

Comparison of national preschool curricula in China and Sweden

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Abstract: Sweden and China have different histories and traditions in the field of early childhood education. In the secondary part of the 1990s, both countries adopted national curricula for preschool. The purpose of this study is to compare the preschool education of these two countries at policy and ideological level by examining and analyzing the frameworks and content of the national curricula for preschool within their respective social, political, cultural and pedagogical contexts. The special emphasis is on the similarities and differences in the statements on goals, tasks, and pedagogy for early childhood education in the national official documents. The major result shows that both curricular are goal directed policy documents in forms of regulations or guidelines. No methods for preschool work are stated, which leaves much room for the local and individual implementation. Learning and development of the child are stressed. Play is viewed as the important means for learning of preschool children in both curricula. The Swedish curriculum emphasizes on the fundamental democratic value for preschool, and the perspectives and values of children's learning and development. The preschool model is based on the premise that children learn and develop in all the contexts in which they are involved. The Chinese curriculum stresses both childcare and education, and the main task of preschool is to promote physical, moral and intellectual development of the child in a harmonious way. The content of educational activities that is selected and organized in a planned way is seen as important. The idea of "respecting children" has been promoted.

Keywords: Curriculum, preschool, policy, child development, knowledge and learning.

Introduction

Comparative approaches have regained their popularity in the last decade, where the geographic distance has become insignificant in almost all areas through globalization. In the global age, cross-national problems at policy level constantly emerge and affect each other with similar triggers and outcomes (Geva-May, 2002). Although countries' particular structure, culture, or politics are crucial contexts for national policies, governments today face the same social-economic, structural, and technological challenges and dilemmas. Comparative studies offer an intellectual arena for "transfer", "borrowing", "lesson drawing", or "pinching" in the international context when they are associated with descriptive accounts of national similarities or dissimilarities in public policies or organizational arrangements, with cross-national generalizations or explanations of differences in public policies and administrative patterns (DeLeon and Resnick-Terry, 1998). Crossley (2002) argues that the renewed interest in comparative studies in education is a consequence of a process of political reorganization of the world space, which calls into question educational systems that for centuries have been imagined on a national basis. It is also argued that a comparative perspective in education provides the possibility to create international tools and comparative indicators for measuring the efficiency and the quality of education, which is believed to play a key role in the endowment of marginal advantage in a global economic competition (Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003).

There has also been an increased interest in comparative studies in the field of early childhood education since the last decade, where various research methods are employed to reflect diverse educational aspects. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the International Association for Evaluation on Education

Achievement (IEA) have conducted a number of large-scale comparative studies providing a wide range of information across nations (see e.g. OECD, 2001; Olmsted, 1996, Neuman, 2005;). There are small-scale comparative studies focusing on two or more countries, in which the similarities and differences in educational policies, philosophies and practice across cultures are presented and analyzed (e.g. Penn, 1997; David et al., 2001; Kwon, 2003; Alvestad & Pramling Samuelsson, 1999; Asplund Carlsson et al. 2001, Allen, 2002, Pang & Richey, 2006).

Preschool in China and Sweden have not had the same tradition. The preschool institutions in China have had dramatic transformations over time both in structure and in pedagogy. In its history, it has been influenced by both Western and Eastern, as well as capitalist and socialist ideology and pedagogy (Gu, 1996, 2001). The nation's economic reform and the policy of single-child-family have also had a great influence on preschool education. Sweden, like other European countries, has a long preschool tradition with its root in Froebel kindergarten. Pre-school pedagogy has been inspired by Rousseau and Pestalozzi in its early period and later by Key and Dewey (Johansson, 1998). The intention of this comparative study on preschool in China and Sweden is to make contextual analysis on similarities and differences in their curriculum policy documents, and to try to delineate and explain the relationship between policy, politics, culture and discourses beyond the texts.

Curriculum theory

According to Lundgren (1978), the term curriculum has a broader meaning than just a concrete document. It includes the whole philosophy and ideas beyond the document. A curriculum is formulated according to a series of basic principles about how the world around us is organized. These principles together, or the collection of these principles, shape what is called a "code", which is related to educational goals, contents and methods. Curriculum theory attempts to build up knowledge on how educational goals, contents and methods are formed in a society and a culture. The analysis of curriculum should be thus on three levels, i.e. to answer three kinds of question:

- How are basic values, knowledge and experiences chosen and organized?
- How do the curriculum documents constructed?
- In what way do these curriculum documents govern and control the educational practice/activities?

On the first level, the question is related to, on the one hand, the historical and ideological influence on our understanding of the aim, content and function of curricula, and on the other, the influence of work market out of the educational system, and as well as the interpretations of this influence by different groups in society (i.e. their different interests). On the other words, the questions on this level is about how a curriculum is established and formed by certain principles, that is to say, how a curriculum code takes shape. The questions on the secondary level are related to the process of decision-making and controlling, where a concrete instrument is created for controlling of education. The concrete shaping of educational content and methods, as well as the control and evaluation of that, are influenced by educational researches and the work of school development (educational theories and didactic etc.). The question on the third level is about how curriculum takes place in an educational process and how this process lead to different types of learning and socialization, that is the implementation of the curriculum.

The social, economic and cultural conditions in the society have become the central in relating to the analysis of curricula. The aim is to describe, understand and explain the condition for emergence and development of basic characteristics of the curricula. The theories combining the statements on societal and cultural conditions with the statements on how these conditions are transformed and transferred in an educational environment have thus become an important perspective. This perspective draws into outline on interaction between the development of society as large and the growing of curricula.

Curriculum as political policy

Goodlad (1979) argues that there are different realities of curriculum such as substantial, sociopolitical and technical professional curriculum reality. Substantial reality gives expression to the contents of curriculum in form of goals, teaching materials and methods. The sociopolitical dimension of curriculum focuses on the social environment where the curriculum exists and develops. Curriculum as a political policy document gives the space for compromise as well as the space for different interpretations. The related questions are, why certain contents and goals in the curriculum have been privileged during a certain period within a certain social-historical context. Technical professional dimension is related to the practice and the activities of teaching.

Curriculum as political policy means that curriculum is culturally selected and represented, that it creates as a product of choice, which is a result of ideological struggle, political compromise, and the interests of society. Moreover, the shaping of a curriculum is not the end of political process but a beginning of a social action, an action of application and implementation. To consider curriculum from a policy perspective is to accept that curriculum is policy and policy in its most public form (Looney, 2001).

Policy is considered as a set of goals and priorities for action based on a theoretical vision of how things work and an ideological version of how things should work. A policy involves the application of this theory to a specific problem or situation. Since policy includes both theory and application, it involves more than one level. As Elmore (1982) argues:

Policies, by themselves, do not produce results. They must be interpreted, applied and elaborated into organizational routines and structures. For this reason, it is not strictly accurate to say that policy is “made” in one place and “implemented” in another. ... Policymaking and implementation, then, are interactive, iterative, and circular (p.97-98).

Policy is a result of coalitions and negotiation that bear the stamp of central-local interests, conflicts, and compromise. The implementation of policy involves far more than a mechanical translation of goals into routine procedures, and it involves fundamental questions about conflict, decision-making, and “who gets what” in a society (Grindle, 1980). In fact, implementation always means interpretation, and people at the local level consequently have an active and partially autonomous role to play in the policy process. Analyzing the process of interpretation requires historical and contextual approaches. Historical approach helps us to understand variation in policies, conditions that spawn it, and the consequences that flow from it. Contextual approach helps us to understand the interrelationships among the content of policy, institutional structures in which policy is implemented, and the wider social and political context in which these structures and processes occur (Paine, 1985).

Policy and discourse analysis

Recent approaches to policy analysis in education have been influenced more generally by discourse theory perspective (e.g. Ball, 1990; Taylor, 1997; Taylor et al., 1997). From such a perspective, policy-making is seen as an arena of struggle of meaning, and policies are seen as the outcomes of struggles “between contenders of competing objectives, where language – or more specifically discourse – is used tactically” (Fulcher, 1989, p.7). This kind of approach is useful to illuminate the politics of discourse and to explore the relationship between policy texts and their historical, political, social, and cultural contexts.

Discourse is an ideological practice in the sense that it contributes to a construction of certain values and goals as more worthy than others, and it attributes authority to certain bodies of knowledge over others. Through its basis in ideology, discourse analysis serves to highlight the distribution of power in society, the institutions which support this distribution and the reproduction of this social structure. Critical discourse analysis aims to explore the relationship between discursive practices, events, and texts, and wider social and cultural structures, relations, and processes. Critical discourse analysis explores how texts construct representations of the world, social relationships, and social identities, and there is an emphasis on highlighting how such practices and texts are ideologically shaped by relations of power (Fairclough, 1992, 2003). A critical discourse analysis perspective is of special importance for policy comparative study, where a cross-cultural (a culture in a broad meaning) contextual analysis of the texts is emphasized. Taylor (2004) argues that critical discourse analysis is of particular value in documenting and analyzing multiple and competing discourses in policy texts and in documenting discursive shifts in policy implementation processes.

Materials of the study

The aim of the study is to make sense, understand, analyze and explain the similarities and differences in the statements on goals, tasks and concepts in these two official documents within their respective historical, cultural, political contexts. Thus, breaking down the texts into small pieces by the technique of coding is not necessary. Instead, I prefer to treat the texts as a whole, and try to see the meanings beyond the texts, that is, what message they transmit and why. And I believe that the focus of the analysis should be a critical examination, rather than a mere description, of the documents.

The materials I use in this study include the national curricula of these two countries and a range of other official and unofficial documents. Some recent research in this field is also presented in this study that provide different clues or evidences for a better understanding of the study object, as well as different perspectives for analyzing the data. According to Hammersley & Atkinson (1983), comparative reading from other relevant settings are also of importance in document analysis.

Soydan (1996) argues that an intimate knowledge of the countries being studied is essential and Chamberlayne & King (1996) suggest that access to a combination of insider and outsider understandings of the subject and countries may produce the most useful insights into data. My knowledge about the pre-school education in both countries has been an advantage for the study.¹ My reading has been dealing with a broad range of different kinds of documents and literatures both in Chinese, Swedish and English. It is of great

¹ I was born in the mainland of China and moved to Sweden for about 16 years ago. I got my bachelor degree in education in China and had been teaching in the field of early childhood education in university in China for 6 years before I left China. I can read and speak both Chinese and Swedish.

importance of reading documents in their original languages because in cross-national research, the difficulties are often compounded by the “non-translatability” or “non-transferability” of terms or concepts (Pitrou, 1994; Jobert, 1996; Rainbird, 1996). Linguistic and conceptual clarity is of crucial importance to the qualitative comparison in document analysis. My cultural background has also contributed a deeper understanding of the implications of meanings in the document texts.

Transformation of preschool

Education in Imperial China focused on preparing individuals for the examinations needed to become government officials. Therefore, the earlier tradition of institutional education did not include education for young children. The first official Chinese kindergarten² was established in 1904. The first curriculum was taken and translated from Japanese (Hunag, 1989). A small number of Froebelian and Montessori kindergartens were also established in some cities by Western (mostly American) missionaries during this early period. These kindergartens were part of a welfare plan to help poor families. The kindergartens hired widows to teach young children copying indiscriminately programs from the West (Lu, 1991). During the 1920s and the 1940s a number of government and private run kindergartens were set up. Unlike missionary kindergartens, most of these kindergartens charged higher tuition fees so that only the children from rich families could have the opportunity to access (Huang, 1989). During this period, Dewey’s progressive ideas had had greater influence in Chinese pre-school in organizing the programs (Yang, 1989).

The founding of the People’s Republic of China entailed a new social system, a new ideology, and a new value system, all demanding a new aim of education: the training of new socialists and an educational system serving social development. Soviet educational theories and practices were uncritically introduced in China as a result of political and ideological intimacy between these two countries. The pre-school education, during this period, had been seen as a part of the welfare system of the state. After Mao’s death in 1976, there was a re-evaluation of Western educational ideas including Dewey’s progressive theory in the preschool field. In addition, there were demands for redefining and reconstructing the goals and mission of early childhood education, as a response to the single child policy (Gu, 2001).

In Swedish history there has been two separate pre-school institutions. One is called child-crib³, which was established during the middle of the nineteenth century as a full-day institution for the supervision of children from poorer families where the mothers had to go out to work, or they were single parent. The other was kindergarten that was a half-day program with pedagogical activities, mainly for children from wealthy families, where the mothers were at home. Since the mid-1930s, the Swedish institutions for child care have been greatly influenced by government intervention, which have been taken as a part of the general thrust of the state welfare policies (Holmlund, 1999).

In China, children enter primary school at the age of 6 or 7.⁴ There are two types of early childhood programs for children under 6: nurseries and kindergarten. Nurseries serve children under the age of 3. Since physical care and nurturing are the primary goals, the caregivers are

² The term “Kindergarten” has been using as an official name in China since the first time of its establishment. Its Chinese name is You Er Yuan (幼儿园) that means the garden of infants.

³ The term “child-crib” is directly translated from “barnkrubba”, the Swedish name of pre-school in the very beginning.

⁴ Parents have the right to make decision if their children start school at 6 or 7, i.e. if their children would go to the pre-school class or not.

trained as “nurses” rather than as teachers. Nurseries are not considered as educational institutions and are not, therefore, under the supervision of educational authorities. The term kindergarten in China refers generally to full-day programs serving children from the age of 3 to the age of 5. There are also boarding kindergartens and half-day programs. Children in kindergarten are generally grouped by age: juniors (3-4-year-olds), middle (4-5-year-olds) and seniors (5-6-year-olds). Group size increases with age, ranging from 25 to 40 children. Large, affluent centers also often have one or more doctors on the staff to care for the sick or injured children. They also provide other health related services, such as health screenings, immunizations and planning nutritious meals. By the end of 2002, China had more than 111,800 kindergartens with the enrollment of 20,360,200 children. Per-school education has been generally universalized in big and middle-sized cities (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2006).

Today there are three forms of pre-school in Sweden: pre-school, family daycare, and open pre-school. All these three forms of pre-school are open for children up to 5 years old. Pre-school is an educational institution where children are usually grouped in mixed ages, but in some cases there are small-child groups for children under 3. Open hours are adapted to the work or study hours of the parents or to the needs of the child. Family daycare is in-home care where a child minder takes care of a number of children while their parents work or study. Activities are generally located in the child minder’s home. Children placed in family daycares should also have access to open pre-school activities. It is of parents’ choice in what form of pre-school they their children will go. Open pre-school provides stay-at-home parents and child minders an opportunity to develop, together with pre-school staff, educational group activities for the children in their care. No enrollment is required. In many municipalities, open pre-school work together with social services or child and postnatal care centers (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2005). There is also a law that guarantees a place within a few months for each child whose parents are working or studying from the day the parents request it. Preschool in Sweden is financed partly by central government and partly by tax revenue and parental fees. Parental fees accounted for about or less than 17 per cent of the gross cost. Local authorities themselves decide how large a fee parents pay and how the fee system is structured, but a maximum fee. As a result, fees vary from place to place (Swedish National Board of Health and welfare, 1995:2).

Curriculum, plan or regulations

There have been different definitions on curriculum in different perspectives (e. g. Dewey, 1902/1980; Bobbit, 1918/1972; Jackson, 1968; Goodlad, 1979). According to Popkewits (1997), the important thing is to have a broad definition of curriculum concept, which must be put into its social, historical and political context. Different definitions of curriculum can be seen as parts of pedagogical argumentation that are important to a further conduction.

On 1 July 1996 the Swedish pre-schooling and school-age child-care⁵ was transferred from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education and Science. Since 1 January 1998, the National Agency for Education has acted as the supervisory authority for the preschool as well as for other child-care sectors and at the same time the legislation was transferred from the Social Service Act to the Education Act. A remarkable transformation by this action is that preschool has become a part of and represents the first step for children in the overall education system. Like the Swedish case, China has had a similar process of transferring the pre-schooling from the National Committee of Women and

⁵ School-age care covers the leisure time center, family daycare as well as open leisure time activities.

Children to the Ministry of Education in 1988, which also indicated the transformation from emphasizing the function of care of pre-schooling to seeing pre-schooling as a part of the whole educational system.

The national curriculum “Regulations on Kindergarten Work” was officially issued by Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China in 1996, which was based on the trial version published in 1989. The “Regulations” were the first formally promulgated decree on pre-school education after Mao. Two years later, in 1998, the Swedish national curriculum for preschool was issued by the National Agency for Education, which is legally binding on all preschool. The curriculum aims at creating conditions for an equivalent preschool of high quality in whole nation. It is based on a division of responsibility in which the overall goals and guidelines for preschool are determined on the state level and the responsibility for implementation of policy is on the municipal level.

The Chinese curriculum is called “regulations”. The term “regulation” is a kind of prescripts or rules that has, to a certain degree, a legal function. The Regulations are principle guidelines for the work in preschool, the principles for not only educational or pedagogical work, but also administrative and management work of the preschool. In Chinese context the term “curriculum” means two things. On the one hand it means the knowledge, skills and experience that teachers use in teaching and children use in learning in school in its broadest sense; on the other, it is used to refer to the detailed specification of the subjects taught and learned in school. It is the latter definition that is most frequently used in many contexts, especially in schools, reflecting the tendency of many teachers to adhere closely to the published syllabus documents (Lewin, et al, 1994).

The original title of the Swedish Curriculum is “Läroplan för förskolan”. The word “läroplan” (curriculum) can be divided into two parts: “Lär” and “plan”, together they carry the meaning of “plan för lärande”, which means “plan for learning”. But the term “lärande”, in a broad sense, deals with all educational activities, in which both teaching and learning, both the process and the outcome of education, as well as the socialization and development of a person are implicated (Illeris, 2001). In fact, the Swedish plan is goal directed with a short introduction on the perspectives and values of children’s learning and development. In this way it also a kind of ordinance or regulation like the Chinese one. It is supposed to be used as quality gauge and indicator for state interventions in accordance with the norm (Alvestad & Pramling Samuelsson, 1999).

In this study, I use the term curriculum as a collective and symbolic name of these two national documents. To make the comparative process of text analysis easier, I also use “regulations” and “plan” to represent the respective national curricular of these two countries.

Structure of the curricula

The Chinese national curriculum consists of ten chapters with a total 63 items and totally 14 pages in English⁶. The general principles are stated in the first chapter, where a short description on the goal and tasks of preschool education are presented. The principles for different areas of work in preschool are displayed following the first chapter: enrollment and grouping, hygiene and care, educational activities, buildings and equipment, staff, funds, cooperation between preschool, family and communities, as well as preschool management.

⁶ The English version of “Regulation” is my own translation of the document. See Appendix 3 in Gu, 2001.

The Swedish curriculum consists of two main parts (totally 14 pages in English too)⁷. The foundation values and tasks of the preschool are presented in the first part of the curriculum as an introduction. Following this is description of the goals and guidelines that consists of the following sections: norms and values, development and learning, influence of the child, cooperation between preschool and home, as well as cooperation between the preschool, the preschool class, the school, and the leisure time daycare for school-age.

Basic values

Democracy values are strongly emphasized in the Swedish curriculum document: “Democracy forms the foundation of the pre-school. For this reason all preschool activity should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values” (Swedish National Agency for Education, 1998a, p.3).

Based on the basic values of democracy and the humanistic ideology, the Swedish society has created a social system where the access to welfare, health and medical care, education and social service are a right for all. Out of this sociopolitical perspective, the early childhood education is seen as a meaningful part of the Swedish welfare project. Preschool reflects this spirit of the nation through that it is built on basic values of the society such as solidarity, communication, value of the child, individual freedom and integration, equality and respect for human life and environment. Besides, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child also provides a basis for the national Curriculum.

The democracy assignment in preschool includes three parts: the first is to teach the children basic values of democracy. The democratic values include awareness and consciousness about solidarity, equality between people and equal opportunity, as well as openness, compassion and empathy, respect and responsibility.

An important task of the preschool is to establish and help children acquire the values on which our society is based. The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between the genders as well as solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are all values that the school shall actively promote in its work with children (Swedish National Agency for Education, 1998a, p.3).

The secondary part is that preschool shall operate in a democratic way, that is, both staff and children as well as parents are empowered and encouraged to participate in and influence activities and the learning environment. The third part of the democratic assignment is dealing with the responsibility of preschool to foster democratic citizenships who are able to live and function in a democratic society in the future (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2006).

Working with fundamental values is an endless process that covers all activities in daily life of preschool. For example learning is also connected to the democratic assignment. Both are promoted by the same set of factors. It is thus suggested that a holistic approach to the learning and development of children is a prerequisite to the improvement of democratic assignment (ibid.).

⁷ The English version of the Swedish “Plan” is published in official by Swedish National Agency for Education, 1998.

Care and consideration towards other persons, as well as justice and equality, in addition to the rights of each individual shall be emphasized and made explicit in all pre-school activity. ... Upholding these fundamental values requires that the attitudes from which they are derived are alwarily apprent in dalily activity. The activities of the pre-school should be carried out democratically and thus provide the foundation for a growing responsibility and interest on the part of children to actively participate in society (Swedish National Agency for Education, 1998a, p.3).

The child's influences are viewed as an important principle for working with the democratic values. There is a whole chapter on influence of the child in the Plan, where the terms like needs, interests, ability, willingness, right, opinions, responsibility and participation of the child have been used as the central concepts in formulating the texts. Allowing the child to have an influence on their everyday life in preschool is formulated as a special goal. The parents' influence in the work of preschool has also been emphasized in the curriculum. The central terms in dealing with this issue are co-operation, dialogue, access, and involvement. "The preschool's work with children should thus take place in close and confidential with the home. Parents should have the opportunity within the framework of the national goals to be involved and influence activities in the preschool. A prerequisite for children and parents to have the opportunity of exercising influence is that the preschool is clear about its goals and the contents of its work" (ibid. p. 12-13).

In contrast, there is no direct description on the basic value system for preschool education in the Chinese "Regulations". The word "democracy" has not been mentioned at all in the Chinese curriculum document. However, the concept and idea of democracy is actually not unfamiliar for Chinese. The "Three Principles of the People" i.e. nationalism, democracy and the people's livelihood existed in the beginning of the 20th century. "Three Principles of the People" is a political philosophy developed and put forward by Sun Yat-sen as part of a program to make China a free, prosperous, and powerful nation. This ideology is heavily influenced by Sun's experiences in the United States and contains elements of the American progressive movement.⁸ The principle of democracy has also been the basis for the ideologies of the Communist Party of China since Mao, but it is interpreted in Marxist and Communist terms, which is expressed in a dialectical way as democratic centralism and democracy under centralized guidance. In fact, the democracy values are regarded as a fundamental value of the society.

However, if we look closely into the texts in the curriculum, we can see that there are some statements related to the issue of democracy values. For example, they added "respecting and loving infants" to item 25 of the old trail vision of the regulations, and moved it from the section "Education in Kindergarten" to "General Principles".⁹ This move indicates the special consideration to a correct attitude towards the status of children and the relationship between teacher and children. Both in the curriculum and *Guidelines for kindergarten educational practice* (Ministry of Education of P.R.C, 2001) the concept of "children's right" are highlighted. Respecting children means respecting children's

⁸ Dewey's influence became even greater when he visited China over the period of 1919-1921. For more than two years, Dewey travelled extensively in China and lectured on social and political philosophy, philosophy of education, ethics, and the main trends of modern education. See Keenan, B., *The Dewey Experiment in China: Educational Reform and Political Power in the Early Republic*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977.

⁹ See Appendix 2 and 3 in Gu, 2001.

independent personality and dignity, respecting every child's right to learn and develop, and respecting the age-related characteristics and individual learning needs and abilities of each child (Liu & Feng, 2005).

“Having esteem for teachers and respect for elders” has been a consistent virtue of the Chinese nation. It is undoubtedly one of the positive components of Chinese traditional culture. It reflected a mentality of great reverence for intelligence and knowledge because, traditionally, teachers and elders are the symbol of intelligence and knowledge. However, this notion has also its negative aspect, which is complete submission and blind compliance of the children to the teachers and elders. According to the Chinese traditional view on the child, children were not born knowing how to behave correctly and it is unlikely that they will recognize correct behaviour through unsupervised play with peers or through a process of “self-discovery” or “self-actualisation” (Tobin et al, 1980; Vayghan, 1993). They need the guide and supervise of adult – parents and teacher; and they are not able to take the responsibility for their actions and for the society. Absence of the term “responsibility” in the curriculum is evidence. Adults thus are expected to play a central role in their development and socialization. Furthermore, the educational system of China has been greatly influenced by the Soviet model since the Liberation. In Soviet pedagogy, it was held that educational process was directly determined by the educator's actions, and teachers thus should take a central position in educational process to explain, demonstrate and impart knowledge to the children in a planned way. In these cultural and ideological contexts, a teacher-centered model of teaching in Chinese preschool education has been stressed and maintained.

The “Regulations”, however, has shifted the ideology from respecting teacher to respecting child that indicates, to a certain degree, an acceptance of democratic values to against autocracy. Furthermore, the child's initiative and active participation in activities, as well as the emphasis on the importance of the child's “free play” are given expression in the “regulations”, but still, this kind of freedom has to be under the selection and guidance of the teacher, which reflects the Chinese dialectical interpretation of the term of democracy.

Teachers shall respect children's desire to choose form of play and encourage them to produce their own toys. Teachers shall provide proper guidance for children in their play and keep them joyful, thus promoting an overall development of children's ability and personality (Ministry of Education of P.R.C., 1996, p.3.)

Cooperation between preschool and families are also encouraged by the “Regulations”, where the preschool are supposed to take the responsibility in guiding the family in fostering and educating their children. In Chins, the preschool is not regarded as a complement to family in child-raring and development but bering the main responsibility in child development for the society.

Kindergarten shall cooperate with infants' families on their own initiative, help parents create good conditions for family education, propagate the knowledge of care and education, and undertake to educate infants jointly... Kindergarten shall adopt multiple measures in guiding the parents to accurately understand the educational content and methods of kindergarten, regularly call the meetings with the parents, and receive parents' visit and consultation. Kindergarten should seriously analyse and incorporate parents' suggestions on kindergarten educational and administrative work...Kindergarten can establish the parental committee. The major tasks of the parental committee are to: help parents understand the plans and requirements of

kindergarten work; help staff know the parents' opinions and suggestions; and assert kindergarten in organizing the meetings to exchange experiences about family education. The parental committee shall work under the direction of the director (ibid. p.9).

Some studies also show some changes in the relationship between preschool and the family recently. As fees paid by parents cover a larger part of the funds of preschool, as the preschool is no longer only owned by the state, the parents' now have more say to preschool, which means that the involvement and influence of parents have been increased through this economic action. While under the old welfare system the parents only played a role as consumers, the new system claims that they also play a role as investors and shareholders in education (Gu, 2001).

Childcare and child development

The Chinese curriculum emphasizes on a harmonious and all-round development of the child, and "physical, intellectual, moral and aesthetic education should integrate and be organically combined with each other" (Ministry of Education of P.R.C., 1996, p. 5). In the chapter "General Principles" of the Chinese regulations, it states:

The major goals of care and education in kindergarten are to: Improve the physically and functionally harmonious development of infants; build up their health; cultivate their habits of hygiene and their interest in participating in physical activities. Strengthen infants' fundamental abilities of associating with others by means of their sense organs and language; enhance their understanding of the environment; cultivate their interests and their capacity of working with their hands; and develop their intelligence. (*ibid. p. 2*)

Hygiene and health care is an important part of the work of preschool. The regulations provide the detailed descriptions on the tasks of preschool dealing with care, and care is separated from the tasks of education:

- *Kindergarten shall arrange a health check-up system for children and set up health files. The general check-up shall be made once a year. Children's height shall be measured twice a year, and their weight and eyesight shall be checked four times a year. Kindergarten shall pay attention to infants' oral hygiene and their eyesight.*
- *Kindergarten shall institute the systems of hygiene disinfection and sick child isolation, and carry out planned immunisation and the prevention and treatment of diseases. Smoking is strictly forbidden in the areas for children's activities.*
- *Kindergarten shall institute the systems of protecting and checking up the safety of houses, installations, fire-fighting equipment, traffic and the supervision of food and medicines. Kindergarten shall intensify its education regarding safety for children.*
- *Kindergarten shall provide proper meals for children. Conditions permitting, kindergarten shall compose recipes for nutritious meals.*
- *Kindergarten shall provide children with drinking facilities. Kindergarten shall cultivate good defecation and urination habits. Kindergartens are strictly forbidden to restrict the number of times and points of time for children's defecation and urination. (ibid. 1996, p. 3-4)*

As mentioned earlier, the authority of preschool transferred from the National Committee of Women and Children to the Ministry of Education in 1988. Child-care had been a major task of the work of preschool during the period of it was under the authority of the Committee of Women and Children. At that time, kindergarten was not regarded as the first stage of the educational system but an institution belonged to the social welfare system. The living standard was relative lower and material conditions were quite poor in many areas of China at that time. The quality of living condition of the child in preschool, including the condition of hygiene, was one of the central concerns of the government and the society. Furthermore, as a result of the single-child policy since the end of 1970s, the safety and health of the child have been of great importance for each family with single-child, so as for preschools. Moreover, the Chinese traditional view on child and on child development was relative passive. The child was regarded as quite weak, independent, incapable and not able to defend himself, therefore they needed more careful physical care and material support at their early ages.

Childcare has not been giving much expression in the Swedish curriculum. The only statement dealing with this issue in the document is the claim for a balanced time schedule for live and activities and the environment in preschool (Swedish National Agency for Education, 1998). This does not mean that childcare is not viewed as important in the Swedish preschool. In contrast, care is seen as presumption for learning and development, and the process of care and education are integrated in the preschool work (Alvestad & Pramling Samuelsson, 1999). Comparing to other countries Sweden has kept a higher living standard for a long time. The welfare system of the Swedish society has minimized the social and economical diversity. As a result of the state financial support and the tax revenue, the quality standard in preschool is generally higher and the difference between preschools is not so great. In addition to the tradition of childcare and the routine in preschool, the issue of care may not be seen as necessary to be given specific expression and explanation in the document. Furthermore, in the field of preschool, combining care, nursing with education has become an international tendency where the term “educare” is used to give prominence to the quality issue in preschool (SOU, 1997:157 refers to Kamerman, 1989).

As a tradition, the moral or ethical aspect of development has always been the spirit of Chinese society and education. In Confucius tradition, the moral characteristics of a person were the center of human nature. The good human nature includes kindness, charity, mutual respect, dignity, devotion, self-responsibility, and so on, and these had to be cultivated, which has to be through the education process. Thus moral education has been always a major task in schools, although the methodology and the content have changed over time, which was largely impacted on by social and cultural transformation. According to the curriculum, the content of moral education in preschool should be: *“Arouse children’s love of their hometowns, motherland, collectives and manual labour; cultivate their moral character, behaviour, honesty, courage, diligence, friendliness, politeness and discipline; and cultivate their bright and cheerful dispositions. Arouse children’s temperaments and interests in feelings and expressing beauty”* (Ministry of Education of P.R.C., 1996, p.2). The curriculum also claims that moral education should stress the emotional development of the child, and the cultivation of the child’s behaviour and lay stress on the imperceptible influences. Moral education should be carried out in children’s daily life and activities.

The notions of child and child development have been rediscovered in the 1980s and the 1990s. On the one hand, traditional Chinese patterns and ideas of child rearing and education

among contemporary Chinese remain discernible. On the other hand, new child-rearing and education attitudes and practices have emerged due to the single-child policy and other social changes, including the Western influence (Ho & Kang, 1984). Piaget is one of the greatest figures among these Western influences. Piaget's theory of development is not unfamiliar to many Chinese kindergarten teachers. It has been introduced in teacher training programs, and has appeared in textbooks of the psychology of child development. As a result, the child's age characteristics are seen as the starting point for teaching and learning. At the same time, children's individual differences, potentials and personalities are also stressed. As it is stated in the curriculum:

“Kindergarten education shall act in accordance with the laws of children's growth of body and mind and conform to the characteristics of their age. Educators shall pay attention to children's individual differences, teach them in accordance with their aptitude, and stress the development of their personalities, thus promoting the healthy development of children's individuality. Educators shall be geared to the needs of whole children, love them, and educate them by means of encouragement and enlightenment.” (Ministry of Education of P.R.C., 1996, p. 5)

The Swedish view on child and child development is more comprehensive. The child is seen as having the potential and being capable to learn. The basic view on child in the curriculum has partly inspired by philosophical and pedagogic ideas from Reggio Emilia in North Italy, where every child is seen as rich and unique, and every child has its own way to be, to think, to learn and to development (Jonstoj, 2000).

The preschool should be characterized by a pedagogical approach, where care, nurturing and learning together form a coherent whole... Activities should contribute to children development an understanding of themselves and their surrounding world. A sense of exploration, curiosity and desire to learn should form the foundation for pedagogical activities. These should be based on the child's experiences, interests, needs and views (Swedish National Agency for Education, 1998. p. 9).

The Swedish curriculum emphasizes on the tasks to develop the entire child. The child is seen first as a human being who has the basic human right as adults have, and the child has the characteristics of having the global sense, and of understanding, believing and acting on the democratic principles. “The preschool should give children support to develop a positive picture of themselves as learning and creative individuals. They should be supported in developing confidence in their own ability to think for themselves, to act, to move and to learn i.e. to develop from different perspectives such as the intellectual, linguistic, ethical, practical, sensory and aesthetic” (ibid. p. 6). Values, knowledge, activities, play, learning and ability are those central concepts related to the notion of child development. It is believed that the child is the product in the future of the society. And most important, learning and development could not be separated (Doverborg, Pramling & Qvarsell, 1987). The child is the subject of learning and development, not the object, who is active in his/her learning and development, and he/she influences the environment of learning through the interaction with the environment.

The emphasis on learning in the Swedish curriculum can also be expressed by officially changing name of early childhood institution from “daghem” (daycare) to “förskola” (preschool). This change marks the transformation of perspectives from stressing the tasks of care to the tasks of learning and development. The preschool is an educational

institution for children, not a kind of service organization for parents who need child minding. However, learning is not the only mission, caring and fostering are also important tasks of the preschool. It is stated in the first rows under the title “The tasks of the preschool” in the curriculum: “The preschool should lay the foundations for lifelong learning. The preschool should be enjoyable, secure, and rich in learning for all children. The preschool should provide children with good pedagogical activities, where care, nurturing and learning together from a coherent whole” (Swedish National Agency for Education, 1998a, p.4).

Knowledge and learning

In Sweden, the change in society and the increased knowledge about the child has led to a new understanding on learning. The traditional view on child development that is predestinated and followed the biological and psychological stages have been replaced by notions of the competent child and the constant learning of the child. This new view on child leads to a tendency in preschool to create all opportunities and conditions for stimulating the child’s learning instead of waiting for the maturity of the child who is ready to learn. The pedagogical idea supports to this is that the child’s own experiences is crucial for learning, but not the age or the level of maturity of the child. The traditional theories on development like Piaget’s maturity stages have been questioned. Instead, Vygotskij’s idea on social interaction as the core of development has been more welcomed and accepted. The pedagogy built on the theories of interaction and mutuality focuses on the balance between the child’s own interest and the creation of a structure. The child’s experience is the source to knowledge formation, and knowledge formation is seen as an internal relation between the child and the world around him/her. Knowledge becomes both subject and object at the same time because the outside world cannot be distinguished from the child’s earlier experiences. At this point, the two notions of learning and development have become two aspects of the same phenomenon.

Knowledge is a complex concept, which can be expressed in a variety of forms – as facts, understanding, skills, familiarity and experience – all of which presuppose and interact with each other. The starting point for the preschool is the experience children have already gained, their interests, motivation and compulsion to acquire knowledge. Children search for knowledge and develop it through play, social interaction, exploration and creativity, as well as through observation, discussion and reflection. A theme-oriented approach to work can broaden and enrich the child’s learning (Swedish National Agency for Education, 1998a, p.6).

Moreover, the Swedish curriculum regards play and learning as integrated in the same process. Play is seen as an important dimension in children’s learning. It is believed that in play, children develop their communicative and social competence. “Conscious use of play to promote the development and learning of each individual child should be an omnipresent activity in the preschool. Play and enjoyment in learning in all its various forms stimulates the imagination, insight, communication and the ability to think symbolically as well as the ability to co-operate and solve problems. Through creative and imaginary games, the child will get opportunities to express and work through their experiences and feelings” (ibid. p. 6). In brief, there is no distinction between formal and informal learning in the Swedish curriculum. All activities in the child’s live, planed or unplanned, and all experiences the child has are related to its learning. Furthermore, reading, writing and mathematics learning that were not officially included in the preschool work in its history have been given special expression and stress in the new curriculum. These kinds of knowledge and skills are argued as the basis for livelong learning.

Like its Swedish counterpart, the important role of play in children's learning and development has been clarified in the Chinese "Regulations", though children's free play is still absent from consideration.

Play is an important way to carry out all-round development education. Children's play shall be selected and guided in accordance with the age characteristics of the children. Kindergarten shall create favourable playing conditions (time, space and materials) for the children. The functional multiplicity and variability of playthings shall be emphasized (*Ministry of Education of P.R.C. 1996, p.6*).

Traditionally, children's play and games were usually not regarded as a proper way of constructing their knowledge, or their learning abilities and habits. Play was seen as being conflict with learning, and thus as time wasting. There is an old saying in China: "Riding a hobby saps one's will to make progress (玩物丧志)." If a person spends a lot of time in his hobby or play, he will have less time to learn or to "read books". When Chinese parents pick up their children from kindergarten, they like to ask them what they have learnt or what the teacher has taught today, but seldom ask them what they have done in play and games. The function of play, by Chinese people, was to relax one's mind and body and to enliven one's life, it was thought of in terms of the needs and instinct of the children. However, belief in play as a key mode of early childhood learning has been accepted in preschool field since the past decades due to the introduction of Piaget's development theory, and others such as Dewey's "learning by doing", where play is regarded as a proper approach for learning of the children in their early ages. But, it is also believed that there are different kinds of play, only those plays being well planned and prepared and carefully organized by the teachers has the pedagogical or educational meanings and functions. The concept of learning as a self-initiated and self-regulated process has not yet been a feature of understanding learning. Children's free play and games, organized by themselves, have not been regarded as being an important part of kindergarten educational activities.

As I have mentioned earlier, the concept of curriculum has its special meaning by Chinese. Thus knowledge and skills, or more exactly to speak, the subjects taught in school have been regarded as the core of curriculum. It is thus in this context that in educational practice, Chinese educators generally give special consideration to what knowledge should be taught, and how to teach this knowledge. Common people like to use "to read books" (读书) for "to go to school" (上学), the underlying meaning of this is that school is the only place to systematically pass on knowledge and skills, and only book learning is the most valuable educational resource. Stressing comprehension and the subjects taught in school, that is to say the formal learning, has been an outstanding character of China's education, and kindergarten education was no exception. It was common before the 1990s that to take lessons (classroom instructions) on different subjects separately in organizing the preschool activities in most kindergartens. A significant transformation has been made, by the curriculum, is that the use of the term "educational activities" instead of "lessons".

By "educational activities", it means that young children not only learn during group lessons directed by the teachers but also learn in other situations during their daily life. The curriculum claims explicitly that kindergarten educational activities are educational processes in multiple forms, which are consciously planned to facilitate young children's active learning. "Educational activities shall be organized so as to make full use of the favourable conditions of the surroundings. Kindergarten shall provide opportunities for children to act by

means of flexible participation in collective and individual activities. The stress shall be on the processes of children's activities, thus promoting children's all-round development" (ibid. p. 5). Since the promulgation of the "Regulations" in 1996, the term has gradually become the common official language by teachers in their teaching plan, reports, and even daily talking, instead of the old notion of "lesson" or "lecturing". In practice, the theme-oriented model and the activity-oriented model, which are opposite to the subject-based and instruction-based teaching and learning, have been implemented in most preschools in the country (Gu, 2001).

Teacher's work and profession

For both countries to be a preschool teacher is a profession. Staff in Swedish preschools are well trained. Virtually all have some forms of training for working with children. There are four categories of staff – preschool teachers, recreational instructors, daycare attendants and child minders. Preschool teachers and recreation instructors have three to four years' training program at university level. As a rule, daycare attendants have vocational training at up-secondary level, while child minders have often attended courses organized by the local authorities. According to the statistics, there are more than half of all preschool employees that have a university degree in early childhood education (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2006).

In the Swedish curriculum document, the teachers' work is described as team work. In each section under "Goals and guidelines" there are descriptions and demands on what the work teams in preschool should and how do. In Swedish preschool it is a tradition that children are placed in different sections with 15-25 children in each section. Teachers who work in the section are supposed to be a work team who are all responsible for all practical work and activities in the preschool, as well as planning, documentations, parents' contact, and evaluations within the section. But the term "work team" in the curriculum document does not only mean the teacher team in a section, but the team in a broad sense. It could be meant all staff in a preschool, or even it is just a collective term for preschool teacher. The underline meaning is that a collective responsibility of the teachers for children's learning and development in the preschool is crucial. Furthermore, as the curriculum is a goal directed policy, it is believed that a collective and common understanding and interpretation of the policies is a presumption for the implementation of the curriculum. Theoretically there is no hierarchy in the staff structure according to the curriculum, but in the reality, the distinctions of wages between different categories of staff are quite big.

The curriculum gives prominence to the significance of that the preschool should develop methods for evaluating own activities and suggests that the pedagogical documentation should be one of the methods. Actually, pedagogical documentation is used quite commonly in Swedish preschools (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2004). It is argued that the pedagogical documentation by the teachers is an effective and practical instrument to bring the collective work and the process of children's development and learning into light (Jonstoj, 2000). The evaluation of preschool's pedagogical work is also related to the recent debate on the quality of preschool (see e.g. Sheridan, 2001; Kärrby, 2000; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2003, 2004).

There are two categories of staff in Chinese preschool – preschool teachers and teacher assistants. Qualifications of teachers are graduates of preschool teacher training school at up secondary level, graduates of secondary and tertiary teacher training institutions specializing in preschool education. Graduates of general upper secondary schools are usually regarded as

qualified too. But there are part of kindergarten teachers lacking the formal qualifications required but have passed qualifying tests enabling them to assume their current posts. The teacher assistants should be graduated from, “at least, lower secondary school...(or) have vocational training in infant nursing” (Ministry of Education of P.R.C. p. 9). Their work is generally to take care of the daily life of children in preschool under the supervision of the teachers, as well as cooperate with the teachers in organizing the educational activities. The State promulgated “Education Law” and “Teacher Law” in 1995, in which to higher the social status of teachers and to adopt a qualification based teacher employment are put emphasis.

In the curriculum, there is a whole chapter dealing with the work of preschool staff. Loving children, their professional knowledge and pedagogical skills as well as their sound moral character are of importance for being a teacher in preschool, according to the curriculum. The major duties of the teacher are to:

- *Observe and analyze the children, set up educational work plans and organize the implementation work in accordance with both the kindergarten educational program stipulated by the state and the character and individual differences of the children.*
- *Obey the regulations of safety, hygiene and health care, guide and cooperate with the assistants.*
- *Be in regular contact with the parents in order to understand the children’s home conditions; discuss educational measures with the parents.*
- *Take part in vocational studies and educational research activities.*
- *Regularly report back to the principal; subject to the principal’s check-up and guidance (ibid. p.8-9).*

Here, it is talking about the individual teachers and their responsibility for children, parents, principal and their own professional development, but not teachers as a work team like stated in Swedish curriculum. Here we also see the hierarchy structure within the staff. As mentioned earlier, it has been a tradition that children in kindergarten are generally grouped by age. Typically, each group has two teachers and an assistant. One teacher works with the children half-day and spends the other half-day planning and preparing teaching aids. These teachers may alternate, teaching mornings one week and afternoons the next. The teacher assistant works with the children throughout the day. Cooperation between these two teachers may be the fact, they usually working out the plan for educational activities and the materials for children’s learning together, and discuss about the issue concerning the children in the group. There are also collective activities for teachers in the same preschool or for all preschool teachers in the whole district or municipality, where they have the opportunities to exchange their experiences, discuss the pedagogical issues and study the policy documents on education. However, the evaluation of teachers’ work is often made at individual level. The teachers evaluate themselves and give marks to themselves according to the evaluation form. This result combined with the inspection of the principal will influence the salary of the teachers (Gu, 2001).

Administration and management

In the Swedish plan there is not much detailed regulations for the administrative work in preschool. As an addition to the curriculum, the Swedish Agency for Education published a series of documents in which the administration and management work in preschool have been

defined, evaluated, and recommended (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2003, 2004, 2005). These official documents or inspectional reports have focused on the quality and equivalence in Swedish preschools.

In the Chinese curriculum, the items considering the preschool's administration and arrangement consist of four chapters: Enrolment and grouping of children, Kindergarten buildings and equipment, Kindergarten funds, and Kindergarten management. These detailed regulations were viewed as necessary at the mid-1990s' China. In 1993, The State Council issued "The National Program for Educational Reform and Development", which is regarded as the first official policy document concerning structural reform of the educational system. Although the program did not include the special field of preschool education, its principles and strategies for primary, secondary, and higher education reform have been adopted to guide the structural reform of preschool education. Strategies for structural reform of education are, according to the program, separating managerial authority from ownership in public schools, and encouraging local people and private investment to run educational institutions at different levels. Since the middle of the 1990s, local governments and educational authorities have focused on the reform of the ownership of the preschool, and encouraging private and other social resources to run preschool institutions. Because of the uneven development between rural and urban, and between different regions and areas, the quality of preschool had thus become an important issue at that time. The "Regulation" was thus supposed to function as a legal policy to restrain and control the quality of each preschool, especially those non-state owned.

Summary and discussion

For both countries the introduction of the national curricula is an important milestone for the development of early childhood education that preschool's incorporation into the education system. The importance of early childhood education for child development is also highlighted. Both curricula are the products of the decentralization politics of the nations started in the end of the 1980s, where division of power as well as division of responsibility have been the outcome. The role of the state is to formulate the national goals and guidelines for preschool at an overall level; the municipality takes the responsibility of providing preconditions for the implementation of curriculum; while the professionals i.e. principals and staff in preschool are responsible for interpreting and applying the goals stated in the curriculum. The curricula are also normative policy instruments. The overall goal descriptions are contained in order to strengthen scope for professionals at local level so that they will actively participate in the process of transforming the goals and making them more concrete and useful.

There are both similarities and differences between these two curricula. Both documents provide more or less approaches or perspectives on learning, values and tasks. There are no statements and descriptions on methodological considerations into educational settings, that is to say, they are not like a traditional curriculum where goals, content, methods (organization and working methods), and evaluation are formulated (Jackson, 1992). They are goal steering policy documents, which leave much space for local and individual interpretations and implementations. Implementation is a part of the process of policy action, which depends on and reflects the local and individual understandings, values and interests. Implementation is also a process of evaluation, which calls for knowledge, initiatives, competence and responsibility of the local and individual professionals (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2004; Alvestad & Pramling Samuelsson, 1999; Gu, 2001).

As official policy documents, both curricula were immediately and widely disseminated throughout the countries. In China, kindergarten educators were asked to “study”, to “understand” and to “carry out” its “spirit”. The terms like “educational activities” and “respecting children” have gradually become the “official language” used in different contexts. Theme-oriented and activity-oriented models are implemented in many kindergartens over the country (Liu & Feng, 2005; Gu, 2001). It is argued that this change has also made the popularization of modern educational ideas among practitioners (Zhu, 2003, Liu, et al., 2004). In Sweden, the curriculum has been given “a positive reception” by the preschool staff. It has provided a kind of confirmation of the preschool’s ways of working, raised the preschool’s status in society, as well as provided support to staff in their pedagogical work. And even the municipalities have got amount of resources allocated by the state in improving the implementation of curriculum (Swedish Agency for Education, 2004).

The social-political function of preschool is emphasized in both the curricula. The important policy goal is preschool for all children that provides an equivalent opportunities for different groups in society. The fact is, the rate of population of children enrolled in Swedish preschool is already higher; while in China, per-school education has been generally universalized in big and middle-sized cities, but very lower enrollment rate in rural and the remote areas. The target for Chinese government is that the gross enrollment rate of kindergartens for children of 3-5 ages will reach at least 45% in the whole nation by 2010 (Ministry of Education of P.R.C., 2006). The curricula are also ordinance with binding provisions for whole countries. The aim is to create conditions for increasing equivalence.

The curricula have different focuses in the statements on goals and tasks, which reflect the different political and societal interests as well as the different traditional philosophical values that are deeply rooted in their cultures. According to the Chinese “Regulations”, the national principle of educational development should turn in the directions of modernization, the future, and the world. In the section on educational activities, this document identified the ideological principle, aims, and requirements for preschool activities, and it also called for early childhood educators to change their views on preschool education and child development. Moreover, the “Regulation” gives also emphasis to the importance of children’s initiative and participation in educational process, and the importance of the function of children’s play, games and activities in the learning process are also stressed. The term “educational activities” is used frequently in texts.

The Swedish “Plan” focuses on developing children’s understanding and accepting and acting with the fundamental values of society. Knowledge and learning of the children are also emphasized. It explicitly states what children should learn in preschool and what is the responsibility of preschool to give children the opportunities to develop in the desired directions. Activities and play should stimulate creativity and a joyful learning experience of children. Activities should help children develop new skills and enhance their existing capabilities. Diversity in ideas and in experiences should also be explored (Swedish National Agency for Education, 1998b). According to the curriculum, the child is competent and is constantly seeking to improve its understanding of life around it. The task of preschool is to make the most of this thirst for knowledge and lay the foundations for a lifelong learning process. Preschools should be fun, secure and instructive for all children who attend them. The Swedish preschool model is based on the premise that children learn and develop in all the contexts in which they are involved, but not some kinds of specifically selected situations. “This has consequences on how pre-schooling should be organized and means that care and

pedagogy are to be interwoven in daily activities” (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2004). This model has also been highly praised as “outstanding” by OECD (OECD, 2001).

Unlike the Swedish plan, the Chinese regulations give much emphasis on fund raising, fees and management of preschool. This is because of the system of principal responsibility where preschools get much less financial support from the State or municipalities and they are supposed to raise funds by themselves in different ways, in which the fees including supporting fees¹⁰ charged from parents cover a larger part of the preschool funding. It is one of the results of the market economic reform in educational area, where preschool has transferred from a welfare model into a market competition model. It is thus needed to have a national “standard” on the administrative work to make control of the quality of preschool. But at the same time, there could also be a danger that, as the growing interest in buffering their kindergartens against the decline in state and enterprises’ support, the principals would deflect their attention away from the issues of pedagogy towards fund raising (Gu, 2001).

Recently, the issue of quality of preschool has also become a hot topic in Sweden. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the establishment of private preschools is permitted by the Swedish government. The economic crisis during the 1990s also led to that the municipalities were forced to reduce financial support to the preschools in terms of saving money. One of the consequences was that there are more children and less teachers in each children groups than before. Furthermore, a greater variation in conditions of preschool has been followed by both privatization and the economic crisis. It claims therefore a careful control on the quality of preschools with the aim of creating equivalence. As Kärby (2000) argued, even if the concept quality could be understood in many different ways, there are some basic elements that should be set on a public institution like preschool where they often do not give parents much possibility of choice. It is just in this respect that the quality issue has become the focus of different groups of the society.

Democracy values are given special stress in the Swedish curriculum as a foundation for preschool work in which children’s influence on preschool practice has been the focus. It is stated that children have the right to express their own views and participate in all matters concerning to them, and to influence both their own learning process as well as the overall environment and work in preschool. The voice of children should also be an aspect of evaluating the quality of early childhood education (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). Internationally, there has been a strong sense of the term “participatory democracy” (Wood, 1988) that emphasizes the importance of the engagement of all individuals, not just a privileged few. “A curriculum for participatory democracy would not only promote the fundamental values of equality, liberty, and community but also provide opportunities for students to experience decision making about what is taught and learned, to make rules for their collective association, as well as to learn the basic skills required to participate in public debate” (Kessler, 1991).

In the Chinese curriculum, the emphasis is placed on the concept of “respecting children”, which means to respect their right to learn and to develop, as well as their individual personalities and needs. The concept of “respecting children” became an important subject of

¹⁰ “Supporting fees (赞助费)” or “fees for collecting funds (集资费)” from the parents are, in principle, supposed to be used in the construction work of kindergarten, that is to build, maintain or repair kindergarten houses. There is no official position on the legitimacy of such extra fees, nor a general standard for the amount of fees. The “Regulations” have not expressly provided relevant clauses concerning “supporting fees” which leaves a room for local variation. The number of supporting fees differs greatly from kindergarten to kindergarten, and even from family to family. See Gu, 2001.

discussion when the first White Paper on human rights was issued by the Information Office of China's State Council on 1 November 1991. This paper was a symbol of the political breakthrough in ideology (Guo & Tao, 1999). The first national-level seminar aimed at implementing the "Convention on the Rights of the Child" by UN was held in Beijing in 1996 that also symbolized the legal introduction of the concept of children's right into the field of education (Feng, 1996; Li, 1996). The promulgation of the national curriculum for preschool has played a crucial roll in bringing this new ideology into the practice of preschool. Focusing on the concept of "respecting children" has also the potential for arguments in support of a child-centered pedagogy, and this will undoubtedly lead to a more democratic education in the future.

We live in a global age. It seems that many aspects in the field of education have become common issues in all countries. We are facing many similar problems and we are trying to solve these problems in similar (or different) ways. The development of curriculum might be an example of this tendency. According to Gunden (1997) there has been a balance or compensation in the development of curriculum between different countries. Countries that had a centralized curriculum administration have become more decentralized (e.g. Norway, Sweden, Finland, this is also the case of China), and countries that had a decentralized curriculum tradition have adopted a more centralized national curriculum (e.g. England and the US). The international trend within the development of curriculum also shows that there has been an increased and strained responsibility for the development of education activities, management and evaluation at both national, regional and local levels. Educational goals, tasks, and contents have become more central in the curriculum than before, and curriculum has become more important for all types of education from preschool to higher education. The introduction of national curricula for preschool in Sweden and in China is an example. The development of curriculum has also been strongly related to the individual teachers' professional development where their curriculum theoretical and didactical competence is considered as an expression for teachers' professionalism.

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