Supporting Parents in their Parental Role - Approaches Practiced by Preschool Teachers in Preschool.

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The purpose of this paper is to analyze and discuss preschool teachers' supportive approaches when supporting parents within their profession. Questions addressed are; what kind of supporting approaches do preschool teachers practice to strengthen parents in their parental role? Which theoretical frameworks do preschool teachers use when supporting parents in their parental role? Results, based on interviews with 30 preschool teachers in Sweden, show that the participating preschool teachers share an ambition to support and strengthen parents in their parental role. To do so preschool teachers practice and use different approaches - the teambuilding-, the reflective-, the expert-, the delimited- and the personal approach. The approaches used in practice do not, however, always serve their purpose, but on the contrary, preschool teachers may weaken parents' self-efficacy. The different approaches also show that preschool teachers not always "preach as they teach", using different theoretical perspectives in their collaboration with parents as they do in their own practice at preschool. The results from this study are important to reach a deeper understanding for underlying factors, as e. g. different views of children, in preschool and home collaboration.

Keywords: Preschool, home, collaboration, competence, parenthood

Background.

The aim of this article is to analyze and discuss preschool teachers' supporting approaches within their profession in relation to various views of children, parents and childrearing. The interaction between the preschool teachers and parents captures interest since there is an explicit political aim in Sweden to promote and strengthen collaboration between home and preschool. This ambition becomes visible in governmental documents (Prop. 2004/05:11), in *General Guidelines and Comments for Quality in Preschool* (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2005) and in the Swedish curriculum for the pre-school (Ministry of Education and Research, 2006).

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The tasks of the preschool are described in the curriculum and it is followed by guidelines stating that all who work in the preschool should "show respect for parents and feel responsible for developing good relationships between the staff of the pre-school and children's families" (p. 13).

Preschool teachers' tasks include one where they should inform parents about the children´s development and learning as well as goals and content of pre-school activities. Preschool teachers should also build and maintain good relationships towards parents and give the parents an opportunity to be involved and influence activities in preschool. And finally they "should help families by supporting them in their role of upbringing and helping their children to grow and develop" (p. 5)

or as stated in *General Guidelines and Comments for Quality in Preschool* (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2005) "provide support for parents in their responsibility for the child's education, development and growing" (p. 37).

Pre-school teachers' supporting role in the upbringing of children is clearly stated in governmental documents and it is also highlighted as a characteristic for high quality childcare when teachers try to influence children's development by improving parents' childrearing abilities (Textor, 1998). It is however unclear what kind of support preschool teachers do provide and which supporting approaches they use in their supporting role and furthermore what theoretical frameworks the support rests upon.

Parenthood in modern society.

Parenting in 'modern' society requires not only an understanding of children needs and develop-ment but also an understanding of the demands that society have on parenting and what demands parents have on society. The wellbeing of the children is not only a concern for the parents but also for society as a whole, manifested through legislation and financial and social support systems. The widespread knowledge concerning child development as well as the enlightening of children's rights contributes to the light being directed towards parental competences and their ability to collaborate with both their children and the adults surrounding them (Bäck-Wiklund & Bergsten, 1997). Böök and Perälä-Littunen (2008) state that parents today experience a stronger cultural pressure to act in the child's best interest than parents in earlier generations since children have become target for all kinds of educative efforts, and later views of the child as competent, active and interacting also set demands on parents being responsive and empathetic listeners (Johansson, 2007).

Constructions of parent.

The idealistic and normative parent described by young people in the study of Böök and Perälä-Littunen (2008) is a caring parent, who loves, trusts, encourages and communicates with the child. A caring parent also sets boundaries for the child and knows about the child's ongoing activities and whereabouts (*ibidem*). Parents may also be constructed in a less ideal way when categorized, as in Prakke, van Peet and van der Wolf (2007) questionnaire, 'excessively worried',

'unsatisfied', 'uncooperative', 'neglectful', 'overprotective', 'involved-uninvolved' or 'fighting'. The study examined teacher´s perceptions of their own ability to handle challenging parental behavior and the categories above are categorized as 'difficult' parents (*ibidem*). The conclusion, when analyzing above categorizations, may be that a less difficult parent, from a teacher perspective, is protective and worried to some extent, yet not overly, yet also satisfied and willing to collaborate. Parents may also be seen as 'in need of support', when not being able to care for the child. In Böök and Perälä-Littunen's (2008) study parents in need of support are described in two different ways – parents who are able to seek help for themselves and parents who are not. The latter are likely to be a specific concern for social workers.

Parental support.

This study, conducted by Böök and Perälä-Littunen, does however not raise questions about in which situations parents seek support or within which areas support might be needed. This is not surprising since the content of support given by preschool teachers rarely is described within research. Taisey Petrie and Holloway (2006) found in their study on parental self-efficacy that working-class mothers use preschool teachers as a source of support and advice in their parental role to a higher extent than middle-class mothers who are relying on other sources. Sandberg and Vuorinen (2007) found that parents' age may matter to which extent parents seek support in their parental role since first time parents who were very young or elderly expressed lacking the opportunity to discuss parental matters with other parents. Their existing social networks rarely included friends being in the same stage of life, if they were very young their friends had not yet become parents and if they were elderly their friends had almost grown-up children at the time. The people included in their existing social networks were therefore not an access when discussing childrearing matters since they lacked an 'inside' understanding of being a parent to a young child today. The challenges parents face today are complex and issues that others, looking from an outside view, may consider easy to handle may include a whole range of considerations. The preschool teachers supporting role was very useful for these parents, especially when the preschool teacher had children of her

own, and therefore could relate to issues concerning parenthood in contemporary time.

The child in the family.

The society is undoubtedly changing and so are family patterns and the interaction patterns within the family. Traditional views of family as 'structure' is being replaced, both in everyday life as in research, with a view of family as 'practice'. It means that the rather static view of the family, focusing on relations, is challenged by a more changeable view, focusing on interaction and processes. These changes in views are often linked to the ongoing individualization in society but also to a later view of the child as a subject with its own rights and competences (Bäck – Wiklund & Lundström, 2009) and therefore also with a voice that should be heard in everyday family life. Johansson (2007) states that the child, who is viewed as competent, fits into a family who is embracing democratic values within the family e. g. the parents are equal and all family members are considered and treated as individuals. The family may be seen as an area of negotiations when family members are trying to implement individual needs and wishes within the collective. Giles-Sims and Lockhart (2005) use Sweden, along with other Scandinavian countries, as examples of societies in which egalitarian pattern in child fostering is dominant. The parent stresses the importance of building strong, life-long relationships with their children based on mutual respect. They attain accountability from the child through the quality of their relationship.

The greatest difficulty for parents seems to be finding the balance between individual and collective needs and concerns within the family (Bäck-Wiklund & Bergsten, 1997) and according to Markström and Halldén (2009) the tension exist also in preschool when children are expected to take part of organized group activities initiated by preschool teachers as well as to be given the opportunity to develop their own interest by taking part of child-initiated activities. Both parents and preschool teachers have to handle this tension when they on one hand strive to let the child influence activities taking place at home or in preschool and on the other hand the adults strive to make the child to submit to things that the child have no or little interest of submitting to. The child perspective is emphasized by Jensen and Jensen (2008) who bring forth the importance of viewing the child as competent and willing to collaborate with both parents and teachers. It is important not only to focus on child behavior but also how adults communicate with the child and how they respond to their needs.

Inclusion v/s rearing.

The communication between child and adult is especially noticeable in situations when adults set boundaries for a child's behavior, and so is the theoretical framework beneath the actions taken. Prochner and Hwang (2008) state however that even though earlier theories of child learning and development have been replaced with newer there are aspects considering childrearing that still relate to earlier theories when embedded in the common wisdoms within cultures. Johansson (2007), on the other hand, shows that earlier theories very much explicitly coexist with later theories when analyzing the advice given to parents by experts during the last 40 years.

Later views of the child, characterized by a democratic approach, are therefore struggling explicitly with hierarchical approaches to childrearing relaying on behaviouristic theory. The contradictions between these perspectives become particularly apparent in matters concerning disciplinary measures. Giles-Sims and Lockhart (2005) apply a grid-group theory to families when pointing out how varying grid and group position may contribute to differences in means used to discipline children. Families with a democratic perspective on childrearing are usually reluctant to use external force or control (grid) in childrearing matters, on the contrary, when striving to attain accountability from their children by building a strong relationship to them characterized by mutual respect and affection (group). A hierarchical approach includes a view of the child as less-knowing and therefore parents' role is primarily perceived as teaching children the right way to live and do things. Accountability from the children is attained by various forms of punishments when deviating from the correct way. When, how and to what extent parents are to set boundaries for their child are issues frequently discussed in Nordic countries and parents are often seen as less responsible than earlier generation when interpreted as lacking the ability, or willingness, to set boundaries for the child's behavior (e.g. Böök & Perälä-Littunen, 2008).

Jensen and Jensen (2008), however, challenge the traditional view of childrearing as a one-way process by replacing the concept of childrearing with the concept of inclusion seen as a two-way or mutual process. Childrearing in a traditional sense

include an active parent, or a teacher, governing or directing a passive child into a desirable direction e. g. adapting to a socially acceptable behavior. The adult have all the saying in this process because (s)he is always considered being right.

The adult then uses different measures, often disciplinary e. g. isolation, when directing the child into different childrearing goals. Children usually have no say in the process or when setting the goals. Giles- Sims and Lockhart (2005) refer to the traditional form of fostering as hierarchical when family members' status varies depending on e.g. age and gender. The family as a unit and the collective interests are superior to individual needs.

Jensen and Jensen (2008) show when viewing childrearing not as 'rearing' but as 'inclusion' modern or egalitarian views of family and child is made visible. The child is considered as an active part in the process when being increasingly included in discussions and decision-making. The goal is the process when values, attitudes, knowledge and actions are constantly negotiated and developed between generations in a community (*ibidem*). Parents' reluctance to discipline children behavior through e. g. isolation and ostracism, measures that Prochner and Hwang (2008) recognize as embedded in common wisdom practiced within Western cultures, can therefore be interpreted both as a sign of failure and as a sign of success, depending on the perspective taken.

With this background, the following research questions are addressed:

- What kind of supporting approaches do preschool teachers practice in order to strengthen parents in their parental role?

- Which theoretical views on child, parenthood and childrearing do preschool teachers express when supporting parents in their parental role?

Methodology.

The research design.

Qualitative research methods and analytic strategies have been used in this study since the aim of this study is to analyze and discuss preschool teacher's supporting approaches within their profession in relation to various views of children, parents and childrearing. The selection procedure used agrees with the overall aim of qualitative research when striving to seek answers to the research questions by examining various social settings and individuals who inhabit these settings (Berg, 2004). This study will take its starting point in social constructionism, which is based on the view of the world as socially constructed. It includes analyzing taken-for-granted knowledge in a critical way e.g. by making visible underlying assumptions. 'Parental support' is for example a concept that has different meanings in different contexts and it is far from clear who is to be included in the concept 'parental' and what kind of 'support' is to be given. The language is furthermore considered as a form of social action since different ways to talk about different phenomena also give different practical consequences (Burr, 1995). Our understanding of different phenomena is further linked to social interaction and social processes and we are not always aware of what our taken-for-granted knowledge is built upon. The interviews were therefore not only analyzed to bring forth the participants' views of the phenomena but also to add a critical view regarding how meaning is constructed as well as analyzing underlying theories and possible consequences of different supportive approaches.

Participants.

This study is based on interviews with 30 female preschool teachers practicing in both rural areas and urban cities in Sweden. The respondents' working experiences varied from a few years to 40 years: the youngest respondent only had begun her carrier while the oldest were close to retirement. The participating preschool teachers were initially selected by the director or manager at the particular preschool and the selection was based partly on the preschool teachers' interest of participating and partly on estimated competence. The latter refers to competences recognized and valued by the director or manager at the particular preschool, since he or she was asked to select preschool teaches that they considered highly competent.

Data production.

The results are based on semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, allowing the participants to broaden their answers in their own way (Bryman, 2002). Teachers' competences were the overall topic during the interviews but

the interviews also included a specific focus on preschool and home collaboration. The interviews were carried out at each workplace and lasted between 60 – 120 minutes. All interviews were recorded and literally transcribed. In order to narrow the quantity of text towards the aim of this particular study, focusing on the collaboration between home and preschool, the following keywords were used; parent*, home, mother, father, family and collaboration. To narrow the text even further focus was directed against preschool teachers supporting approaches, analyzing differences and similarities as well as the theoretical framework of the different ways preschool teachers talk about parents, the relation between children and parents and preschool teachers' views of their supportive role. Most of the preschool teachers brought forward the importance of providing support to parents but only a few gave examples of the content in the support given.

Results.

The results show that there is no doubt that preschool teachers share an ambition to support and strengthen parents in their parental role. Preschool teachers participating in this study experienced that parents sought advice in practical childcare and also in childrearing matters. Parents are seen lacking e.g. the knowledge of the importance and the ability to set boundaries for the child.

A participant stated that:

Well, it's all [kinds of advice parents seek] from questions about childcare, such as "What kind of boots for the winter should I buy [to my child]?" /.../ But also questions about childrearing ... I think [laughs] elementary childrearing things … uncertainty in setting boundaries … that you have discussions with your child … who has been here [at preschool] … let us say 6-8 hours … and give them [children] choices that really don´t make much difference ... you think you are a good parent if you let them [children] choose between all sorts of things.

What is viewed as 'elementary childrearing thing' by the preschool teacher are seen causing difficulties for the parent when trying to be a 'good' parent. The parents are having 'discussions' with the children and are also giving them 'choices'. The parent is seen trying to include the child in the decision-making by letting him or her make a choice and some negotiating communication is obviously taking place in the meeting between the parent and child. This is however not considered as 'good' parenting by the preschool teacher as she sees that the child is too tired for decision-making and the choices are not significant. A 'good' parent should therefore recognize the child's state of mind and save it from the effort of making decisions. The preschool teacher recognizes the parents strive to be good parents, but also refers to a failure when stating "you *think* you are a good parent". The parent encourages the child to contribute to what could be seen as a joint decisions between the child and the parent, and this shows that the parent recognizes the child as competent enough to communicate his views, even when being tired. The teacher on the other hand does not recognize the child's decision-making skills, at least not in this specific situation. The child is considered overly tired and therefore in no shape to contribute with its view.

The different standpoints in this case may be influenced by the situation when the parent has an ongoing dialogue with the child, whilst the preschool teacher is a spectator with the privilege of being able to give a hindsight interpretation of the specific situation. It is however possible that the parent came to the same conclusion when talking to the child but s/he did not take the child's unwillingness to discuss for granted. This could be a situation where the parent develops her/his parental skills coming to a conclusion maybe similar to the teachers'. What might seem as evidence of parental failure could therefore also be interpreted as a parental experience of learning and a parental effort to practice child 'inclusion' rather than child 'rearing'. The inclusive approach is however seen as a sign of weakness by the preschool teacher.

The results show that preschool teachers may practice different approaches in order to support and strengthen parents in their parental role; the teambuilding-, the reflective-, the expert-, the delimited- and the personal approach.

The 'teambuilding' approach.
The preschool teachers practicing a 'teambuilding' approach collaborate with the parent in order to handle and solve difficulties, focusing on the individual child's well-being.

Problems or shortcomings are identified and they work together as a 'we' when striving to come up with a solution or a strategy to make everyday life as good as possible for the actual child. Parents contribute with their knowledge and experience about the specific child in the home environment whilst preschool teachers contribute with their more general knowledge of child development and the experience (s)he has about the child in the preschool environment. The following quotation is an example of the teambuilding approach:

> We've a little guy ... the mother is so worried that he doesn´t eat ... he only drinks formula in the morning before he leaves home and then ... so she wants to ... so she thinks it is so long before lunch is served here /.../ but then when I said "But ..." ... because then she wondered if he could eat something more in the morning …"Yes, but then he can eat porridge here"... /…/ and then she´s been asking how it works out … "Well, now he eats a smaller lunch when he has had porridge in the morning "..." Well, maybe"... then we may stop with the porridge for a while and try ... so that he eats ..."it's better for him to eat a steadier lunch?"..."Yes, I think so too, I think it's better for him to have a real meal than having porridge in the morning. We can take half ... he eats half portion of porridge so we'll see what happens when"... yes, we have tried a little something like that ...

The preschool teacher has recognized that the mother is 'worried' and takes her worry seriously and discusses what solutions can be provided in the preschool. The parent and the preschool teacher communicate continuously and share their experiences with one another when trying different strategies. They continue to reach joint decisions and the collaboration is to be seen as an ongoing process striving to reach a joint picture including both their experiences and views in different contexts. The preschool teacher listens to the parent and takes a constructive attitude towards trying different solutions suggested by the parent. The parent is kept informed about the effects that their strategies generated when the preschool teacher reports noticing that "now he eats a smaller lunch". The strategy is obviously not working and they continue the effort to find a way to keep the child content during the preschool visit. The preschool teacher may come up with suggestions of what strategies to use but no action is taken within this area without mutual consulting. The strive for consensus is made visible in this example. Thus, there is no apparent competition between the parts involved or a desire to try to convince one another.

The problem perceived is furthermore linked to the adults surrounding the child, not to the child itself, when sharing an assumption that the child will probably eat if only the preschool teacher and parent learns to understand how to regulate the meals during the day. The child is seen as both competent and collaborating when recognizing hunger and doing its best to eat up whenever a meal is served.

The 'reflective' approach.

When practicing a reflective approach the preschool teacher strives to identify and solve difficulties through dialog focusing on parents own experiences. The preschool teachers are striving to make visible to the parents their own ability to come up with alternative ways to handle difficulties when not providing an answer or make suggestions for action.

> I usually don´t give an answer [when parents consult me]/.../ I don´t respond ... as if I have an answer for everything ... but I ask questions ... where the questions lead, I don´t know in advance /.../ parents just experience that I listen, I ask questions, I´m curious, interested in the ... it can provide a solving effect ... not that it solves the whole problem but it provides trust in the parent's own ability.

The preschool teacher does not share her own views but strives to broaden the parent's views or to change her or his focus by asking challenging questions. The preschool teacher states that she does not respond as if she has "an answer for everything" and by doing so she "provides trust in the parent's own ability" to solve problems. She chooses to be passive with the deliberate intention to make parents use or develop their own competences when facing parental dilemmas. She is supporting the parent by being "curious" and "interested" and providing a mirror that the parent can reflect upon. The preschool teacher sets trust in the process knowing that the reflections can contribute to a solution or to a different way to handle the specific situation.

The view of the child becomes invisible in this example when focusing on strategies used by the parent and any strategy seems to go as long as the parents identify the strategy as successful.

The 'expert' approach

The 'expert' role is sometimes *given* to the pre-school teacher by the parents. One pre-school teacher stated for example that "they [the parents] see us as professionals at what we do" or refer to situations where parents search for a preschool teacher who has more knowledge in matters concerning child development. Sometimes the role of an expert is *taken* by the pre-school teacher:

> *I can support them [the parents] if they need assistance in child development and learning ... many times ... they will come and ask how they should deal with conflicts, for example, at home ... they always ask questions .... they know that we know best or that we know more than they do.*

The preschool teacher recognizes her ability to provide support when stating that preschool teachers, stated as "we", know best or at least more than the parent. The parent's competences are not made visible in this situation, on the contrary, the parent seem to have failed with her or his own strategies when dealing with conflicts. Some preschool teachers emphasize the importance of parents having someone more knowledgeable to consult in different matters since it can give them a sense of security, knowing that there is someone to ask and someone who can come up with a solution to the problems they are experiencing.

> *We are being capable and we know … and it should be a security in you [parents] being able to ask a preschool teacher [for advice]*

The knowledge transmitted or the advice given reveals however interesting aspects since preschool teachers not always 'preach as they teach'. When preschool teachers describe competences related to their everyday work at preschool they emphasize the importance of taking children's perspective in consideration, involving children in activities and giving children an opportunity to speak their mind, in short –

including children in the planning and decision-making at preschool. But in their consulting role preschool teachers sometimes give parents advice working in the opposite direction, excluding children from activities and leaving no room for negotiations. This is highlighted in the following interview:

> Preschool teacher: *Somehow I feel that perhaps parents are more uncertain nowadays ... that they do not dare to speak against their children ... because it should be so enjoyable when they are at home ... the moments they meet … so it might be based on a little remorse/guilt …*
> Interviewer: *What do you say when … let us say that they consult you about the meals … a child is misbehaving … and they [parents] wonder what to do … what do you say to them?*
> Preschool teacher*: Of course it depends on the situation … but … and what child it is … it depends … because you have to consider the individual child … so sometimes you can … well 'take the plate away' and then say "Now you will have no more food!" and then they will have to wait until the next meal … and sometimes you want them to remain in place … then they must remain [by the table] … so that you are consistent.*

The parent is constructed as weak in this interview when not daring to speak against the child, or when not exercising power as an adult. The parent is also seen as an "absent parent" when trying to make "the moments they meet'" enjoyable, this is however not seen as a desirable thing when it is interpreted as a way to stun the remorse for being absent. The preschool teacher senses that parents are more "uncertain these days" and relate this uncertainty to parents' absence from the child. Underlying that if the child and parent spent more time together the parent would not hesitate to "talk back" or disciplining the child. The uncertainty is linked to the relation between the parent and the child, and preschool teacher's conclusion seems to be that parents who spend too much time away from their children are reluctant to discipline the children in a traditional way and therefore they run into trouble when rearing the child. The preschool teacher´s advice to the parent includes a traditional view of childrearing when adults are considered to know best and children should be passive and disciplined into desirable behaviors. The preschool

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teacher do however highlights individual differences among children but only when it comes to the content of the punishment, not whether the child should be punished or not. There are openings for making different considerations in different situations when stating the importance of being 'consistent'.

The 'delimited' approach.

The delimited approach often includes a boundary between preschool and home when preschool teachers link their competence only to children's play, learning and development at pre-school. They may listen to the difficulties that parents experience but they are reluctant to discuss or to be consulted in matters concerning parenthood.

> *My profession is so incredibly linked with a role of rearing [children]/ … / it is not negative thing as long as you are a parent … So, if it would have been my children it would have been perfectly OK … then I have that role, but I am not a parent to the these kids … I'm not.*

The preschool teacher is aware of that her profession is linked with the role of fostering the children but she is not willing to embrace that role, on the contrary, she emphasizes that she is "not a parent". The parents will have little or no direct support from the preschool teacher in their parental role. Parents may also express, more or less explicitly, that fostering children is not a concern for the preschool teachers. The delimited approach practiced may therefore strengthen parents´ autonomy when solving parental issues on their own and by that recognizing their own ability to handle difficulties.

The 'personal' approach.

The results from this study show that sometimes preschool teachers abandon their professional role to give more personal advice. The preschool teachers lean on their experiences being a parent and having experienced parenting from an 'inside' view:

> *You can hear when they have huge problems at home … after a while … then they might leak a little once in a while /… / yes, but when I try … to give a bit personal … well, tell a little about myself and my children … "Yes, I recognize that*

> *and …" … so that it won´t be so dramatic ... "… and I did this" I can tell them ... that it is important to pull together and help each other ... if you are two for example ... because you don´t have the energy if you have ... if you have a child who is very, very stubborn and strong ... then you don´t have the energy ... to ... to ... maybe ... try to be a bit charitable, so that you won´t say any like this [to the parent] "Now, do like this, do you like that, do you understand?" /…/ you can have an understanding that it is tedious and ... that you shouldn´t give up but struggle on ... because you don´t want a teenager who will do as they like ... because they [parents] say "they are so young" ... but you have to think in a wider perspective …*

The parent in the above example seems to be reluctant to seek support from a professional preschool teacher in matters concerning parenting. The preschool teacher can however get the parent to bring the guard down by sharing her own experiences of similar situations. She recognizes how childrearing can have an effect on the relationship towards one's partner when stating that it is important to "pull together and help each other" as a couple. The difficulties are not seen as a failure explained by the parent's lack of parental skills but as an exceptionally challenging task when the child is being so "stubborn and strong".

There is a parental understanding shared when stating "you don´t have the energy" and recognizing that there are no quick-fix solutions that work in every situation. The support given is empathy when encouraging the parent to continue the struggle and also by giving the struggle a meaning by pointing at the future. By referring to her own parental experiences the preschool teacher may reinforce parents to seek advice, knowing that you are in a similar situation and struggling with the same kind of issues. Being professional and sharing personal experiences is however sometimes experienced as complicated. One of the participants states:

> *I have children in the same age ... you go through the same problems /…/ it's not something that I refer to when talking to parents, but it has after all some importance … how … you have gone*

through the situation yourself at home…. just as parents have worked with ... and you may be able to support in a different way /…/ I can give some tips ... if they'd like some advice … and ask … and if they want some tips … often I refer to, of course, how we handle situations at preschool … but then I´m also aware of what works … "I have tried this at home with my children" … and it worked out /…/ and you can reflect both professionally and personally as … parents might feel a little more affinity /…/ that they might not only look at you as a professional, but they know that I have my own children here [at preschool] … they are the same age as well and ... it ... it ... although I always try to be professional and so, but perhaps they don´t see me as a professional.

The preschool teacher in the example above seem to struggle with the different roles stating that "it´s not something that I refer to when talking to parents, but it has after all some importance" since you can support "in a different way". The word 'different' is here linked to a view of the preschool teacher not supporting the parent as a professional but as a parent. The professional advice is made less efficient when stating "often I refer to, of course, how we handle situations at preschool … but then I´m also aware of what works". The preschool teacher points out that strategies used in preschool do not always work at home. Of course there are obvious reasons for not using the same approach toward a child in home and preschool environment when e. g. having stronger and longer lasting bounds towards one's family. The differences can however also be linked towards differences in the views of child-rearing when being a professional and being a parent and what measures that are available in the specific settings. A preschool teacher is expected to act 'professionally' in their professional role also when handling issues concerning fostering. Being 'professional' means being aware of how to implement work governmental guidelines as well as later theories that emphasize children as competent and therefore also given the right to influence practice. Using exclusion as a method in child rearing does not however agree with preschools teachers assignment or the theoretical frameworks manifested in practice, in e. g. the preschool curricula. The preschool teacher are also

pointing out the effects that the personal approach can lead to when parents "feel more affinity" but it can also undermine her professionalism when parents no longer see her "as a professional" but as a parent.

Discussion.

The results of this study show that the supporting approaches practiced by preschool teachers to strengthen parents in their parental role vary and not all of them are to be considered as strengthening. The expert approach e. g. may have the opposite effect when not always recognizing parents' ability to handle difficulties using their own experiences. Yet, in this study, preschool teachers experience a demand for expert advice and this is often interpreted as an uncertainty or a lack of ability among parents e. g. to set boundaries. But there are other aspects to consider when uncertainty or lacking skills also can be interpreted as a reluctance to set boundaries by using traditional childrearing measures. Parents are, according to Böök and Perälä (2008), experiencing stronger cultural pressure than earlier generations to act in the child's best interest and Giles-Sims and Lockhart (2005) found that Scandinavian parents may be especially reluctant to use external force or control when disciplining children since it is not consistent with the democratic perspective on childrearing characteristic of parents in the Scandinavian countries.

The question is however which theoretical views on children, parenthood and childrearing preschool teachers practice in preschool and which views they express when supporting parents in their parental role? The democratic views on childrearing are, according to the preschool curriculum and the participating preschool teachers, characteristic of Swedish preschools. The child is viewed as capable, active and socially interacting, and is to be included in the democratic processes in preschool when given the power and ability to influence preschool activities. The child constructed in preschool setting does however seem to fade when preschool teachers use the expert approach to provide support to parents in childrearing matters. Instead a hierarchical view on childrearing is appearing, leaving no room for negotiations between parents and children. The coexistence of theories brought forward by Johansson (2007) becomes visible in the results, when preschool teachers not always preach as they teach. Preschool teachers may take pride in using inclusive strategies at preschool giving the children a voice and the power to influence preschool activities but when giving support to parents, as experts, exclusive strategies are

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brought forth when encouraging parents to silence the child and take control. As Jensen and Jensen (2007) state, it seems to be a great challenge for preschool teachers to communicate democratic views of the child practiced in preschool when collaborating with parents and the results show that there are specific reasons to reflect upon this when discussing childrearing matters with the parents.

How can opposite views of the child and childrearing coexist in this way? Especially the expert- and the personal approach seem to include the coexistence of two opposite ways to view the child and childrearing and the question is how it possible and what may the consequences be? One explanation for this coexistence may be that preschool teachers only use the rhetoric of theories that agree with the curriculum without turning it into practice. Another way to explain this difference is that in certain situations preschool teachers tend to abandon their professional role and therefore also theories linked to their profession. When turning to be a member of the parental collective they recognize and bring forth their own experiences or the common wisdom embedded in the culture. This turn can however result in different practical consequences, in some cases strengthening the collaboration between home and preschool and in other cases weakening it. When the preschool teacher´s and parent's

experiences and fostering goals are coherent a personal approach can lead to an increased dialogue when parents experience the relationship as both mutual and empathetic. If the discrepancy between the parent´s and the preschool teacher´s views on the child and childrearing becomes evident it may however have effects on parent´s trust in the preschool teacher´s competence, and by extension in the preschool as an institution.

Professional teachers practice, according to Jensen and Jensen (2008), within areas linked to relations, setting boundaries and reflection and in this study all of these aspects have been considered as a whole when preschool teachers´ supportive approaches have been identified and discussed. When setting boundaries for the child, different strategies can be used and the strategies chosen reveal underlying views on children, parenthood and childrearing. A question to consider is to what extent preschool teachers can serve as a support for parents if the content of the support is not analyzed and critically viewed from a theoretical perspective? The underlying assumptions should therefore be a topic for reflection when discussing childrearing matters with parents in preschool.

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