

# A Child Perspective or A Child's Perspective

## – What's the different?

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### INTRODUCTION

This paper considers revising on educational research and practice that focuses directly on improving the quality of learning in pre-school. In my action research (Mårdsjö, 2005) the results show that teachers have different views about their participation in children's learning. It has been possible to distinguish the following critical aspects of the teachers' conceptions of how they experience their participation in children's learning. In this paper, an account is given of how teachers understand their participation in children's learning in two qualitatively different ways:

- The teacher being sensitive to the children and the world around them (A Child Perspective).
- The teacher challenging the children in their learning (A Child's Perspective).

The difference between these two perspectives is that the conception *being sensitive to the children and the world around them* is child-centred while the conception *challenging the children in their learning* is relational. The aim of this paper is to account for these two perspectives, but first and foremost to further develop what it means to the child's ability to create a meaningful and purposeful learning if we take one perspective or the other. In this text I will also argue for the importance of teachers developing a skill in challenging children in their learning, and what impact this may have on children's opportunities to understand what they learn.

These two qualitatively different conceptions are hierarchically ordered. Therefore I assert that there is a complexity between these two perceptions, which entails that the teacher must be able to take a child perspective in order to take the child's perspective in a learning situation. Thus, the teacher's ability to being sensitive to children and their world is a precondition for her to become able to challenge children's basic abilities (Pramling Samuelsson & Mårdsjö Olsson, in press). Taking a child perspective or a child's perspective contain dimensions where the teacher's critical aspects of the learning object will be expressed in different ways.

## THEORETICAL POINTS

Variation theory focuses primarily on teachers' teaching (Runesson, 1999, 2006) and their teaching practices (Emanuelsson, 2001). It is also a theory of learning with consequences for teaching. Variation theory has to do with experiences (Marton & Booth, 1997). Marton and Pang (1999) claim that phenomenography describes variation in the way of understanding a phenomenon in two dimensions. The first dimension consists of different ways of understanding the same phenomenon, and can be regarded as "classical phenomenography". The second dimension, according to Marton and Pang (op. cit.) involves regarding the variation from a theoretical perspective with the help of the concepts discernment, simultaneity and variation. These concepts are used to describe both teaching and pupils' learning (Emanuelsson, 2001).

The phenomenographic research approach constitutes one methodological base of the present study – a perspective of people's learning and knowledge formation that is holistic and non-dualistic. A person's understanding of the world around him cannot be separated from the world he lives in.

This means that the teachers in this investigation relate their knowledge to previous knowledge and experience in their professional practice. Another way of understanding the approach in this study is that it involves the participants including their previous knowledge and experience when they create meaning in their learning in the education program. A fundamental element of the phenomenographic approach is that it also lays claim to describing how people experience, imagine, conceive of and understand a specific phenomenon (Marton & Pang, 1999). A person's understanding of the world around him is incorporated into his way of experiencing<sup>1</sup> the phenomenon and thus becomes a part of him, with each new experience and insight changing his way of experiencing and conceiving of the world. Marton & Tsui, (2004) states that it is not possible to separate subject and object from each other. Instead, he claims that there is a relation between subject and object, which is formed according to how a person experiences the world around him. The phenomenographic approach sheds light on people's subjective world and their ways of creating understanding of the world around them.

A core task in the phenomenographic approach is to describe a phenomenon as somebody conceptualises it. This presupposes, in this study, that I as a researcher strive to adopt the perspective of the participants when the data corpus is analysed in order to be able

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<sup>1</sup> In the text, the words conceive and experience is used synonymously. I am aware that there is a slight difference in meaning between the two words, where conceive focuses on thinking while experience has a broader meaning since it includes perception and experiences, according to e-mail correspondence with Marton, 2000. I have chosen to use the words synonymously in the text because the aim of the study is to investigate how the participants think about their own learning and participation in children's learning.

to understand how the teachers experience that they are creating meaning in their learning and how they understand their participation in children's learning. The participants take part in teaching, which becomes part of the learning' object. Employing phenomenography to study an object means that as a researcher, I describe how the phenomenon appears to another person in the sense of how that individual conceives of the phenomenon.

## THE LEARNING OBJECT

Marton and Booth (1997) have described how learning can be analysed with the help of theoretical concepts. To be able to describe theoretically the teacher's participation in children's learning, I employ what Carlgren and Marton (2000) call the learning object. As regards the learning object, they claim that teachers first and foremost have focused on the "how" question in their teaching, that is, how they should teach to enable children and pupils to learn and develop in a certain direction. The authors claim that "what" questions have more or less been taken for granted by the teachers. Accordingly, it would seem important that teachers reflect upon what it means to learn different things and to thus coordinate the how and what questions. Problematising the "what" and "how" aspects of learning means, according to Carlgren and Marton, that the teacher must ask herself: What should the child learn and how are we working towards this? In this way, the teacher develops her own abilities, insights and approaches, which she is expected to employ when she contributes to children developing their understanding of something (op. cit.).

My interpretation of the "what" and "how" aspects is that in the "what" aspect, both the learner's and the teacher's attention in the learning situation is focused on a specific content, which can be described as a direct object. Additionally, the teacher must be aware of the indirect object (Marton & Booth, 1997), which can be described as how the person who is learning should understand the content. In other words, a teacher must be aware of what the child should develop and how the child should understand the content.

## BACKGROUND

Through the years, the content of activities in the pre-school, after-school recreation centres and the school has been changed and affected in several ways by current research theories and curricula as well as political decisions. A study of current research on children's learning shows that a paradigmatic shift in the view of learning has taken place in Sweden. The view of children's learning has moved away from a maturity-based view, where children's prerequisites of learning follow a natural and biological development, and towards a perspective of social and cultural experience (Pramling 1994, 1994; Stern, 1991; Sommer,

1997, 1998, 2003; Säljö, 2000; Vallberg-Roth, 2002). In 1998, the pre-school was incorporated into the education system and, as a result, was assigned a clearer pedagogical social task (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, SOU 1997:157). Researchers who have had, and still have, a significant influence on the development of the pre-school include Doverborg and Pramling Samuelsson (1995, 1999), Halldén (2003), Johansson (1999), Kärrby (1997), Pramling (1983, 1994a), Pramling and Mårdsjö (1994, in press), Pramling and Sheridan (2001), Williams (2001) and Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi (1996). Their research shows that the view of children and their learning as well as the view of the pre-school's activities has changed and this, in turn, has consequences for teachers in their professional practice.

A basic definition of pre-school pedagogy in Sweden is the teaching and fostering of children that take place within the framework of the pre-school's activities. The view of the activities in pre-school and the teachers' participation in children's learning has changed over the years, parallel with changes in society's view of knowledge and learning.

A person who has exerted an influence on pre-school activities was Friedrich Fröbel who, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, laid the foundations of the pedagogy, traces of which can still be found in today's pre-school. Fröbel's pedagogical ideas were based on mathematics and ethics and Johansson (1992) claims that Fröbel's pedagogy and outlook on life were intertwined since he regarded God as the centre of the world. The children were seen as plants, which had to be taken care of by a skilled gardener, and the teacher's task was to foster the children. At his time Fröbel was an innovator of the field, pointing at the importance of play for children's learning. He claimed that a skilled teacher spends time together with the child and guides the child in order to help the child develop harmony with itself and with nature. This view builds on the idea that children's learning goes from "the external to the internal", that is, first children have to participate in an activity in order to become able to transform this activity into thoughts.

The next large trend within pre-school was connected to developmental psychology. Here Gesell's (1880-1961) research played an important role. Fröbel's as well as Gesell's theories on learning take the active child as a point of departure, even though there are some differences between their theories. Fröbel used a metaphor, that the child learn from the external to the internal, while Gesell saw the child's inner maturity as a preconception for the learning.

Gesell was an American psychologist who had a great impact on pre-school until the beginning of the 1950's. The developmental psychology builds upon the child's maturity and fitted like a glow into the pre-school traditions. The view on children's learning was based on the developmental psychological theories, where the pedagogic task was to use children's "natural" abilities as a point of departure. Gesell's theory became a norm for all children's

development, and if a child did not follow this norm, the child was considered divergent. Gesell's maturity theory did not take the influence of culture or the child's own ways of experience the situation into consideration. Instead, the child's inner process of maturity was central in his theories. A teacher who takes Gesell's developmental theory as a point of departure need to be flexible and pliable to the child's actions and supply material and support when necessary, but never intrude.

Another developmental psychology theorist who also became important to the pre-school practice was Piaget (1986-1980, 1962, 1976). One of the questions he asked himself was: How do children create knowledge? He described children's creation of knowledge in relation to the thought structure that matures within them, and thus creates opportunities to learn. Piaget's maturity stages describe how children's thinking develops at different ages. According to Piaget children's thoughts build on their concrete experiences, and he describes children's thinking in four stages: The senso-motoric, the pre-operational, the concrete operational and the formal operational stage. These stages build on each other as a developmental stepladder. According to Piaget learning implies that children adept their new experiences to their existing way of thinking, which he calls assimilation. On the contrary, when children change their way of thinking in relation to their new experiences he calls this accommodation. He says that children's mental structures constitute the base for understanding. Further, Piaget elucidates that when children meet new experiences a lack of balance appears in their conceptualized world, which leads to that children's awareness increases. A constant interaction between assimilation and accommodation results in children that develop as new schemes are created. A teacher who uses Piaget's cognitive theories as a point of departure considers in which phase of development the child might be. The child's development is decisive for what the child learns and therefore adults have to adjust to the child's different stages of development. The teacher wants the child to make his or her own experiences of the content by listening and hearing, do something and/or reflect upon the content. Piaget's theories, which focus on the child's logical thinking, have also influenced the teaching in school. Children were given a larger freedom and consequently opportunities to construct their own knowledge. Piaget also describes play in different developmental periods, and that it manifests in children's thinking (Piaget, 1962).

If we look upon pre-school from a historical point of view we find that to start with it was the external activities that were seen as decisive for children's understanding of the world around them. During the period when developmental psychology was prevailing it was children's inner psychological world that constituted the foreground in their learning.

## LEARNING IN PRE-SCHOOL

The Swedish pre-school of today is characterised by the teachers having a relational perspective of learning (Johansson & Pramling Samuelsson, 2003). Communication, interaction, teamwork and the child's perspective have become central dimensions in the pre-school's practice. Today's perspective of learning in pre-school makes it impossible to distinguish between learning and development (Pramling, 1994, Johansson & Pramling Samuelsson, 2007). From a relational perspective of how children learn, learning is dependent on environment, interaction and children's experiences.

What is central in the view of children's learning in today's pre-school is that children are encouraged to be creative by both finding and solving problems. Creativity means that hypotheses are proposed rather than finding solutions to problems. A child who is creative learns to think about its own thinking but is also able to transfer what it learns to a different content (Next Generation Forum, 1999). Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson claim that creativity and learning are two intertwined phenomena (2003).

One way of understanding what it means to relate to children and their learning is that there is a concordance between the teacher's thoughts, language and actions. This requires the ability to see the whole picture and to challenge children in routine, everyday and planned situations. Developmental pedagogy has emerged from the phenomenographic approach and what characterises a developmental pedagogy perspective is that learning has a direction (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2003). Developmental pedagogy has become a pre-school pedagogy for younger children, which has borrowed aspects and dimensions from other theories and where variation is one aspect. A central aim of the developmental pedagogy theory is to utilise children's intentions and perspectives in order to capture and challenge their world with the help of variation. The authors describe different theoretical dimensions where children's ways of experiencing the world begin with a single phenomenon, which is gradually differentiated in order to be integrated into new understanding. Developmental pedagogy has its roots in the pre-school and the youngest children's learning, while the researched carried out from the perspective of variation theory has concerned older children and adults' learning. Young children are active by "nature" and thus make other demands on the ability of the teachers to "blend into" their world and games. Consequently, learning is different when it comes to young children while the object of learning remains the same from the perspectives of both variation theory and developmental pedagogy. The development pedagogy theory focuses on children's learning, but also has consequences for the teacher's actions (Johansson, 1999; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 1993, Pramling Samuelsson & Mårdsjö Olsson, in press).

Utilising and creating opportunities for understanding how children perceive something in order to challenge their understanding of the content are fundamental in

developmental pedagogy theory. Characterising for a developmental pedagogy approach to children and their learning is that the teacher provides children with prerequisites that enable them to become aware of the world around them and their own learning. Another factor characterising developmental pedagogy theory is that variation is important for learning. Diversity transforms children's different thoughts and reflections into content in the activity when the teacher bases her teaching on a developmental pedagogy theory. The approach to children and their learning based on a developmental pedagogy theory is characterised by the "what" and "how" questions (Carlgren & Marton, 2000), which means that learning is always tied to a content.

Accordingly, we can establish the fact that teachers' ways of viewing children's learning has changed over time. In the Swedish pre-school today teachers are aware of how children learn and how teachers need to act in relation to children's learning – they are good at taking a *child perspective*. However, I would like to claim that teachers' ways of contributing to children's learning in pre-school not only can lean on a conception which embraces a sensitivity for children and how they experience the world around them – a *child's perspective* must be added. These two perspectives will be described below, as they appear in my study (Mårdsjö, 2005).

## A CHILD PERSPECTIVE

Characterising for a conception where teachers take a child perspective as a point of departure is teachers who experience that they participate in children's learning by being sensitive to children's interests, engagements, questions, comments etc. They support the children's interests and talk with them about the content aspect on which the children's attention is focused. As a result, the teachers feel that they are supporting the children's interest in an activity or an area of interest that is important for them in the situation in question.

In the study, it emerges that the teachers often feel that they are being sensitive to the children and what their attention is focused on. This also shows that the teachers have the ability to be flexible and adapt their own behaviour and the content of the activity to things the children are interested in. The teachers also hold the conception that one of their tasks as teachers in relation to children's learning is to be attentive by utilising everyday events initiated by the children and dealing with them on their terms. This perspective is also characterised by the teacher's intention to treat children on the basis of their basic knowledge and skills. The teacher may have a specific reason for the activity, but she adapts it to what is happening in the situation in question. The teacher points out that it is the spontaneous questions that are reflected on in the activity.

A prominent feature of the perspective *being sensitive to the children and the world around them* is that the teachers make use of different incidents that appears in their activities or in different situations. To make this possible teachers mean that they need to be present and attentive to what children are directing their attention towards. They want to give children an immediate and positive confirmation of that which engages them, regardless of the kind of situation. Children's learning requires teachers with an ability to constantly improvise in order to meet children by considering age, situations, contexts etc. To achieve this teachers have to learn about how children think about that which their attention is directed towards.

Teachers who are working child-centred are characterised by *being sensitive to the children and the world around them*. This means that the teachers who are *sensitive to the children and the world around them* become acquainted with their thoughts, questions and skills in order to be able to interpret and support their needs. But, even if the child can decide what to do or what to talk about, there is an obvious risk that the teacher decides how the activity or the conversation should be carried out. The teachers do this by (being sensitive to the children's interest and curiosity) talking with the children, answering their questions and allowing them to gain their own experience of the phenomenon on which their attention is focused. This means that the realization or the "how" aspect most likely takes place on the teacher's conditions and terms. My interpretation is that the children's experiences become figure in the teachers' participation in the children's learning; however, there is a risk that the teachers take for granted what developing this understanding means for the children.

## A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE

This conception is characterised by the teacher's saying that they challenge the children in their learning based on what they know and understand about how children think and reason. The aim of problematising the content for the children is that the children should change their way of thinking, they should understand how to do something. This conception thus becomes a prerequisite of the teachers' ability to challenge the children in their learning. For example, this leads to that the technique of interviewing no longer constitutes the figure in teachers' participation in children's learning. Instead, children's creation of meaning becomes the figure.

This conception is characterised by the encounter between teacher and child acquiring a completely different dimension as a result of the teacher challenging the child's thoughts and skills in a specific direction. The teacher has a notion about what the child should develop and in order to achieve this, she challenges the child's way of experiencing something. What characterises the teacher's participation in the child's learning is that she deliberately

problematizes for the child what it means to learn different things and, as a consequence, coordinates the how and what questions in her teaching.

The teachers who say that they challenge the children in their learning problematise, draw attention to and use the variation, which the children themselves create, to challenge their thoughts, knowledge and skills. The relation between children and adults is characterised by mutual contact and the teachers having a relational perspective of learning. This means that the teachers<sup>2</sup> who are sensitive to the children and the world around them become acquainted with their thoughts, questions and skills in order to be able to interpret and support their needs. The relation between children and adults is characterised by children making contact with adults, who support them as well as their interests.

## CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The content of this text shows that teachers' awareness of their own participation in children's learning differs in two qualitatively different ways. There are teachers who take a child perspective when meeting children in their learning process, which means that their strategies characterise of sensitivity to what children do direct their attention towards. There are also teachers who express that having a child perspective is a precondition for being able to challenge children's ways of understanding a content and for becoming able to take a child's perspective. The latter strategy has proven to be more complex in character than the first, as it embraces more dimensions, for instance, metacognition (Pramling Samuelsson & Mårdsjö Olsson, in press). The difference in meaning between the two perspectives might seem quite small, but the meaning does have consequences for children's learning, as the preconditions for children's learning will be different depending on which perspective the teacher use as a point of departure.

According to my interpretation of the conception child perspective, the teacher has knowledge about what children in general need in order to develop their skills and abilities further. The strategy of taking a child perspective is fundamental in all education (Mårdsjö, 2005), but if this strategy is not developed in such a way that the teacher takes a child's perspective in her teaching, the teacher's knowledge about children's learning becomes abstract, which has consequences for the education.

The point of departure for a teacher who has taken the child perspective is that she plans and carries out activities with the intention that children should learn something. Consciously, the figure for her is her professional way of finding out how children think about and understand a specific content, and to act out from a general theoretical frame for how children learn. The reason why she does not challenge the children in their ways of

understanding a content, is most probably because she has not reflected upon this way of working and lacks a sound knowledge about the conditions for and the process of learning.

A teacher who takes the child's perspective as a point of departure, however, brings with her fundamental ideas about what a child need in order to learn, but has also developed an ability to make use of the individual child's ideas about a phenomenon. Characteristic for this kind of teachers is that they also are able to use the child's thoughts about a content in their practice, which contributes to further development of the child's knowledge and abilities. A teacher who takes a child's perspective starts out from the individual child's conceptions and experiences of a specific content. Here the figure for her is her awareness of how she in her professional actions can use children's thoughts in order to help them develop further knowledge and abilities about the object or situation their awareness are directed toward. A teacher using this perspective never takes anything for granted when it comes to how children experience the world around them, but encourages them to verbalise or illustrate in other ways how they think about, conceptualise, solve a problem etc. Then the teacher lets the children share each others' different ways of experiencing one and the same phenomenon, making them aware of all the different views that are possible to think about the same phenomenon or solve the same problem etc. This helps the children to think about and understand a content in many different ways. By this way of working a teacher who takes a child's perspective creates better conditions for children's learning than a teacher who only finds out how a child thinks about a content. It is when children are given the opportunity to take part of all different ways of reasoning and understanding that it becomes possible to achieve a change in children's taken-for-granted attitude towards their surrounding world (Pramling Samuelsson & Mårdsjö Olsson, in press).

By way of conclusion one example on a teacher who takes a child's perspective when she reads for two children in pre-school will be illustrated. The teacher is sitting on the couch reading a book for Antonia and Christin, both three years old. There are several purposes with the reading, but the overall aim is to make the children understand the meaning of the story. After have been reading for a while the teacher notices that one of the children has difficulties with concentrating on the content of the story. Here the teacher makes use an ordinary everyday situation and challenges the two children in their learning process. She is attentive to the children's reactions and to which signs they give about their understanding of the story. She also notices that Christin is losing her concentration and wants to leave the couch. The teacher who is aware of Christin's limited knowledge of the Swedish language, since her mother tongue is English, draws the conclusion that the reason for her problems with concentrating on the story might be that she does not understand the words in the story. Christin's actions clearly show that she does not want to listen to the story any longer. Hereby meaning and action are intertwined. The teacher is sensitive and understands Christin's body language and in what way she experiences the situation. However, she is not content with that,

but starts to read the book in English instead, Christin's mother tongue, and notices an immediate reaction from both children, but in different ways. By this action the teacher gives the children an opportunity to develop their understanding and realise that you can both tell and understand one and the same story even if you are using different languages.

Antonia, whose mother tongue is Swedish, looks surprised at the teacher and starts to imitate her way of speaking and in that way actively participates in the linguistic action by speaking pretend English. Also Christin's attitude changes and she shows more interest in the story than before. She leans back on the couch and listens without commenting the changed situation. When the teacher changes her way of dealing with the situation, her action is an expression for that she is respecting both the children's knowledge and abilities. She shows her presence in the situation and that she is aware of how the children experience the content of the activity.

The teacher does not hesitate to change her own actions in order to support Christin in the situation in question. When the teacher is sensitive to the children's situation and therefore changes the language she makes use of the English speaking child's knowledge and experiences, at the same time as she challenges Antonia whose mother tongue is Swedish. The change of the language becomes a tool that can call the children's attentions to the fact that you can read one and the same book, but in different ways.

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