

# An Unclear Task?

## Perspectives of Swedish Preschool and Special Needs Teachers on their Role in Assessing and Documenting Child Development

Maja Erlandsson<sup>1\*</sup>, Christina Gustavsson<sup>1</sup>, Peter Karlsudd<sup>1</sup>

1. Linnaeus University, Sweden

### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** *This study explored how preschool and special needs teachers in Sweden perceive their own role and the role of each other in the preschools' documentation and assessment practices. It examines the possible consequences of this perception and of the actions based on it for children with special needs.*

**Method:** *The study took a qualitative approach. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven special needs teachers and seven preschool teachers from different schools and municipalities.*

**Results:** *The results show that the preschool and special needs teachers' roles regarding assessment and documentation, as described and specified in the curriculum, are contradictory and difficult. Assessing an individual child's knowledge development by observing and documenting the child group was regarded as problematic by both occupational groups, and further training in assessments was sought.*

**Conclusion and Implications:** *Clear differences were found between the way in which preschool teachers and special needs teachers performed observations and assessments and documented them. Preschool teachers mainly used participant observations at a group level, while special needs teachers were usually tasked with observing a particular child. Preschool teachers' reluctance to document the performance of individual children might result in children's special needs remaining hidden. It is important to find methods which endorse assessments that allow for and appreciate diversity, and that are not based on normative notions which often result in differentiating between children and*

---

\* **Corresponding Author:** Peter Karlsudd, Professor of Pedagogy, Linnaeus University, Sweden.  
Email: peter.karlsudd@lnu.se

*dividing them into different groups of learners based on their perceived level of knowledge.*

***Limitations:** From the interview results, it has sometimes been difficult to differentiate between the concepts of observation, documentation and assessment as they are often parts of a whole within the context of preschools. As the survey was of limited scope, the results cannot be generalised to all Swedish preschools, but the data obtained could provide important guidance for further work with inclusive preschools.*

***Key words:** preschool, observations, documentation, assessments, children with special needs*

## INTRODUCTION

During the last decade, preschools have to a higher degree been tasked with approaching learning as it is done in traditional school subjects. This tendency is apparent in the curriculum's design, the stated goals and pedagogical practice (Einarsdottir et al, 2015). In Swedish municipalities' educational management, the prioritised goals are those focusing on abilities in languages, mathematics, natural sciences and, of late, digital technology. Since the focus is now more often on the cognitive competence of the children, more voices are demanding that the educational efforts in preschools be documented and assessed.

Research within this field shows that the focus of documenting **child development** is frequently on the child as an individual and that learning as traditionally done in schools is deemed valuable (Löfdahl & Pérez Prieto, 2009; Lindberg, 2018; Nilfyr, 2018; Virtanen, 2018). The Swedish Schools Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen, 2011:10, 2012:7) shows in its reports that preschool teachers are unsure of how to document children's development and learning without assessing the children like teachers in formal school systems do. With the increasing focus on assessments, it is of interest to study those occupational groups that actually do the assessment and document the development of the child; in other words, study the role and tasks of **preschool teachers** and **special needs teachers**. The latter group is tasked with working with those children deemed to have difficulties in reaching the preschools' aspirational goals.

## Earlier Research - Observation and Documentation

### Observation

Observation as a documentation method became widely used in the 1950s and was then known as child observations. These observations derived from theories within developmental psychology; Gesell's maturation theory and Piaget's theory of cognitive development played prominent roles in the practise of objectively observing and measuring a child's development in comparison with the "normal" child (Tellgren, 2008). Today, observation is not considered an action in and of itself by most teachers; to them, it is an interaction between a teacher and child, an interaction where the teacher is a present and active co-agent. The notion of passiveness as a method of objectivity and of not influencing the observed child can still be found in preschools (Lenz Taguchi, 2013). It is not unheard of that observation templates measure a child's development according to established norms, criteria and levels regarding language development and mathematical thinking. These observation templates are however not compatible with the intentions behind the curriculum (Palmer, 2012).

### Documentation

It is clear from the recommendations of the Swedish National Agency for Education (SKOLFS, 2017:6) that support efforts for children's development and learning are not prescribed by law. However, it is also clear that the documentation of these efforts must be continuously reviewed and assessed. Moreover, children's development should not be understood from established norms nor compared to that of other children but instead be understood from the social context that is the preschool. A child's need for extra support is always situational. This need is not a quality found in the child; it arises from what happens in the interactions between the child, the teachers and the preschool environment (SKOLFS, 2017:6).

Documentation can, according to Alvestad and Sheridan (2015), be understood from three perspectives. The first perspective is **limited documentation**, which focuses on the individual child's abilities and inabilities. The second perspective is **child-centred documentation**, which focuses on the activities in which the child takes part. The third perspective is **learning-oriented documentation**, which focuses on bringing to light the child's learning in relation to an object of learning.

An example of learning-oriented documentation, which can be used to develop pedagogical practice and to continue with didactic practice, is pedagogical documentation (Elfström, 2013). The term “pedagogical documentation” implies a working tool but also work material that is or has been the object of reflection (Bjervås, 2011). According to Bjervås (2011), creating pedagogical documentation requires not only observational skills but also an understanding of philosophical and theoretical perspectives as a basis for reflection and analyses. Despite the fact that teachers are becoming increasingly aware of this, there seem to be difficulties in finding a good organisation model for mapping changes in children’s knowledge (Alnervik, 2018; Kang & Walsh, 2018; de Sousa, 2019; Lee-Hammond & Bjervås, 2020).

Several studies show that preschool teachers are unsure of what documentation is required and how to create it (Lindgren Eneflo, 2014; Johansson, 2016; Hamilton & Hermansson, 2017). Recent research indicates that a performative approach dominates documentation as a whole and that the aim then is to present preschools in a positive light (Lindroth, 2018; Lindberg, 2018). Documentation is also becoming more digitalised (Virtanen, 2018); a possible consequence is the omission of the components of reflection and analysis from the documentation process, which instead then focuses on the act itself. Despite the fact that the intention, based on policy documents and research, is to conduct learning-oriented documentation, this development represents what Alvestad and Sheridan (2015) describe as child-centred documentation.

### **Assessment**

Documentation and assessment can be seen as being dependent on one another. On the one hand, this can promote the uncovering of children’s changing abilities; on the other hand, documentation and assessments can also be misleading when children are assessed from a perspective of inability. In preschool documentation, several different forms of documentation, deriving from different theories, appear (Vallberg Roth, 2014). Many preschool teachers believe that an implicit component of observation and documentation is assessment to some degree. The more pronounced and formalised the documentation becomes, the more it resembles what would be considered an assessment. Assessment is regarded as an uncomfortable component that in its formalised and pronounced form prompts ambivalence and interferes with the preschool teachers’ pedagogical values (Karlsudd, 2021).

In preschools, there are elements of both summative and formative assessments, assessment forms that are primarily suited for the goals of compulsory schools and for measuring whether individuals possess required knowledge, not for the aspirational goals of preschools. The preschool's traditional working method has been inclusive and has created spaces for children to be children and develop in their own time without pressure and expectations (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2016). This approach has led to preschool teachers opposing assessments to various degrees, as assessments can easily give rise to an approach that is less tolerant of diversity (Karlsudd, 2021). As special needs teachers have pointed out in previous studies, this poses the risk of children with special needs not being seen and therefore not receiving the support they need to develop as much as possible on their own terms (Renblad & Brodin, 2014).

### **The Role of the Preschool Teacher and the Special Needs Teacher within a Documentation and Assessment Practice**

The curriculum for preschools includes specific guidelines that assign responsibility for systematic quality work (Skolverket, 2018). The preschool teacher's increased responsibilities in relation to other members of the team are also highlighted in the policy document; this can be understood as a consequence of the "New Public Management" trend that has influenced the way municipalities organise their services and resources (Wiesel & Modell, 2014). This means that preschool teachers are obligated to continuously and systematically document each child's development and learning and follow up by analysing the documentation. This task is supposed to allow for an evaluation of how the preschool provides opportunities for children to learn and develop in accordance with the goals of the curriculum and the intentions behind it. It is, therefore, not the children but the conditions for learning and the development over time within the pedagogical practice that is to be assessed (Sheridan et al, 2012). It is not uncommon for preschool teachers to express concern that the current documentation requires time that could have been spent with the children. Another concern is that documentation work can lead to an increased "schoolification" and that the preschool practice will therefore lose its unique character of care and learning in unity (Logan & Sumison, 2010; Grant et al, 2018). However, preschool teachers also view assessment as a profession-enhancing method, as an increased commitment to children's learning, and the mapping of this learning can be viewed as a sign of increased professionalism (Johansson, 2016). Another argument for documentation is that parents become more involved

in the preschool's activities (Löfgren, 2015; Paananen & Lipponen, 2018; Hostyn et al, 2020).

The System of Qualifications (SFS 2011:688, 2011) describes the knowledge and capabilities required of special needs teachers to finish their degrees. Regarding observation, documentation and assessment, it states that special needs teachers are expected to conduct pedagogical assessments, reviews and evaluations; they also need to be able to analyse difficulties at both group and individual levels. They should also be able to participate in the development of the pedagogical work and learning environment in order to meet each child's needs and act as qualified interlocutors for teachers, parents and other concerned parties. Assessments within special needs education are to be made on the basis of scientific research and ethical aspects (SFS 2011:688, 2011).

## **Objective**

The objectives of the study were defined as follows:

- To establish how preschool and special needs teachers perceive their role and the role of each other in the preschool's documentation and assessment practices.
- To define the possible consequences and necessary actions based on the perception of preschool and special needs teachers towards preschool's documentation and assessment practices of children with special needs.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The preschools where the preschool teachers and special needs teachers were employed or assigned were selected with socio-economic and geographical diversity specifically in mind. To achieve diversity regarding the informants' ages and experiences, the method of strategic selection was used. Seven preschool teachers and seven special needs teachers participated in this research. Half of the teachers within each profession had more than ten years of experience.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data gathering was conducted through semi-structured interviews. These were individual interviews in which the participants described their views on the

tasks of observation, documentation and assessment. The interviews concluded with questions on how the interviewees perceived the professional roles of both their own occupational group and the other group. To increase the validity of the question formulation (Patel & Davidson, 2019), the individual interview schedule was piloted; one with a preschool teacher and another with a special needs teacher. This resulted in minor adjustments being made.

Before the interviews, a letter guaranteeing the upholding of the principles of research ethics was sent to the participants (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). This mainly meant informing the participants of the aim of the study and that participation was voluntary.

The interviews were recorded digitally, then transcribed and anonymised. Participants' anonymity was protected by allotting each one a unique identification number (1–14) without linking them to other information, such as gender or age. The seven preschool teachers were identified as 1–7 and the seven special needs teachers were identified as 8–14.

## RESULTS

In the interviews, preschool teachers often spoke from a team perspective. This means that individual and personal ideas were often held back in favour of a more descriptive account of how the preschool teachers worked with the concepts of observation, documentation and assessment. The responses followed this pattern fairly often, as the preschool teachers viewed their role as being part of a collective.

The special needs teachers were more prone to give answers based on an individual perspective, as their role was fairly solitary. From the answers, it was sometimes difficult to differentiate between the concepts of observation, documentation and assessment, as these frequently were parts of a whole within the context of the preschools. In preschools, observation is now seldom seen as an act in and of itself, as it is part of the “multi-tool” known as systematic quality work.

Despite the similarities among the concepts, it has been possible to organise the results in the order in which the concepts were discussed: observation, documentation and assessment. The two occupational groups' perceptions of the other group's tasks and role are then presented: the interviews with the preschool teachers are followed by the interviews with the special needs teachers.

## Observation

The **preschool teachers** explained that observations were mainly conducted through photographs and films. The objects of observation were mainly directed at processes taking place at a group level. The preschool teachers did not speak of observation as a concept in and of itself; instead, they interpreted it as a component of the pedagogical documentation. Regarding observations of individual children, the preschool teachers mentioned several observation tools and templates in which activities were observed on a group or individual level. Observations of individuals did occur but were not spoken of clearly and were expressed in indirect comments.

*“If we are a bit concerned about a child, then first, you observe them a little in the background, by yourself or with colleagues” (Participant 2).*

The **special needs teachers’** observations were based on their assignment. This could be about observing a group and/or an individual. Most assignments for special needs teachers were aimed at individuals, but they were also consulted for assignments at a group level.

*“Most assignments we are given aim towards individuals, but we have reformulated our information so that it becomes clearer that you can also bring us in for group efforts” (Participant 11).*

Before the observations were conducted, the special needs teachers met the preschool team so that they could convey how they viewed the situation/problem. Often, the special needs teachers had already reviewed the preschool teachers’ observation documentation before the visit. During the observations, the special needs teachers placed themselves somewhere neutral so as not to influence or disturb the children/child group.

*“I observe it in the interaction between the child–adult, child–child, and try, as objectively as possible, to describe what happens here, how does the child interact, how does the child process instructions, how does the teacher give instructions. We can’t change a child; all we can change is how the teacher actually handles the interaction. They have to be the ones attempting to change” (Participant 9).*

Special needs teachers with less experience mentioned that they would be helped by having some kind of observation schedule from which to work. Those who had more experience claimed to not need any specific observation templates. Knowledge and approaches seem to have been internalised.

*“I note down observations continuously. I don’t have a list of things I’m looking for, but because I’ve worked as a special needs teacher and preschool teacher for so long, I know instinctively what I want to see... and that is a lot. How does the child communicate, does the child understand what the others are saying, what the friend is saying, what the staff is saying, do they understand, do they follow the routines, how to interact with others, are they interested or uninterested in other children and do they continue with an activity for a long time or just a short while? That’s what I think is the main essence of my observation” (Participant 8).*

Special needs teachers claimed that they used a relational perspective when they discussed interaction, communication, environment, concentration and attention in connection to the teachers, the group and the learning environment.

The differences between the two occupational groups were apparent from the fact that the preschool teachers mainly used participant observations at a group level, while the special needs teachers were usually tasked with observing a particular child.

## **Documentation**

The **preschool teachers** stated that they documented the children’s learning at a group level and that this was usually included in the systematic quality work done at the preschools to develop the practice. The documentation regarded what children did and said and was conducted through, for example, photos, videos and notes, all collected digitally under easily understood headings connected to the goals in the curriculum. In order to quickly inform the legal guardians about the preschool’s activities, it was also common to document the activities online, for instance by using programmes like Instagram. Digitalised documentation seemed to have caught on in practice.

*“Earlier, we sent out a weekly newsletter by email, and then there were very few who read it, and then we think that it is easier if they are sitting with their phones, using Instagram anyway, that they ask the children, ‘well, what did you do?’ and somehow have a conversation with the children” (Participant 4).*

According to the interviewees, there were clear structures and examples of how to document at a group level, where the preschool teachers discussed children’s changing abilities. However, there was no clear structure for documenting an individual child’s development and learning which, according to the curriculum

(Skolverket, 2018), the preschool teachers were supposed to systematically and continuously document and analyse. Consequently, they expressed uncertainty regarding this assignment.

*“And the individual child, we don’t document them specifically, well, we do have the material that we base our development talks on that can be a kind of documentation as we do save that, and then you look back a little when it’s time to write again and then that becomes a kind of documentation of the child’s development, I think” (Participant 6).*

Some preschool teachers thought that introducing the concept of teaching into the curriculum might result in increased documentation and greater responsibility for them in the long term. They wished that the concept of teaching would be adopted by preschools and incorporated to include children’s play and learning; this was evident in some answers. According to the preschool teachers, the ability goals would be given more weight than the value goals, and therefore they were concerned that the goals to which the preschools aspire would turn into goals that have to be met.

*“I think that the schoolification will continue as the preschool class is now mandatory, and that is one step closer to us, so I definitely think that will spread to our level as well, and that they will expect children to know certain things about mathematics and Swedish language” (Participant 5).*

Another factor that was raised was how individual documentation was becoming more digitalised through different types of “documentation platforms”. Much uncertainty was expressed regarding how the documentation of individual children had to take place. It was evident that the preschool teachers were vague on the topic. The curriculum (Skolverket, 2018) recommends that each child’s development and learning be continuously and systematically followed, documented and analysed, but the preschool teachers felt that there were no instructions as to how this was to be done.

The **special needs teachers** described how they documented their assessments and observations in order to analyse and reflect on the observed situation before providing feedback and guidance to the team. Several special needs teachers made it explicitly clear that this documentation was shared neither with other personnel nor the parents.

*"It's up to the teachers to note down what they feel they want to bring with them or they want to keep. The documentation I keep, I keep to myself and I never share it" (Participant13).*

Some special needs teachers pointed out that there was no legal obligation to document a child in need of extra support from the preschool, in the form of action plans and action programmes.

*"In our catchment area, we have decided together with the principal that we won't make action plans here and there; instead we only make them if in very, very particular situations" (Participant 10).*

There were no recommendations regarding how the documentation of children with special needs was to be arranged, nor how other professionals were to cooperate. One special needs teacher revealed as much.

*"One problem that we have discovered here... if I'm assigned a child, and then that child is, for example, hearing-impaired, then there comes another special needs teacher who specialises in hearing impairments. Then, she makes her own notes, and I make mine, and they are always not similar. I feel like there should be a record system that actually takes the little child's integrity into account" (Participant 9).*

The special needs teachers indicated that they did not use systematic documentation like the preschool teachers did. They made it clear that they kept their documentation to themselves. If the team asks them for documentation, an "adapted" and summarised version might be given to them.

The mapping done by the team, with or without the help of a special needs teacher, was a form of documentation. Suggestions for extra measures, drawn up together and with the special needs teacher's observations given a prominent role, formed the basis for the possible establishment of an action plan. The action plans aimed at both groups and individuals, and measures were suggested to be taken at a group level.

*"I always make sure when reviewing to look at the group... because then I say that what is good for all children is also good for [child's name]. We have discussed if we should set up goals for the preschool or for the child... That's the crucial problem" (Participant 11).*

## Assessment

The **preschool teachers** claimed that it was the practice of preschool assessment of the development of the child that was being assessed through the systematic quality work. A majority of the preschool teachers maintained that it was the personnel's approach that was assessed to a greater extent than the individual child's performance. Assessment is a charged word that gives rise to many thoughts.

*"There are many reprimands that you shouldn't assess, but you still have to make some form of assessment because otherwise you will never be able to see the individual child, because we are all different, so you feel a bit conflicted" (Participant 7).*

*"Yeah, it's easy to think of assessment as something negative, but it doesn't have to be, it can be a positive thing that can help us develop our practice. I have to assess myself in order to develop" (Participant 1).*

The respondents shed light on, and discussed the concept of, assessment at their preschools but their views differed on whether assessments should be done. None of the preschool teachers mentioned that assessments were done of the individual child, despite the fact that they said that it should be legitimate to do so as they need to be able to see each child's needs for the child to develop as much as possible. Many avoided taking a stance on the concept and played it safe, but it was accepted to some degree that assessments were necessary.

*"Assessments of the child do happen despite being really taboo, but in development talks you can interpret it in many different ways what you write, and that often differs from what you say later; that can probably definitely be interpreted as an assessment of the child. Also, it depends on what values you ascribe to the word, I think" (Participant7).*

*"Of course, it's our task to see the individual child. We have to help them if they need support, and if you can't make an assessment, then how are you to see that? You have to see the children to help them" (Participant 6).*

*"In my opinion, a child should receive as much help as possible. I have discussed this with other colleagues; it turns into a real dispute. It's a hot potato within preschools... You're not supposed to single out a child, and one way is to look the other way –'well, we're all different' " (Participant 3).*

The respondents did not use the terms formative and summative assessment. There was, however, a clear distinction between the two concepts in the answers, as the systematic quality work, the learning process on a group level and assessments of the personnel's perceptions could be considered formative assessment. Summative assessment could be seen in the discussion of the individual child in relation to the goals set and in the fears that preschools were becoming more like compulsory schools.

All the **special needs teachers**, except one, claimed that they made assessments based on the mappings and observations that they had received from the team or that they themselves had made. They chose their words carefully when discussing the concept of assessment. The more experienced special needs teachers talked of the child's expected development; age-appropriate behaviour and typical development was something they noticed but did not pay too much attention to. Their focus was instead on guiding the teachers in adapting the learning environment and conveying a clarifying pedagogy. If there were no changes in the child's development, despite pedagogical efforts, the special needs teachers might deem that the case needed to be assessed by a psychologist. This was not entirely unusual, according to them.

The special needs teachers described assessment from a relational perspective. They talked of assessing the quality of the education, how the personnel interacted with the child, and not from a perspective of inabilities found in the child. Several special needs teachers mentioned that they made intuitive assessments based on theories within developmental psychology, but that this was not documented in action plans as the measures then risked being aimed at an individual (cf. Palla, 2018).

*"It might sound a bit strange, but I make an internal assessment, and then I assess the child's ability to communicate. Can the child understand what is happening? Can the child make themselves understood?... Introverted or expressive?... I assess a little there" (Participant 8).*

The fact that they did note *"the typical development"*, as a special needs teacher phrased it, was legitimised by a perceived responsibility to be the one to forward the case for further assessment by, for example, a psychologist. The special needs teachers emphasised that the concepts of assessment and teaching, and the meaning of these, were open to interpretation and should be discussed in every preschool.

## What Preschool Teachers and Special Needs Teachers Expect from One Another

The **preschool teachers** said that they expected the special needs teachers to support the team through in-service training in diagnoses and disabilities and through concrete solutions, ideas and tools for moving forward when a problem arises. The preschool teachers also expected the special needs teachers to have more expertise in working with children with special needs and seeing what needed to be done.

*“My expectations are that the special needs teacher should contribute with something that is outside our area of expertise, that we have tried to support and help the child as much as we can and know how to, but when we no longer know what to do, that she knows more than that and that she has a tool or a way of reaching the child, a tool to go forward with” (Participant 7).*

The **special needs teachers** said that they expected the preschool teachers to be prepared before the first meeting and to be able to express what help they needed and what measures had been taken. They also expected the preschool teachers to be able to see their own roles, what they do and what they do not do, instead of blaming the child. They claimed that the preschool teachers themselves had the resources and a good understanding of the curriculum, enabling them to carry out their tasks. The special needs teachers also expected the preschool teachers to be curious and open to finding and trying out new solutions, and open to receiving further training in areas needed to support the child group. The special needs teachers claimed that it was up to the preschool teachers to adopt and continue with the suggestions and recommendations given.

*“I expect the personnel to be curious and willing to learn. That’s how we merge your knowledge and experiences with my knowledge and experiences, and then we lift each other, and then we lift the child” (Participant 11).*

## DISCUSSION

The documentation task given by the curriculum can be perceived as contradictory and hard to carry out. Preschool teachers are expected to document each child’s development without making assessments, while the preschool’s practice is to be assessed in relation to the aspirational goals regarding the individual child (Skolverket, 2018). This setup creates a conflict between documentation and assessment. It is a delicate task, on the verge of impossible, to assess an individual child’s knowledge development without

observing and documenting it and without implicitly or explicitly conveying an individual assessment through this.

Graded knowledge assessments and assessments based on personality psychology were not supported by the preschool teachers, special needs teachers or the curriculum (cf. Vallberg Roth, 2014). That those active within the preschool practices dissociated themselves from individual assessments was most likely due to a non-normative perspective dominating within the preschool practices. Another reason for not highlighting the individual child's abilities and development could very often be that the systematic quality work was so clearly aimed at the child group. The tradition of preschools being safe spaces, free from the need to perform and assess, combined with the significance of play for the children's development and with the socio-cultural framework of the curriculum, most likely contributed to a certain degree of resistance to documentation in general and assessment in particular.

Despite the fact that the concept of assessment carries many connotations within preschools, the study results show that preschool teachers sought legitimacy by being allowed to assess the child's changing abilities through formative assessment. The interviews with the preschool teachers illustrate that the reluctance to assess was giving way (cf. Virtanen, 2018). This was partly due to the concepts of teaching and assessment having been discussed at the preschools.

### **Intentions, Ambivalence and Uncertainty**

The preschool teachers' intentions seem to be to conduct a learning-oriented documentation that highlights children's learning in relation to an object of learning (cf. Alvestad & Sheridan, 2015). Despite these intentions, preschool teachers frequently ended up conducting child-centred documentation in which the activities that the children participated in, "the doing," were documented to show children and parents what was happening within the practice. It can be difficult to highlight changing abilities in the documentation. This is especially difficult when preschool teachers are afraid of being perceived as advocates for a perspective based on inabilities and the individual, often known as a categorical or compensatory approach (Karlsudd, 2017).

Based on statements from those participating in the documentation, the special needs teacher was the one mainly responsible for documenting the individual child. The observations that form the basis for the documentation are mostly

conducted as non-participant observations. Special needs teachers felt, to some degree, responsible for documentations which included mapping in some form and making an action plan, but they were unsure of how and to what extent they were supposed to document (cf. Palla, 2016). They also found it difficult to know what to do with that documentation. The special needs teachers were reluctant to produce any written material, and if they did, it was treated as personal notes which were not necessary to save for record-keeping.

### **Division of Responsibility**

When the curriculum (Skolverket, 2018) states that **the preschool** is to observe children who for various reasons need extra guidance, incentives and support, the division of responsibility between preschool teachers and special needs teachers is unclear. Neither of the two professions are guarantors of the measures founded on documentation being conducted for the sake of the individual child. Only when the curriculum refers to the preschool class is it apparent that it is the preschool teacher who is responsible for observing children in need of extra support for development. In most cases an achievable division of responsibility has been established, but without more explicit regulations of this division the equality of the practices is jeopardised. In the worst-case scenario, this might lead to a child attending preschool for five years before one of the professionals, through a structured and formal approach, observes that the child needs extra support.

The relational perspective, which characterises the special needs teachers' discussions of children with special needs, seems to be reflected by the preschool teachers, who adopt the suggestions for changes in the learning environment and the approaches recommended by the special needs teachers. Special needs teachers are expected to possess a greater understanding of the possibilities for supporting the individual child, and that understanding is conveyed to the preschool teachers, who transform it into action.

### **Implications for Special Needs Education**

To achieve equality in preschools and to be able to take early measures, children in need of extra support need to be given the right to have their needs noticed and documented. Preschool teachers' reluctance to document the individual child might result in children's special needs remaining hidden, as it is only the group's development and learning that is depicted. It is therefore important that

there is a method for assessment that does not include judgements. Assessment in its current form is usually based on normative notions which, within the education system, often result in differentiation.

It is evident that the preschool teachers sought further training on “how” and “what” to document when it came to the individual child. One step towards improving the preschool teachers’ expertise is to work towards a better understanding of inclusive special needs education. This would make it easier to identify and meet children’s special needs at an earlier stage. If the preschool teachers feel that they lack the knowledge required to document the individual child and assign responsibility for this to the special needs teachers, there is a risk that the latter will be seen as the ultimate authority. A better solution is that the special needs teachers do preventive work, together with the team, with child groups at a few preschools.

### **Limitations**

As the survey was of limited scope, the results of this study cannot be generalised to all Swedish preschools, but the data obtained is expected to provide important guidance for further studies and evaluations.

## **CONCLUSION**

The present study shows that preschool teachers have difficulties in finding a balance between group and individual-oriented observations and documentation. In this occupational group the dilemma is noticeable. On the one hand, there is a concern that the documentation practice will be developed into individual assessments that reduce the scope of children’s differences, while on the other hand is a concern about the risk of underestimating children’s need for special support. The special educators have a clearer and more direct responsibility for the individual assessments, although they themselves would like to observe and develop the activities for the whole group.

A proposal for further research is that the two professional groups together, in an action research project, might develop and test documentation for more inclusive assessments and work for activities that lead to the individual being put at the centre with the support of group-oriented initiatives.

## REFERENCES

- Alnervik, K. (2018). Systematic documentation: Structures and tools in a practice of communicative documentation. *Early Childhood*, 19(1), 72-84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949118762147>
- Alvestad, T., Sheridan, S. (2015). Preschool teachers' perspectives on planning and documentation in preschool. *Early Child Development and Care*, 185(3), 377-392. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2014.929861>
- Bjervås, L. (2011). Samtal om barn och pedagogisk dokumentation i förskolan som bedömningspraktik: En diskursanalys [Conversations about children and pedagogical documentation in preschool as an assessment practice: A discourse analysis]. (Doctoral thesis). Acta universitatis Gothoburgensis, Göteborg.
- De Sousa, J. (2019). Pedagogical documentation: The search for children's voice and agency. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 27(3), 371-384. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01350293X.2019.1600807>
- Einarsdottir, J., Purola, A., Johansson, EM., Broström, S., Emilson, A. (2015). Democracy, caring and competence: Values perspectives in ECEC curricula in the Nordic countries. *International Journal of Early Years Education*. 23, 97-114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2014.970521>
- Elfström, I. (2013). Uppföljning och utvärdering för förändring: Pedagogisk dokumentation som grund för kontinuerlig verksamhetsutveckling och systematiskt kvalitetsarbete i förskolan [Follow-up and evaluation for change: Pedagogical documentation as a basis for continuous business development and systematic quality work in preschool]. (Doctoral thesis). Stockholms universitet, Sweden.
- Grant, S., Comber, B., Danby, S., Theobald, M., Thorpe, K. (2018). The quality agenda: Governance and regulation of preschool teachers' work. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 48(4), 515-532. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2017.1364699>
- Hamilton, H., Hermansson, K. (red.) (2017). Upptäck små barns lärande: Ett utvecklat kunnande i förskolan: Slutrapport från FoU-programmet Små barns lärande [Discover young children's learning: Developed knowledge in preschool: Final report from the R&D program Young Children's Learning]. Stockholm: Ifous.
- Hostyn, I., Mäkitalo, A-R., Hakari, (Tast) S., Vandenbussche, L. (2020). The professional actuation of pedagogical documentation in Belgian and Finnish early childhood education settings. *Early Child Development and Care*, 190(3), 400-413. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2018.1475368>
- Johansson, E.M. (2016). Det motsägelsefulla bedömningsuppdraget: En etnografisk studie om bedömning i förskolekontext [The contradictory assessment task: An ethnographic study of assessment in a preschool context]. (Doctoral thesis). Göteborgs universitet, Göteborg.
- Kang, J., Walsh, D.J. (2018). Documentation as an integral part of teaching: Early childhood teachers' systematic search for good teaching. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 39(4), 262-277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2018.1514333>

Karlsudd, P. (2021). Mot snävare normalitet [Against the stricter normality]. In A. Emilson & L.L. Bjervås (Ed.), *Dokumentation i förskolan - Att bygga luftslott eller borga för kvalitet?* [Documentation in preschool - Building castles in the air or guaranteeing quality?]. (pp. 7-13). Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Karlsudd, P. (2017). The search for successful inclusion. *Disability, CBR & Inclusive Development*, 28,142-160. <https://doi.org/10.5463/dcid.v28i1.577>

Lee-Hammond, L., Bjervås, L.L. (2020). Pedagogical documentation and systematic quality work in early childhood: Comparing practices in Western Australia and Sweden. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949120928431>

Lenz Taguchi, H. (2013). *Varför pedagogisk dokumentation? Verktyg för lärande och förändring i förskolan ochskolan* [Why educational documentation? Tools for learning and change in preschool and school]. Malmö: Gleerups.

Lindberg, R. (2018). *Att synliggöra det förväntade: Förskolans dokumentation i en performativ kultur* [Making the expected visible: The preschool's documentation in a performative culture]. (Lnu Licentiate; 22). Linnaeus University Press.

Lindgren Eneflo, E. (2014). *Dokumentationens dilemma. Förskollärare samtalar om pedagogisk dokumentation* [The dilemma of documentation. Preschool teachers talk about pedagogical documentation]. (Licentiatuppsats). Umeå Universitet.

Lindroth, F. (2018). *Pedagogisk dokumentation - en pseudo verksamhet? Lärares arbete med dokumentation i relation till barns delaktighet* [Pedagogical documentation-a pseudo-activity? Teachers' work with documentation in relation to children's participation]. (Lnu Licentiate; 8). Linnaeus University Press.

Löfdahl, A., Pérez Prieto, H. (2009). Institutional narratives within the performative preschool in Sweden: 'If we write that we're no good, that's not good publicity!' *Early Years*, 29(3), 261-270. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575140903161438>

Löfgren, H. (2015). Teachers' work with documentation in preschool: Shaping a profession in the performing of professional identities. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 59(6). <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2014.965791>

Logan, H., Sumison, J. (2010). Early childhood teachers' understanding of a provision for quality. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 35(3), 42-50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/183693911003500306>

Nilfyr, K. (2018). *Dokumentationssyndromet: En interaktionistisk och socialkritisk studie av förskolans dokumentations- och bedömningspraktik* [Documentation syndrome: An interactionist and socially critical study of preschool documentation and assessment practice]. (Lnu Licentiate; 11). Linnaeus University Press.

Paananen, M., Lipponen, L. (2018). Pedagogical documentation as a lens for examining equality in early childhood education. *Early Child Development and Care*, 188(2), 77-87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2016.1241777>

Palla, L. (2016). *Åtgärdsprogram i förskolan? Specialpedagogers motstånd och alternativ* [Action program in preschool? Resistance and alternatives for special educators]. *Socialmedicinsk tidskrift*, 93(2), 190-198.

Palla, L. (2018). Individcentrerad prestation och måluppfyllelse i förskolan?: När åtgärdsprogram blir examinerande dokument och verktyg i specialpedagogiska processer [Individual-centred achievement and goal fulfilment in preschool? When action programs become examining documents and tools in special educational processes]. *Pedagogisk forskning i Sverige*, 23(1-2), 89-106.

Palmer, A. (2012). Uppföljning, utvärdering och utveckling i förskolan: Pedagogisk dokumentation [Follow-up, evaluation and development in preschool: Pedagogical documentation]. Stockholm: Skolverket.

Patel, R., Davidson, B. (2019). Forskningsmetodikens grunder. Att planera, genomföra och rapportera en undersökning [The reasons for the research methodology. To plan, conduct and report a survey]. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Renblad, K., Brodin, J. (2014). Behövs specialpedagoger i förskolan? [Do we need special educators in preschool?]. *Socialmedicinsk Tidskrift*, 91(4), 384-390.

SFS 2011:688. (2011). Examensordning [System of Qualifications]. Stockholm: Utbildningsdepartementet.

Sheridan, S., Pramling Samuelsson, I. (2016). Barns lärande-fokus i kvalitetsarbetet [Children's learning-focus in quality work]. (2nd. ed.). Stockholm: Liber.

Sheridan, S., Williams, P., Sandberg, A. (2012). Systematic quality work in preschool. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 45, 123-150. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-012-0076-8>

SKOLFS 2017:6. (2017). Skolverkets allmänna råd med kommentarer. Måluppfyllelse i förskolan [The Swedish National Agency for Education's general advice with comments. Goal fulfilment in preschool]. Stockholm: Utbildningsdepartementet.

Skolinspektionens rapport 2011:10. (2011). Förskolans pedagogiska uppdrag [The preschool's pedagogical mission]. Stockholm.

Skolinspektionens rapport 2012:7. (2012). Förskola, före skola-lärande och bärande. Kvalitetsgranskningsrapport om förskolans arbete med det förstärkta pedagogiska uppdraget [Preschool, pre-school-learning and carrying. Quality review report on the preschool's work with the strengthened pedagogical assignment]. Stockholm.

Skolverket. (2018). Läroplan för förskolan: Lpfö 18 [Curriculum for preschool]. Stockholm: Skolverket.

Tellgren, B. (2008). Från samhällsmoder till forskarbehörig lärare: kontinuitet och förändring i en lokal förskolläroplanutbildning [From mother of society to researcher qualified teacher: Continuity and change in a local preschool teacher education] (Doctoral dissertation). Örebro universitet.

Vallberg Roth, A.C. (2014). Bedömning i förskolans dokumentationspraktiker-fenomen, begrepp och reglering [Assessment in the preschool's documentation practice-phenomena, concepts and regulation]. *Pedagogisk forskning i Sverige*, 19(4-5), 403-437.

Vetenskapsrådet. (2017). God forskningssed [Good research practice]. Stockholm: Vetenskapsrådet.

Virtanen, M. (2018). Förskolans dokumentations- och bedömningspraktik: En diskursanalys av förskollärares gemensamma tal om dokumentation och bedömning [The preschool's documentation and assessment practice: A discourse analysis of preschool teachers' joint speech on documentation and assessment]. (LnuLicentiate;15): Linnaeus University Press.

Wiesel, F., Modell, S. (2014). From new public management to new public government? Hybridization and implications for public sector consumerism. *Financial Accountability & Management*, 30(2), 175-205. <https://doi.org/10.1111/faam.12033>