

Making sense of Swedish practice: is it that different from practice in Wales?

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Introduction

I have been interested in international perspectives on early years practice since I first started training for my career in 1995. I have visited Germany, Czech Republic, USA, Madagascar and most recently Sweden and it is thought that when practitioners visit settings in other countries it helps them consider and question different perspectives (Katz, 1999). Apparently, early childhood education and care in Sweden is known throughout the world to offer exemplar practice (Korpi, 2007). According to Melhuish and Petrogiannis (2006: 2) '... their Early Childhood Care and Education is amongst the most developed in the world': there could be a range of reasons for this, from training and professional development, to culture and socioeconomic factors.

Important features and pedagogical principles of Swedish Pre-school Practice

Within the various settings I visited the three most important features of Swedish pre-school practice that I observed were the physical learning environment, the pedagogues and the children. The pre-school environment resembled a family home where staff and children took their shoes off inside and children addressed staff by their first name, both of which have been evident in pre-schools for many years in Sweden (Alvestad and Pramling, 1999). Generally, members of staff are addressed more formally in Welsh education settings.

There was very little labelling in the environment to promote literacy and numeracy (something I am used to seeing in my practice in Wales) and a kitchen was based in each room. Resources and equipment seemed very accessible for all children and individual work trays were constantly in use for unfinished work. In addition, each child had easy access to drinking cups, coats and wellingtons. Interestingly, the children had large amounts of unrestricted floor space to play, build and be creative. Is it often thought that 'nurseries tend to fill indoor spaces with furniture, leaving few if any areas for vigorous play' (Alderson, 2008: 28). My floor space (when I was a nursery teacher) was often dominated with storage and furniture that possibly restricted children's play space. The Swedish floor space appeared to offer more children freedom to plan their own play spaces. When I was there, embracing the

space, I realised what image I could be portraying to children in my care in a Welsh classroom, which was “I am in control and I know what is best for you”.

In Sweden, the play rooms were free from clutter and storage and floor space was being utilised by the children most of the time. Walls were displayed with children’s work that had been annotated. Interestingly, work was not displayed on display boards with commercial borders and paintings did not appear to be a representation of an adult’s interpretation of a child’s work. Furthermore, I observed a pre-school environment purely created for the children. It has been suggested by Alvestad and Pramling (1999) that to create an environment where children are granted rights and agency then practitioners need to be listening to children and taking on board their views and comments and ultimately learn about them from the important signals they are communicating. This seemed to be one of their main beliefs. It is was also clear that ‘when the learning experiences flow from the children’s ideas... there is more likely to be a good match between what the children are ready to learn and activities offered in the classroom than in a teacher-dominated curriculum. This intersection between the children’s interests and their activities is critical’ (Bennett, 2001: 1).

Swedish pedagogy

I was very impressed with the Swedish pedagogues and their commitment and passion for change and continuous professional development and interestingly, Moyles (2001) stresses that being passionate is a fundamental characteristic of an early years practitioner. In Sweden, the pedagogues were knowledgeable and extremely comfortable with their pedagogical principles. Their ideology was ‘believing that teaching is not merely the transmission of knowledge, but that the teacher is a facilitator of the child’s learning ... teachers exhibit flexibility in planning the day with the children’ (Bennett, 2001: 1). In time, this is what one would hope to observe in Foundation Phase practitioners (Curriculum Framework for 3-7 year olds in Wales).

Another value that Swedish pedagogues share is regularly participating in *Problem Based School Development* (PBSD) and reflecting on important issues to enhance practice. For example, working as a team or effective ways of recording assessment or documentation as it was often referred to. They place great emphasis on listening to each other and valuing each other’s opinions and views. In addition to this they read literature and keep up-to-date with new initiatives and ways of approaching and implementing the pre-school curriculum. They showed a lot of enthusiasm and motivation towards their job and a deep appreciation and respect for the children in

their care. Lesley Abbott and Cathy Nutbrown make an interesting point and write, 'we could ask what early education in the UK would look like if everyone who worked with young children spent six daytime hours of their designated working week on professional development, planning, preparation and spending time in meeting with families either individually or in groups' (Abbott and Nutbrown, 2001: 4).

It was obvious to me that the Swedish pedagogues viewed the children and each other equally. For example, the same space was allocated for staff and children to store outdoor clothing and the pedagogues ate lunch with the children. According to the pedagogues, children are competent beings who should be listened to and helped to reach their potential and it is important that adults recognise the time when children are ready to learn at appropriate times rather than forcing them into doing something (Bennett, 2001). It was interesting when the pedagogues were asked about managing challenging behaviour and they replied 'at times all children refuse to do things so the most important thing to remember is for whose benefit...' For example, one pedagogue asked the question: "Why do children have to be told when to play outside? What if children don't want to go outside at a certain time? Why do we make children have snack at a certain time? For whose benefit do we make children do things?"

Observing the children

All the children aged between one and five years of age seemed very independent. For example, in making choices, getting dressed and eating. They had many opportunities to think for themselves, be creative and utilise resources and appeared happy and calm. 'In Reggio Emilia the child is viewed as a powerful partner who 'actively co-constructs' the content of the curriculum with a more able 'other' (Soler and Miller, 2003: 66). The pre-school children were mainly engaged in child-initiated tasks and the relationship between adult and child seemed very positive. It is thought that when children are given opportunities to choose activities, learning becomes more meaningful and memorable (Bennett *et al.* 1997).

Impact on Professional Development

The field trip was enlightening and I am glad that I had the opportunity to observe practice, interact with children, reflect on pedagogical principles and collaborate with Swedish pedagogues. Alderson (2008) reminds us that Reggio Emilia practices are so widely discussed but are not adapted or copied in other parts of the world, and suggests it could be because of the structure of the economic, political and social

power that countries refuse to admit that children are talented, experienced, knowledgeable and creative. Visiting a Reggio Emilia setting has confirmed my understanding of the importance of valuing, respecting and working with children. Moyles (1989) suggests that teachers should take into account what is written in a prescribed curriculum but ultimately use their knowledge of child development, research and practice and do what they believe is right for the children in their care.

The field trip has motivated me to improve my own practice as an early years teacher and challenge current practice, views and ideas in the UK, particularly Wales. For example, the structure of the day for young children, the way we view childhood and investigate the true meaning of child-initiated learning. Moyles (1989) reminds us that there will always be some who refuse to consider play and education in the same sentence. She also points out that change does not happen immediately and takes time.

Reflecting on my experience

Also, in light of the visit, I have thought considerably about my title as 'teacher' and whether it has been misunderstood (by so many) and instead I should be thinking of myself as facilitator of young children's learning. As stated in the WAG documentation, '... central to the Foundation Phase approach is the practitioner as a facilitator of learning, with the child at the heart of learning and teaching' (WAG, Learning and Teaching Pedagogy, 2008: 12).

The visit to Swedish pre-schools has reignited my ambition to work abroad, embrace culture and share good practice. More importantly, the trip has made me realise that features of early years provision in Wales should be celebrated, such as partnership with parents and a focus on helping children become happy and competent learners and more emphasis on outdoor play in the Foundation Phase. Finally, we should not be quick to criticise each others' practice but instead learn from one another and aim for professionalism.

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