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Teaching as a new mission: Swedish preschool teachers' collegial discussions

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how preschool teachers, over time, collectively manage teaching as a new part of their mission. The study's empirical data consist of two related but temporally separated sets of data containing collegial discussions among preschool teachers; talks during a development process and group interviews with the same preschool teachers six months later. Through a theory-driven analysis, using the theoretical concept of teacher agency, different ways of achieving teacher agency are brought into light. When tensions appear, the preschool teachers achieve teacher agency by using professional core values in order to make adjustments, additions or changes to school policy. These professional core values consist of for example, sensitivity to the interests and needs of children, the ambition to perform a pedagogical practice for the greater good of children and the professional tradition of preschool teachers and child minders working together in teams.

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Introduction

Collegial discussions, as a tool for collaborative peer learning, are often described as a key factor in terms of enhancing professional knowledge, development and learning (cf Sula, Dutrevis, and Crahay 2019; Nolan and Molla 2018). Various aspects of collaborative peer learning have been highlighted as essential in times of educational change (Hargreaves 2000). The national Swedish Preschool Curriculum (Lpfö18) regulates practice for all preschool children (age 1–5 years), where the children often are divided into age-based groups: 1–3 year olds and 4–5 year olds. Preschool practice in Sweden is a unitary system with a long tradition of enhancing care and learning. Swedish preschools have a professional tradition of preschool teachers and child minders working together in working teams, according to principles of solidarity and equity amongst staff. In each team, there has to be at least one preschool teacher, but there are no divisions of tasks based on professional background, even though preschool teachers have a higher salary compared to child minders. Collegial discussions between preschool teachers and child minders are a well-known and well-used method to enhance the working teams' professional learning and development (Öqvist and Cervantes 2018). Recently, in line with other countries, Sweden has undergone several policy changes concerning preschool practice.

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One example of these policy changes occurred in 2010, when Swedish preschools became integrated in the whole school system, also meaning teaching is required as part of the teachers' mission (Swedish Educational Act SFS 2010:800).

Teaching in preschool, policy and research

The Swedish Schools Inspectorate (SSI) conducts inspections to what extend preschool practices live up to recently formulated policy, such as the Educational Act and the curriculum. In 2016, the SSI published a report with results from inspections of 82 preschools, focusing on various preschool teaching aspects, children's learning and the preschool teachers' responsibility. The SSI found that the concept of teaching was not used when describing preschool practice and the enhancing of children's learning and development. Teaching is described as 'preschool teachers' conscious support of children's goal-oriented learning and development' (SSI 2016, 12, translated from Swedish). The report highlights a further need for a teaching process performed with awareness in line with the curriculum goals. The inspection report (SSI 2016) received a lot of attention, both in media as well as within preschool practice, and many national and local development processes were initiated following the published criticism. The empirical data in this article consist of collegial discussions that took place during one of these development processes initiated in the wake of the inspection report. Preschool teachers as well as preschool managers relate the concept of teaching to the practice within compulsory school and with instructional learning of a fixed content (Sæbbe and Pramling Samuelsson 2017; Hildén, Löfdahl Hultman, and Bergh 2018). Research shows that Swedish preschool teachers, like preschool teachers in other countries (cf Maniates 2016; Dockett and Perry 2014; Sisson 2011; Sofou and Tsafos 2009), are struggling with preschool policy approaching compulsory school policy, fearing the loss of the play-based pedagogy. A play-based pedagogy where care as well as the relational construction of knowledge is highlighted, which contributes to the concept of teaching as a problematic concept within preschool practice (Jonsson, Williams, and Pramling Samuelsson 2017; Vallberg Roth 2018; Hildén, Löfdahl Hultman, and Bergh 2018).

Due to the SSI report, research studies were conducted with the aim of contributing to knowledge on preschool teachers' understandings of the concept of teaching. A profession in transition came into light, holding ambivalent ways to relate to the concept of teaching as both good and bad. Teaching was regarded to be both demanding and challenging, while at the same time contributing to quality and higher status for the profession. Preschool teachers also expressed that children have the right to be educated, while at the same time have the right to be protected from teaching (Jonsson, Williams, and Pramling Samuelsson 2017). Preschool teachers described the need for teachers to be a competent leader (Gustafsson and Thulin 2017), who can take the child's perspective, to be communicative, to have a clear goal to focus on and to be prepared. Difficulties concerning taking the leading role and at the same time acknowledging children's interests were also found in research on preschool teachers' understandings of the concept of teaching (Melker, Mellgren, and Pramling Samuelsson 2018). The inspection report, based on its findings, indicated a need for more research on how to teach in preschool, which paved the way for research on how to teach according to preschool policy and tradition. The need for teaching to take a child's perspective is highlighted in

a report from the Swedish National Agency for Education (2018). Teaching should be interesting and meaningful for children, and should contribute to children developing relevant knowledge. In order to accomplish this, preschool teachers' support is emphasised. This support is further described as teachers challenging children in a playful and explorative way. In addition to the report published by the Swedish National Agency for Education (2018), journals simultaneously invited scholars to publish in specific issues on teaching in preschool. According to Jonsson and Thulin (2019), taking a child's perspective is too limited to form the only starting point when teaching. Instead, as concluded by Björklund and Palmér (2019), preschool teachers must have a more active role, directing children's attention towards specific goals to enhance learning. Teaching should acknowledge and be responsive to children's play and imagination, adopting actions in accordance to children's response, which calls for the preschool teacher to be active and steer the process as well as being sensitive to children's interests, as argued by Pramling and Wallerstedt (2019).

To sum up, research on Swedish preschool teachers' teaching focuses on preschool teachers' understandings of the concept as well as how teaching can be performed within preschool practice, but little is known about the process when preschool teachers transform their understandings of teaching within collegial discussions. This article focuses on collegial discussions amongst Swedish preschool teachers who work with children up to the age of three during one of the development processes that was initiated because of the SSI report (2016).

This article aims to contribute with knowledge on how preschool teachers over time collectively manage teaching as a new part of their mission.

Theoretical framework: teacher agency

Agency is always present, more or less, and consists of the interplay between the capacity of actors and the structural environment:

The temporal constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 970).

Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015) developed this definition of agency further by using an ecological approach when looking specifically at *teacher* agency. Teacher agency is described as agency-as-achievement, which means agency is defined as something that one can do, but not something that one can have. In times of educational change, teacher agency is often called for, highlighting agency as a significant dimension of teachers' professionalism (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015). Individuals or groups in concrete settings in the here and now can achieve teacher agency where different structural, cultural and material aspects serve as conditions and circumstances (Biesta and Tedder 2007). Therefore, teacher agency is 'both relational – highlighting how humans operate by *means of* their social and material environments – and temporal – as agency is rooted in past experiences, oriented to the future and located in the contingencies of the present' (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015, 20).

In this article, the relational aspect of teacher agency becomes visible in preschool teachers' collegial discussions in organised settings together with child minders. Teachers' talk consists of vocabulary and discourses that consist of the words that are being spoken as well as how the content is being communicated. This kind of teacher talk is not uniquely individual, but rather dependent on policy, research and the everyday discourses within their own practice (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015). This constitutes a collective experience base that appears in teachers' talks (Bergh and Wahlström 2017). Therefore, teacher agency needs to be understood as a shared experience through communication, as well as temporal. When analysing the data, the temporal aspect of teacher agency consisting of the iterational and projective dimension (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015), were used. The iterational dimension refers to an actor's experiences, consisting of past patterns of thought and action, while the projective dimension consists of an actor's view on possible different ways to act, related to hopes, fears and desires for the future.

In this article, the two temporal dimensions of teacher agency described as the iterational and projective dimension make it possible to shed light on how preschool teachers collectively and over time manage teaching as a new part of their mission. The following questions led to the process of analysis:

- Which prior experiences do preschool teachers, when describing their aspirations concerning teaching, consider significant?
- What aspirations do preschool teachers have concerning teaching?

Method, data and analysis

The empirical data consists of two related but temporally separated sets of data holding collegial discussions among preschool teachers. As we mentioned earlier, collegial discussions within developmental processes in Swedish preschools include both preschool teachers and child minders. The first set of data (phase one) consists of talks during a development process in which seven preschool teachers and three child minders were engaged, and the second set of data (phase two) consists of group interviews with five preschool teachers and two child minders six months later. The preschool teachers Anna, Maria and Margareta (fictitious names) participated in both phases.

In phase one, a preschool principal together with other preschool staff leaders arranged a competence development process aiming to let the staff discuss the meaning of teaching as a new part of the preschool teacher's mission. In the spring of 2017, inspired by the earlier mentioned inspection report (SSI 2016), around 50 preschool staff (preschool teachers and child minders) met and had group discussions about teaching during two half-day sessions. One session focused solely on teaching, and one session focused on pedagogical documentation. As we, the researchers were engaged in another cooperation project with the preschool principal prior to the developmental process, we came to know about the upcoming sessions and we decided, together with the preschool staff leaders, to engage as researchers in the development process. The preschool staff leaders, who alternately lectured and read aloud from the inspection report and encouraged the staff to discuss topics in smaller groups, structured the group discussions. We took field notes and taped all group talks, both the lecturing

parts led by the preschool staff leaders and the various group discussions. As we were not able to attend physically in all groups, we placed a sound recorder on the table at the beginning of the discussions. Ten group discussions were recorded and transcribed. When selecting target groups for this article we chose the two groups of staff that worked with 1–3 year old children. Anna and Maria participated in a group consisting of four preschool teachers and one child minder in total. Margareta participated in a group consisting of three preschool teachers and two child minders in total. From a total amount of 21 hours of recorded talks from phase one, data from the selected group-talks were limited to four hours and ten minutes. Our choice of staff working with a specific age group relates to our research interest in the youngest preschool children.

In phase two, six months later, two group interviews with the selected target groups in phase one, working with 1–3 year old children, were conducted. One with Anna and Maria's working team (four preschool teachers and one child minder in total) and one with Margareta's working team (one preschool teacher and one child minder in total). The interviews, which lasted for a total of two hours and 15 minutes each, were recorded and transcribed. Before each interview, we videotaped every-day situations in the teachers' preschool settings, where the video recordings totalled 7 hours and 30 minutes. The researcher selected parts of the video films, containing different situations where the staff interacted with the children. The video excerpts were chosen because they showed different types of situations (meal times, routine situations, planned activities and so on) but also differed when it came to which preschool teacher participated. The selected video films were used as a trigger in the interviews, which focused on situations in the selected video films as well as other every-day situations from which the staff discussed what is viewed as teaching, what is not and why some situations might be viewed as teaching while others are not.

In both phases, the staff/participants consisted of preschool teachers and child minders. However, when analysing and presenting the results we mainly focus on the three preschool teachers Anna, Maria and Margareta. The reason for us selecting three preschool teachers is primarily that preschool teachers are responsible for the teaching in Swedish preschools and therefore, we want to highlight their reasoning. We are aware that all staff who participated in the group discussions, the child minders and even those who did not engage verbally in the discussions have had an impact on the preschool teachers' reasoning, as well as other aspects like as researchers listening in, the discussions being recorded and so on. In both phases, some of the participants did not actively take part in the discussions. Thereby – following the analytical focus of what was actually spoken, the silent participation was not acknowledged. We are aware of the large part of communication that is nonverbal but such aspects were not included in the study.

In this article, preschool teachers are positioned as active agents by acknowledging the important role of preschool teachers in times of educational change. We regard preschool teachers' discussions on teaching as actively contributing 'to shaping their work and its condition' (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015, 1). During the analysis, all transcribed data were analysed according to the temporal dimensions from our theoretical framework of teacher agency (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015). The analysing were carried out through the lens of the iterational and projective dimensions that also formed the first preliminary themes in the results. The theoretical lens of teacher agency enabled us to regard how teachers 'critically shape their responses to problematic

situations' (Biesta and Tedder 2007, 11). When analysing and presenting the data, the focus were set on the tensions that became visible during phase one. Therefore, in the data from phase two, we focused on whether these tensions had transformed or vanished, which explains the somewhat limited data presented from phase two. Another aspect is the differences in amount of data. From phase one, data consist of a transcription of 39,709 words, compared to the transcriptions from phase two, which consists of 18,196 words.

As the temporal dimension is important when analysing teachers agency, we decided to choose a closer analysis of three preschool teachers who participated in phase one and then participated in the interviews in phase two. By following the same three participants, we were able to show in what way their discussions on teaching changed and/or developed between the first discussions during the development process and the discussions in the group interviews six months later. The three preschool teachers Anna, Maria and Margareta were chosen because they all work with children aged one to three and because their utterances showed different nuances within the tensions that appeared. The tensions appeared when their reasoning differed amongst themselves or from the preschool staff leaders, but also when past patterns of action and thought were in conflict with teaching as a new part of their mission. We use quotations from Anna, Maria and Margareta in the results to illustrate these tensions and the different ways to achieve teacher agency. All quotations are translated from Swedish into English.

In both phases, during the whole research process, ethical guidelines for research were followed (Swedish Research Council 2017). All the staff and the preschool staff leaders gave their informed consent to let us take part in the development process, to let us take notes and record their group discussions. All staff in both working teams, from which data in phase two was collected, gave their informed consent to let us video film their everyday activities and to conduct and record the group interviews. All the preschool children's guardians gave their informed consent to let their children be part of the video films. All the participants were aware of their rights to withdraw from the research project, and if withdrawing it would not affect their participation in the developmental process, but no one told us they wanted to do so. Concerning the young children's voluntary participation, we cannot consider them aware of being part of the research process, but we strived to not videotape situations where the children seemed to feel uncomfortable.

Results

This article aims to contribute with knowledge about how preschool teachers collectively manage teaching as a new part of their mission. Data from phases one and two are presented separately since the settings are different.

Phase one: managing tensions between the iterative and projective dimensions

The following quotation exemplifies tensions between the iterative and the projective dimensions:

Maria And that is really how we have done it many times before. We have written our observation and then 'Well, what's in it from the curriculum?/ ... /If looking at this in

another way, if you actually select a goal in the curriculum first, then you can also direct the group differently, in your own direction.

The quote from Maria exemplifies the iterational dimension, indicating that the goal was chosen after having an activity with the children prior to the new mission of teaching. The projective dimension exemplified in Maria's quote above consists of other possible ways to act and engage in the future. Here Maria describes situations where the pedagogical staff chooses the goal from the curriculum during the planning stage. When describing new possible ways to act Maria achieves teacher agency by seeing other alternative ways that correspond with the mission of teaching, as described in the inspection report from the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2016). Similar tensions appear in Anna and Maria's discussion:

Anna Because you can work towards a goal but if you are not aware of the goals, you do not know, uh, that it is teaching. It is only teaching if you base it on the curriculum goals, I think. Because it is our steering document, so. You cannot ignore it.

Anna's viewpoint is based on the notion that preschool practice may have been goal-oriented before teaching was introduced to the teachers' mission. Adding to this starting point, she communicates other possible ways of teaching in the future. The curriculum as well as the inspection report appear to be important to Anna, as exemplified in the projective dimension in the quotation above. Anna and Maria continue their discussion by comparing past patterns of actions and thoughts with possible ways of acting in the future according to their understandings of the mission of teaching:

Maria You think we might have done something in the same way before, but we did not have a goal in sight from the beginning?

Anna No, but I think it is like that now, that we have to be aware of what goals we are working towards.

Maria Mm, that is the difference between teaching and not teaching.

Anna Yeah

During their collegial discussion, Maria and Anna come to a mutual understanding of the mission of teaching, which comes into light through the iterational as well as the projective dimensions of teacher agency. According to our interpretation, the collegial discussion is central when Anna and Maria achieve teacher agency.

Yet another tension appears in relation to either steering towards the goals in the curriculum, as the quotations above shows, or letting the children's interest lead the process. Anna talks about experiences of activities like circle time, that didn't acknowledge children's interests. The discourse of children's interests is present both in the iterational as well as in the projective dimensions:

Anna It should be a goal-oriented process based on the children's interests. Then it might not be ... OK, it might be teaching, because you have a goal-oriented process, but you do not reach the children in the same way if they have no interest.

In Anna's view, there is a tension between the ambition of enhancing children's learning and development through children's interests and her interpretation of the mission of

teaching. According to Anna, a goal-oriented process should include children's interests. By making this addition, she achieves teacher agency where the iterational dimension as well as the projective dimension, focusing on children's interests, plays a big part.

The iterational dimension, consisting of past patterns of thought and action, contributes to Margareta's achievement of teacher agency to a high degree. Instead of highlighting children's interests, as Anna does, Margareta focuses on preschool teachers' knowledge and experiences concerning the needs of children:

Margareta A goal-oriented process must be when we notice an interest, a need [from the child] to work a bit more with for example language learning and to let the child's interests and needs direct our process.

Margareta transforms her understanding of the mission of teaching in the same way as Anna does, but adds the children's needs, which serves as a point of departure from which preschool teachers choose a goal. Children's needs are central in Swedish preschool culture, and to Margareta this is important when transforming her understanding whilst at the same time tuning into the discourse of children's interests.

After a few group discussions, the preschool staff leaders ask if the preschool teachers can define a goal-oriented process. Margareta replies:

Margareta Well, it would probably be curriculum goals, something in the curriculum that we want to deepen our knowledge about, and probably, there will be different paths to take along the way.

This definition is both corrected and further developed by the preschool staff leaders by stressing a joint discussion. Margareta clarifies her previous utterance:

Margareta Yes. Which path it takes ... mainly we begin with the children and the children's interests, but of course, we have the curriculum goals

Margareta holds on to her belief whilst managing the mission of teaching. By adding awareness of the children and children's interests to the definition expressed by the preschool staff leaders, we interpret her actions as achieving teacher agency.

Tensions also appear during discussions about the mission of teaching and the responsibility of the preschool teacher, as stressed in the SSI report (2016). Maria describes some experiences of when a child minder successfully took responsibility of a typical preschool teacher task. She continues by expressing her vision in which she does not explicitly mention the responsibility of the preschool teacher, but rather uses 'one' and 'we' as expressions for the whole working team:

Maria For example, we kind of sit down together and discuss direction and goals. Um. For everyone to agree. One might decide that it is these concepts, when we are working towards this goal, so that everyone speaks the same language/ ... /and then, uh, then you evaluate and see if you have reached the goal.

Anna, on the other hand, expresses her vision by highlighting the individual responsibility of the preschool teacher:

Anna I have an obligation to do that and then I have to make sure/ ... /if someone asks me, do you teach? Then it is my job as a preschool teacher to be able to show the

teaching. Um. And to assure quality for it for example through our pedagogical documentation and to be able to point to it/ ... /It is our responsibility to also make sure that the child minders are included in that process, yes, what we actually do and why, because they should actually be a part of it even if the greatest responsibility lies with us, we must involve them.

Maria and Anna's visions exemplify nuances in the projective dimension when discussing aspects of differences in responsibility between preschool teachers and child minders, according to the mission of teaching.

Later on, in collegial discussions between Maria and Anna, further nuances come to light:

Maria I personally think it is ... I really cannot manage it, I think it's weird how you can ... I can't as a preschool teacher say that ... I can't say that I am much smarter and have better thoughts than ...

Anna But it is not about you saying you are smarter and having better thoughts, it is about what, which is your responsibility based on our steering documents/ ... /I totally agree, I don't think you should split up tasks either, but at the same time, we have the formal preschool teacher education. We are the ones who have been studying for three and a half years to have that expertise.

Maria Absolutely! But you may have taken other courses, although you yourself may not be a formal preschool teacher, that have provided relevant knowledge

Anna Yes, you may have taken educational courses, but we have a teacher's certificate.

The preschool staff leaders take part in Anna and Maria's discussion. The preschool staff leaders stress their interpretation of the Swedish Educational Act 1 chapter 3§: 'under the direction of preschool teachers'. Their interpretation involves mutual discussions in the working team as a shared task, however the responsibility lies on the preschool teachers. Anna and Maria's discussion continues:

Anna If you see it like that, can you divide task then? If you choose to see it that way?

Maria Yes but, what I do not like is that child minders are not allowed to have developmental talks [with parents], I cannot manage such divisions

Anna Okay

Maria Yes, I am against that division. But I understand, that I have the responsibility

Maria's expressions indicate concerns regarding teaching as divided tasks within the working team. She expresses positive experiences of sharing task with child minders, as well as ambitions towards including child minders in teaching. Anna's expressions, on the other hand, do not indicate any concerns regarding preschool teacher's explicit responsibility according to the mission of teaching. Anna attunes to Maria's ambition, but at the same time continues to highlight the differences in terms of responsibility. She handles the teaching responsibility by stressing her obligation to teach and by including child minders in the teaching process. Maria and Anna achieve teacher agency collectively through collegial discussions in which they come to a mutual understanding of the

mission of teaching, finding a way for the different nuances in the projective dimension to coexist.

Phase two: towards a projective dimension, collectively negotiated

In the data from the group interviews that took place six months after the developmental process (phase two of the study) the tensions that appeared during phase one seem to have faded out. No one talks about preschool teachers having tasks that differ from child minders or about preschool teachers' specific responsibility. Instead, expressions like 'we' and 'together in the working team' are used. The discourse of the curriculum is central, as well as the discourse of children's interests, but differs from phase one:

Anna Do you need to have an expressed goal, I wonder ...

Maria No, you do not have to

Anna Maybe it is about being aware of the goals. And that's when you can depart from the children's interests because then I know that I can work with this or invite to this.

Maria But we could almost decide the goal ... a goal retrospectively, almost

Anna Yeah

The projective dimension consists of expressions that stem from hopes and desires for a good child-centred pedagogical practice. Anna and Maria transform their understandings of teaching using the concept of awareness, found in the inspection report (SSI 2016), as a way to acknowledge children's interests. By doing so they relate to the mission of teaching, transforming it to fit their mutual ambition. According to our interpretation, Anna and Maria achieve teacher agency through their collegial discussion when discussing possible ways to act in their future teaching practice.

Maria describes, for her, problematic experiences of convincing children to taste different kinds of foods. One example of the developed discourse of intentions from the curriculum and the children's interests is exemplified below:

Maria Although I also think, we have returned to what is expressed in the curriculum, what is our mission? It is a relief – it does not say that, it does not say in the curriculum that we must actually eat carrots

In the quotation above, she talks about the mission as a way to overcome a sense of forcing children to do something, and instead open up towards a child-centred pedagogy. Maria takes advantage of the curriculum to legitimise her ambition for the future (the projective dimension) as a way for her to achieve teacher agency.

Another example of the projective dimension consists of discussions that stem from hopes and desires for a pedagogical practice for the greater good of children is the ambition of having a practice that is fun for children. Margareta talks about the importance of teaching not being experienced as 'demanding' for children, and continues by saying:

Margareta Our starting point is the children, we see that they think this is great fun and they help each other in this, and it serves as an engine, and above all it is fun and what is fun you can continue with

When Maria, on the other hand, talks about teaching and fun for children, she talks about it as a strategy for enhancing children's positive feelings towards specific subjects and in the end making experiences in compulsory school more fun:

Maria Then one can have an awareness also in I think, um, as you say, I do not teach math now but on the other hand, afterwards you can perhaps see lot of mathematics here, and then with awareness name it as mathematics to increase the children's desire to actually like mathematics or science, kind of. So that the school might be fun later on,

[Laugh]

Maria Even though it is, teacher centred teaching then, yes ...

By using a concept from the inspection report ('awareness') in a way that fits ambitions and hopes for the future, Maria entwines the iterational dimension constituting of past patterns of recognising the goal afterwards with the projective dimension constituting of possible future trajectories of action. The projective dimension rooted in the iterational dimension enhances Maria's achieving of teacher agency.

Conclusion and discussion

Through the theory-driven analysis, using the theoretical concept of teacher agency, different ways of collectively managing teaching as a new part of Swedish preschool teachers' mission come into light.

In the results presented above, the preschool teachers Anna, Maria and Margareta achieve teacher agency in different ways, all of which are depending on the contextual aspect of being able to discuss these matters collegially. Tensions between the iterational and the projective dimension appear during phase one but the tensions seem to have faded out during phase two. The preschool teachers achieve agency by transforming their understanding of the mission of teaching during their collegial discussions. When transforming, the preschool teachers reformulate their own definitions and understandings of teaching by including ambitions that stem from past patterns of action and thought, as well as hopes and desires for the future, both their own as well as those of their colleagues.

The results presented in this article will be further discussed in relation to the need of collegial discussions over time, the preschool profession's core values and the preschool profession's core values relation to the concept of teaching.

In order for a new part of a mission to have impact on teachers' understandings, repeated collegial discussions over time are needed. The competence development process aimed for the staff to discuss the concept of teaching. The preschool staff leaders challenged as well as encouraged the staff to discuss the difficulties concerning aspects that were contradictory to the professional tradition. When for example Maria seemed to have lost her self-esteem during phase one, talking about differentiated tasks, Anna encouraged Maria to take another perspective and challenged Maria's way of thinking. The development process involved collegial discussions in which teachers have managed different tensions connected to teaching. We have seen the importance of collegial discussions as prerequisites for joint reasoning on other possible future ways to act and think, as exemplified in the projective dimension of teacher agency. The

process duration is another important aspect enabling possibilities for preschool teachers to transform their understandings of teaching in preschool, thereby contributing to a changed approach to teaching in practice. In the studied competence development process, we initially noticed how the preschool teachers felt insecure. Later on, in the group interviews, the preschool teachers' discussions were more elaborated and connected to their experiences and visions. The preschool teachers' experiences showed the iterational dimension, and their visions indicated the projective dimension of teacher agency, for example, as shown in phase two where Maria entwined past experiences of recognising the goal afterwards with the ambition to depart from children's interests when teaching.

We have noticed the appearance of the preschool profession's core values in the teachers' reasoning and discussions on teaching. The central aspects, representing core values, are for example sensitivity to the children's interests and needs, the ambition to perform a pedagogical practice for the greater good of children and the professional tradition of preschool teachers and child minders working together in a team. The preschool teachers manage teaching as a new part of their mission by this professional core, using the core to illuminate their mutual transformation towards a new understanding. When tensions appear between tradition and new policy, the preschool teachers use the central aspects of the professional core to make adjustments, additions or changes to school policy. This is exemplified when Margareta adds children's needs as an important aspect of teaching. The professional tradition of preschool teachers and child minders working together in teams where there is no division of tasks is exemplified in Maria's discussion. We ask whether upholding this professional tradition and 'not stepping on the toes' of child minders is more important than enhancing children's equal rights to high-quality practice within the Swedish preschool.

Previous research on teaching in preschool has principally shown preschool teachers lacking an understanding of and resistance towards the concept of teaching. As our study departs from an understanding of the preschool teacher as an active agent of change related to policy, and as we studied a process over time, we have been able to visualise how the preschool teachers manage the new part of their mission, incorporating it into their professional core value. As opposed to previous research that has shown difficulties and challenges related to teaching in preschool, our study shows a preschool specific teaching based on the preschool teachers' own experiences, understandings and visions. We have seen how they achieve teacher agency through actively contributing 'to shaping their work and its condition' (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015, 1). Anna and Maria exemplify this when discussing dividing tasks between child minders and preschool teachers.

Finally, our data have been analysed through the lens of preschool teacher agency, acknowledging the preschool teachers' competence and skills. Without this lens, our data might have been interpreted differently as if tensions between traditions and policy were invisible and not managed by the preschool teachers. Such results might uphold an image of preschool teachers resisting teaching, thereby looking like new policy is failing to transform and change practice. Preschool is considered to be in constant transition and has been for a longer period (Swedish National Agency of Education 2004), and our wishes for future quality accounts and evaluations are that preschool teacher agency is taken into account.

An implication for future research is that use of longitudinal studies could inform sustainability of policy changes, for example whether or not teaching will change practice and how, or if, the preschool practice will transform the concept of teaching.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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