant school, who expressed their opinion at a meeting in 1868, advocated that the infant school should be closed down owing to the increase of common schools in the city of Gävle (GSA, protokoll 14-03-1868). In 1877 the management of Karlskrona infant school states the fact that the benefit of infant schools is not as great as it once were. This, according to the board of directors, was the result of the establishment of common schools. This development meant that the city now had several of these schools that could offer the same academic instruction as the infant schools (BLM, protokoll 18-12-1877).³ In 1886 a committee claims in a report that the infant school in Örebro at the present time is of almost no use since the parish has to fund the establishment of new common schools if the infant school is closed (ÖSA, protokoll 13-03-1886). The ladies Association of Lund (Lunds fruntimmersförening), which administered an infant school, asserted a similar view in 1891. They claimed that the common school system nowadays was in a state that forced the infant school to change (LSA, protokoll 04-05-1891, see also (SSA, protokoll 04-05-1871, and SAU, protokoll 11-11-1892).

The improved organization of the common school was also of major importance for the pedagogical reform of the infant schools. These improvements consisted among other things in the establishment of local education authorities in the cities, and the

³ Junior school (småskola) was a kind of common school that comprised the first two years of schooling.

employment of supervisors with the assignment to inspect the status of the cities elementary instruction. The consequence of these changes was that it was possible to receive better knowledge of the merits and imperfections of the school system, which implied that the use and benefits of infant schools could be valued and questioned.

The consequences of this improved organization is probably most evident in Göteborg. According to the common school legislation of 1842 every town parish was a local education authority (Spetze, 1992, p. 7). This led to problems in Göteborg, whose parishes were not territorial. They did not contain a specific geographical area, which meant that it was especially hard to keep track of those children that were obliged to attend common school. To create some kind of order the city was endowed with a single local education authority which unified a previous divided school system, and a school supervisor (Olsson, 1958, p. 53-62, 96). The local school authority had its first meeting in 1858 and as early as the next year, school supervisor Johan Wallin was co-opted onto the board of The Infant School Society of Göteborg. The purpose of this was to create a collaboration with the common school system that had been lacking (RSG, protokoll 29-11-1859). To achieve this Wallin takes prompt action. In 1859 he removes over-aged children from the infant school to the common school (RSG, protokoll, 29-11-1859). Wallin is also assigned in 1860 to make a draft memorandum of a new curriculum. His draft is approved which meant that for the first time a froebelian curricula was introduced in the Swedish pre-schools (Ekstrand, 2000, ch. 9).

The consequences of the improved school organisation are also manifested in Stockholm. The letter which concludes the discussion about the future of the infant schools in Stockholm, and was followed by a reform of the infant schools curriculum, was written by school supervisor C G Bergman. In his letter to the board of the infant school society of Stockholm, Bergman discusses several questions but emphasises, as all previous contributors to the discussion, the problem with the diffusion of common schools in Stockholm. Hoping that the board of directors will not be offended, he claims that the academic instruction of the infant schools has become superfluous since no children at the present time are denied admission to the common schools of Stockholm. Therefore, Bergman asserted, the academic instruction of the infant schools must be replaced by another form of pedagogy, preferably froebelian (SSA, protokoll 16-12-1892).

In addition to the diffusion of common schools and the improved organization of the common school system, the establishment of junior schools in 1858 must be mentioned. With the establishment of these schools, which were a kind of common schools for children between the ages of six and eight, the age from which school was to be compulsory was changed. Previous to this reform children started school at an age differing from six to eleven, but with the introduction of junior school it became common to begin school at the age of six (Sörensen, 1942, p. 109). This meant a decrease in the number of children that had not yet begun to attend school, which led to a decrease in the perceived need for infant schools. The establishment of junior schools also rendered dissatisfaction with the infant schools, which Ekstrand mentions. With the establishment of junior schools it became possible to claim that infant schools should be reformed from their present state as junior schools to the 'real'

infant schools that they once were. This was claimed in a meeting at the Infant School Society of Örebro (ÖSA, protokoll 14-03-1874). It also became possible to criticise infant schools for being neither an infant school nor a junior school but a confused mix of both kind of schools.

The last-mentioned opinion is formulated in Stockholm. In the 4th of May 1871 a committee presents its view of infant schools in the Infant School Society of Stockholm. They claim that the infant schools must change. It is a known fact, the committee claims, that the infant schools are not the same schools as they once were. They were infant schools but have become something between infant schools and junior schools. This, the committee claims, is unfortunate because an increasing number of children nowadays has got the opportunity to attend to common schools, which means that infant schools are not needed in the same way as they once were (SSA, protokoll 04-05-1871, see also GSA, protokoll 14-03-1868).

The common school system and the organization of the infant schools

The fact that the development of the common school system had a major impact on the curriculum of the infant schools can be understood in the context of the organization of the infant schools.

In terms of organization, the infant schools had characteristics that were typical of the period. Organized in societies or associations they were a part of the associations of the 1900th century that was the answer to a number of societal problems and the result of the transformation of society from feudal to capitalist relations of production (Jansson, 1985). As an association the infant school societies shared many of their qualities. They were pronounced urban, and were administered by individuals with middle-class background. The infant school societies also received, which was typical of the associations, both moral and financial support from the highest stratas of society (Nilsson, 2003, p. 133ff). Above all there were two characteristics of the infant schools that determined the impact of the developments of the common school system on the curriculum of the infant schools.

The social utility of the Infant School

A distinguishing feature of the Swedish associations was the emphasis on the importance of being of a certain utility to the society at large. It was not enough to work only in the name of Tradition, Truth or Jesus. Educational societies wanted to contribute to the education of good citizens of the society, and poor relief-institutions aimed at contributing to the wellbeing of society by helping the less fortunate (see e.g. Taussi Sjöberg & Vammen, 1995). To be of use was also an ideal among the men of the middle-class who were active in these associations (Tjeder, 2003, p. 140, 148ff).

The ambition to fulfil the needs of the society was consequently common in the Infant Schools of the nineteenth century. Often this was formulated, as it often were during this period, in relation to the 'social question' (den sociala frågan) (Pettersson, 1983). Often this was done by portraying, in dramatic colours, a crisis where the infant school is depicted as the most effective solution to the flaws of society. An example of

this is to be found in "The Journal of common school teachers and the friends of common school education" where an author asserts that the progress of science and industry is only surpassed by infidelity, depravity and crime ("Tidskrift för folkskolelärare och folkskolebildningens vänner, 1852, p. 149). This evil of the time cannot, according to the author, be eradicated by a half measure such as the common school. Only the infant school can eradicate it (Tidskrift för folkskolelärare och folkskolebildningens vänner, 1852, p. 149).

This desire to be of common good is also expressed in another context. In addition to, as other educational institutions, being of use for the society at large, the infant schools also aims at being of use to the system of elementary education. This aim is formulated in my material using concepts as 'use', 'gap', 'utility' and 'redundancy' (see e.g. SSA, protokoll 8-12-1871, 31-10-1892, ÖSA, protokoll 13-03-1886, 07-06-1886)⁴.

The fact that the infant schools changed their curriculum because of the expansion of the system of common schools can be interpreted in the light of this desire to be of use to the school system. The development of the Swedish common school system does not necessarily question the pedagogics of the infant schools. The infant schools are not obliged to give up traditional academic instruction just because the common school is offering it to a growing share of Sweden's children. But the infant schools ambition to accomplish something with a certain use to the society makes it so. With the aim of contributing something to the society as the point of departure, the curriculum of the infant schools is problematized because of the fact that the government-financed common schools are offering the same kind of education as the infant schools. What's the use of offering the children of the society the same thing that the common school already guarantees?

An example that illustrates the role that this aspiration for societal utility has in the curriculum reform of the infant schools can be found in the infant school of Gävle. Here the board of the infant schools claims, in a meeting in 1892, that the parish nowadays is equipped with enough junior schools, and that the infant school therefore is of no use. The assets and properties of the infant school should therefore be used in a more suitable way for the children and youth of the city, and the board decides to close the school down. This decision was followed by a discussion that also illustrates the importance of the aspiration for being of societal use to the reform of the infant schools. A suggestions which was proposed, was that the infant school should be turned into a school for mentally retarded children. This suggestion was dismissed. As the education of all children was to be organized by that common school system, the reform of the infant school into such a school would not be to any real use. The proposal that was approved was instead the establishment of a domestic science school (GSA, protokoll 12-03-1892).

The importance of this aspiration to the change of the pre-school curriculum is also illustrated by a report that is presented to the board of infant school in Uppsala in 1892. In addition to a concise description of the history of Swedish infant schools with a focus on the events in Uppsala, the use of the education of infant schools is discussed. As point of departure the infant schools of Stockholm is mentioned. In

⁴ 'gagn', 'lucka', 'nytta' och 'överflödighet'

these infant schools children, according to the report, between the ages of five and six are admitted. During a year these children are educated in what is equivalent with the first grade of the common school. This means that when these children are of seven years of age, they are to attend to the same classes as those children that already have been in school for half a year. The conclusion that is drawn from this is that education in the infant schools are of little use, because it only gives the children the advantage of half a year in respect to their comrades of the same age. The proposal, which the report finishes of with, is therefore that the education at the infant school should come to an end (SAU, protokoll 11-11-1892).

The administration and economy of the infant schools

In addition to the infant schools emphasis on the importance of being of a certain utility to the society, the impact of the expansion of the common school was conditioned by the infant schools administration and economy. This is evident in a comparison between those infant schools, which was shut down because of the common school, and those infant schools that for the same reason chose to reform their curriculum.

A distinctive feature of the four infant schools that were closed down is an economy and an administration that does not demand an infant school. This flexible organization is marked in the cities of Gävle and Lund where the infant schools were administered by Ladies associations. The aim of these societies were not solely to run an infant school. The object of the Ladies Association of Lund was, according to their regulation from 1847, to give destitute children Christian care in their homes or elsewhere (Stadgar för fruntimmers-föreningen i Lund, 1847, § 1). The object of the Ladies Association of Gävle was at its establishment to promote education among children and help women with limited means by supplying them with employment (GSA, protokoll, bifogad historik).

These aims also manifested themselves in the Ladies associations' field of activities. In Gävle the ladies association ran an infant school, a handicraft school (slöjdskola), and a self-help organization (skydds-förening) which was concerned with helping poor women finding jobs (GSA, ÖI:2, övriga handlingar, årsberättelse 1875). The ladies association of Lund had far reaching interest in such things as an infant school, an junior school and later on an orphanage for young children (småbarnshem), a summer camp (skollovskoloni) and a crèche (Tallberg Broman, 1996, p. 29).

This flexibility that characterised these ladies associations facilitated the closing-down of the infant schools of these associations. When problems in the shape of the establishment of common schools appeared, these associations did not meet any economic or organizational impediments when responding to these problems by shutting their schools down and instead establish another kind of institution.

This flexibility is not unique to the ladies associations, but can also be found in the organization of other infant schools that is closed in this period. Örebro Infant School Society illustrates this. A poor economy in combination with the existence of a fund intended to serve the establishment and maintenance of an orphanage creates a space for change. This space is utilised when the utility of an infant school seems to be reduced when the common school system is developed in Örebro. The society changes

name from “The friends of the infant school” (“Småbarnsskolans vänner”) to “The friends of infants” (“Småbarnens vänner”), the infant school is closed down and an orphanage is established (ÖSA, protokoll 13-03-1886, 15-03-1886, 14-09-1886).

As a condition for the impact of the common school system on the curriculum of the infant schools appears accordingly a certain organizational rigidity that prevents infant school societies from closing down their infant schools in face of the problem presented by the common schools. This rigidity has partly an administrative basis. The infant schools which is attempting a curriculum reform are run by societies whose sole purpose is to operate a pre-school institution. An example of such an institution is the Infant Schools Society of Stockholm, whose purpose, according to the societies regulations, was to establish and maintain infant schools (Stadgar för sällskapet till inrättande af småbarn-skolor i Sverige, 1846, § 1).

This rigidity has also an economic basis. A distinguishing quality of the infant schools are an economy that is dependant on funds (Ekstrand, 2000, ch. 5). These relatively large amounts of money, which interest financed the maintenance of the schools, were always equipped with specific instructions and regulations regarding the funds possible use. Often could the fund only be used to finance activities directed at young children. Consequently, curriculum reform was the only possibility for these infant schools if these funds were to be used in the future.

The best example of this is the infant school of Karlskrona. An important economical source for this infant school was “Miss Danielsson’s fund” (“Mamsell Danielssons donationsfond”), created in 1849 with the purpose to establish and maintain an infant school or a similar institution (BLM, donationsurkunder). When discussions began regarding what the infant school could and should be in times when common schools are established all over Karlskrona, it is evident that “Miss Danielsson’s fund” is of major importance. A variety of proposals regarding how the infant school is about to change is discussed, and it becomes obvious that this fund restricts the possible outcomes of this discussion. For example the suggestion that the infant school should be turned into an institution for the clothing of the poor (beklädnadsverksamhet) is rejected on the ground that “Miss Danielssons donation” cannot be used to finance such an arrangement. (BLM, protokoll 18-12-1877, 20-12-1877).

Concluding discussion. The introduction of Froebelian practices

A common approach in the science of history is a kind of idealism. The history of our society is, considered from this point of view, the history of concepts, mentalities, theories, and discourses, and behind every reform one therefore can find a change in the perception of or the theory on the subject matter. This is also true in the history of education. As Bengt Sandin points out, the development in institutions for children is frequently explained by ideological positions. (Sandin, 2003, p. 56).

This intimate connection between ideas and educational change has been complicated in different contexts. Not least in an Marxist tradition, where ideas and notions has been deported to the superstructure and thereby defined as secondary in relation to the more fundamental movements in the socioeconomic structure of the society.

Although I do not want to fit this paper's results into a specific theoretical model, they support a perspective where ideas are not the fundament of an explanation. This article on the introduction of frobelian practices in Swedish infant schools has shown that ideas did not have the importance that has been attached to them. Instead I have claimed the importance of the developments of the common school system to the reform of Swedish pre-schools. I have shown how the rising number of common schools from the 1860s was regarded as the most important reason to reform the infant schools curriculum and introduce a froebelian pedagogy, or to simply shut the schools down. Since the common schools could offer education in reading, writing and arithmetic's, an infant school curriculum consisting of the same basic elements did not seem to serve any useful purpose.

I have also shown how the common school's effects on the infant school's curriculum have been dependant on the properties of the infant schools. In this article I have paid attention to the infant schools desire to be of use to the society. Without this purpose the expansion of the common school system would not have been a reason to reform the infant schools. The fact that the common school did teach the children the same thing as the infant schools would not have been a problem. The administrative and economic structure of the infant schools was also of importance in reference to the curriculum reform of the infant schools. Only in the instances were the infant schools were characterized by an economy and a administrative form that demanded a kind of pre-school institution, the expansion of the common school system led to a reform of the infant school curriculum from education in the 3rs to froebelian gifts and games.

The view of the introduction of froebelian practices into the early years education of the nineteenth hundred, that has been promoted in this article, is consequently a view where the importance of the ideological positions has been reduced in favour of the importance of socioeconomic conditions. Nevertheless this does not imply that the curriculum of the pre-school can be explained by developments in machinery of production or the classes of society. Neither is this an approach that leaves ideas out of the analysis. Instead it is an analysis which takes the organizational and economic context of pedagogics as its point of departure. A context in which also ideas has a significance as practical deliberations or assumptions.

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