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The Study Abroad Research Context

Sweden's distinctively social-democratic government encompasses an extensive and world-renowned network of social welfare benefits, including comprehensive family policy and universal child-care services. Cornell Abroad's semester-long Swedish Practicum in Childhood, Family, and Social Policy provides an opportunity to gain an advanced and inclusive understanding of this system, and the links which bind family policy to early childhood pedagogy in the context of Scandinavian culture.

The foundation of the program is a ten-week, individualized field experience, where each student acts as a participant-observer at a Swedish child-care facility, actively engaging with young children, their families and teachers. Their learning is supported by an initial two weeks of orientation and intensive Swedish language training concentrating on the functional vocabulary needed in a child care setting, and by close mentoring by a field site supervisor . Visits to other field sites, and interviews with policy makers, child development experts, and educational administrators during the semester help students conduct a multi-dimensional analysis. The student's experience is rounded out by two weekly seminars led by experts at Göteborg Universitet. The *Pedagogy and Policy* seminar gives students insight into theories of Swedish preschool education, connected with components of Swedish family policy. *The Reflecting on Practice* seminar gives students a communal opportunity to discuss experiences and observations from their field placements. Weekly journal entries, participation in seminars, and a practicum thesis, provide the basis for evaluation of participants' work. The practicum thesis compares pedagogy and policy in Sweden and the United States. Most participants use ethnographic models, based on observations and insights from their field placement as the basis of their research.

Conducting an ethnographic study in the natural setting of the Swedish preschool was central to my acquisition of a genuine

understanding of Swedish early education. Through my research, I developed close relationships with the Swedish parents, children, and teachers with whom I worked and observed daily. These interactions gave me an insider's view of Swedish society, and were essential in facilitating my understanding of the embedded value system behind the practice of Swedish early educators and their employment of portfolios. Furthermore, working directly in the preschool exposed me to the web of interdependence between including teachers, children, and parents, and helped me uncover how national policies and local educational guidelines manifest within a specific setting, revealing to me the strong link between policy and practice in the Swedish context. Consequently, this research-based immersion provided me with a comprehensive understanding of Swedish culture and became the crux of my cross-cultural learning and eye-opening abroad experience.

Documenting Development and Pedagogy in the Swedish Preschool: The Portfolio as a Vehicle for Reflection, Learning, and Democracy

Democracy and the Need for Documentation

In Sweden, governmental decision-making is based on a social-democratic ideology and a system of representative democracy. In citizens' meetings, the democratic values and norms, that are both a requirement and goal, at are formed (Ministry of Justice in Sweden, 2002). This concept of democracy, and the value system behind it, permeates Swedish culture, and its institutions and policies. It plays an especially significant role in Swedish early childhood education and care (ECEC), a system that is part of a comprehensive network of family policies and services. The importance of democracy in Swedish ECEC is evident in its National Curriculum for the Preschool, which states:

> Democracy forms the foundation of the pre-school. For this reason all preschool activities should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values. Each and everyone working in the pre-school should promote respect for the intrinsic value of each person as well as respect for our shared environment. (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 2001, p. 7)

It is considered paramount that democracy is upheld in the child-care setting, so that children acquire these values on which the Swedish society is so fundamentally based. Thus, it is essential that pedagogues in the preschool find democratic methods to work with young children, as well as parents, co-workers, and all those involved in childcare and educational services. Documentation brings democracy into the pedagogical activities and decision making of the preschool by offering a means for those within, along with those outside the preschool, to observe and reflect on its activities and development.

Swedish education officials have recognized the importance of concretely demonstrating the learning within the preschool, and now often require their centers of ECEC to engage in documentation. For example, the Skolplan from the Göteborg municipality of Sweden (2001) maintains that pedagogues,

alongside children, must conduct continual documentation of the learning that occurs in the preschool, since collected material gives the possibility to reflect and illustrate progress together with parents.

In Swedish ECEC, the individualized portfolio method has become an increasingly popular way to record learning. A portfolio is a profile of a child's work and interests is built up gradually with representative components of a child's educational experience. These may include pictures of the child engaged in activities, his or her words as they discuss what they are doing, feeling, and thinking, and the child's interpretation of experience through the visual or auditory media (Helm, Beneke, & Steinheimer, 1998). Through collecting children's work, portfolios illustrate the pedagogical activities in the classroom, and allow the student, teacher, and parent, and the community at large, to reflect on the practice and progress of the preschool. This concrete display of work gives outside stakeholders and community members a clearer understanding of the everyday methods and pedagogy in the early childhood facilities. In addition, it supplies the child with a clear voice and influence on what is illustrated, and the teacher with material for reflection. By giving multiple parties access to the learning within preschools, portfolios inform diverse constituents, essential for constructive dialogue on educational quality and reform. As a result, this documentation can serve as a democratic channel to evaluate learning in early childhood centers.

Portfolio Use in Sweden: Origins and Influences

The development of portfolios in Sweden has been influenced by the world-renowned approach to education pioneered in the northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia, internationally recognized for its innovative, publicly-funded network of full-day infant-toddler centers and schools for young children. The founder of the Reggio Emilia theory of ECE, Loris Malaguzzi (1993), was inspired by the work of Vygotsky, Erikson, Piaget, Bronfenbrenner, Montessori, and Dewey.

The ideology of Reggio Emilia holds a social constructionist perspective. "Social constructionism encompasses a range of approaches in psychology which share the view that our knowledge about ourselves is culturally bounded and that different cultural (and subcultural) systems entail different psychologies" (Parker & Burman, 1993, p.160). The concept of social constructionism maintains that "knowledge is not what individuals believe, but rather what social groups, or knowledge communities believe" (Warmoth, 2001), and therefore, people's ideas are in the end given meaning by their

social context. This modern understanding of development implies that bodies of knowledge can no longer claim to be value free or scientifically neutral, and consequently has significant implications for the practice of educating, including a new understanding of the roles of both teachers and learners.

The philosophy of Reggio Emilia centers on the belief in children's potential for learning, exploring, and entering into relationships with peers, teachers, the environment, and the community:

> Our image of children no longer considers them as isolated and egocentric, does not see them only engaged in actions with objects, does not emphasize only the cognitive aspects, does not belittle feelings or what is not logical and does not consider with ambiguity the role of the affective domain. Instead our image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and most of all connected to adults and other children. (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 10)

Educators are viewed as researchers and partners with children in the learning process, as the children make hypotheses, explore their environment, and discover connections and meanings.

In addition, the Reggio Emilia philosophy states that children "have many, many languages for expressing and communicating" (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993) what they discover. For this reason, the Reggio Emilia approach to education is committed to the creation of conditions for learning that will enhance children's construction of his or her own powers of thinking "through the synthesis of all the expressive, communicative and cognitive languages" (Edwards et al., 1993). It is essential to record the children's many means of expression in order to further understand children's thinking and development. Documentation of children's learning experience, ideally through a variety of mediums, becomes a key component of the pedagogy.

In Reggio Emilia practice, documentation serves several functions: to make parents aware of their children's experiences and maintain parental involvement; to allow teachers to understand children better, to evaluate the teachers' own work; to facilitate communication and exchange of ideas among educators; to make children aware that their effort is valued; and to create an archive that traces the history of the school, its children and their teachers (Helm et al., 1998). Furthermore, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) 2001 report illustrates that in Reggio Emila, documentation:

> Also provides children with a concrete visible memory of what they have said and done, using images and words to serve as a jumping off point to explore previous understandings and to co-construct revisited understandings of the topics investigated. Children become even more interested, curious, and confident as they contemplate the meaning of what they have achieved. (p. 71)

Documentation in the Reggio Emilia approach facilitates and promotes reflection, an essential tool for life-long learning and the refinement of educational practice.

The development and structure of ECEC in Reggio Emilia and Sweden have many striking similarities. The growth of child-care in both these settings arose from the need to provide a safe place for children while their parents work. Both are characterized by publicly-funded facilities for young children included in a social welfare system. Supplying ECEC as a fundamental aid to the modernization and growth of society, gives Sweden and Reggio a common philosophical ideas base (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999). Dahlberg et al. (1999) expand on some of these ideological parallels:

> Since the 1960's, Sweden has tried to move away from a simple classification of 'children at risk' and 'children with special needs' related to a deficit concept and the role of institutions being to make good that deficit. Instead the emphasis has been on early childhood institutions for all children, where the idea of children with special needs has been changed into the idea of children who may need additional support. Reggio, with its image of the rich child, adopts a similar view of its early childhood institutions. (p. 124)

In addition, Sweden has increasing incorporated pedagogical dialogue, an essential component of Reggio Emilia's philosophy. This idea was first introduced in Sweden in the Child Care Commission's 1972 report, which states that

> Dialogue pedagogy starts from the idea that there should be a continuous dialogue between the child and the adult, on both the inner and outer level, which implies a reciprocal giving and taking of emotions, experiences and knowledge…In the 'dialogue' between the child as an active individual, as well as the possibility for the child to experience meaningful human relations which in the long run can lead to the child developing such relations by him/herself. (SOU, 1972, pp. 26, 46)

Within the past two decades Swedish pedagogues have shown a particular interest in the Reggio Emilia philosophy, "almost 3,000 Swedes…visited Reggio to study the pedagogical work, and many books and films about Reggio [were] published in Sweden during the 1980's and 1990's" (Dahlberg et al., 1999, p.123). Reggio Emilia has greatly impacted Sweden's current teaching professionals and Swedish ECEC practices.

Swedish educator Gunilla Dahlberg has written extensively on pedagogical documentation and through her work strengthened the connection between Reggio Emilia ideas and Swedish pedagogy. Dahlberg is Professor of Education at the Stockholm Institute of Education and was a scientific leader for the Stockholm Project, a practice-oriented program to build greater support for Swedish preschools attempting to adopt Reggio Emilia ideas. The Stockholm Project aimed to challenge the dominant discourse of early childhood pedagogy, those based on a scientific paradigm that neglects values and culture. Seven childcare facilities in the Stockholm area were involved in the Project. In addition, outside the Stockholm Project, thirty-four local networks using the Reggio Emilia Institution were established throughout Sweden, as well as one Nordic network, illustrating the influence Reggio Emilia has had (Dahlberg et al., 1999, pp. 126–132).

Through her Reggio Emilia-inspired work, Dahlberg expanded on social constructionism to formulate ideas on the evaluation and goal-setting of ECEC. In a 1994 article (with G. Åsen), she argues for an associative model of quality assessment in ECE. The associative model is an interactive approach to quality assessment of early childhood services. In locally-based forums for discussion and reflection on early education "people [can] engage as citizens with devotion and visions- not only as stakeholders positioned in an administrative perspective" (Dahlberg & Åsen, 1994, 166). These forums establish a dialogue, characterized by debate, confrontation, and exchange of experiences. However, in order to establish these democratic discussions so that all may reflect on the preschool quality, documentation of pedagogical activities must be presented. Dahlberg explains that to generate reflection, there must be a record of pedagogical work:

> A reflective dialogue and a reflective practice presupposes material to reflect on, material that is visible for all whom it concerns. Another presupposition is that the pedagogue and the child are given a voice in this process, a voice that can be communicated to others. (167)

She later expands on this concept:

> Documentation offers an important starting point for the dialogue, but also for creating trust and legitimacy in relation to the wider community by opening up and making visible the work of these institutions. Thanks to documentation, each child, each pedagogue and each institution can get a public voice and a visible identity. (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999;158)

Dahlberg illustrates that by facilitating a reflective dialogue, and in turn democracy, pedagogical documentation can play a powerful role in the evaluation of ECEC. Dahlberg sees great potential in pedagogical documentation, defined as two related subjects: "a process and an important content in that process."

> Content is material which records what the children are saying and doing, the work of the children, and how the pedagogue relates to the children and their work…. This process involves the use of that material as a means to reflect upon the pedagogical work and do so in a very rigorous, methodical and democratic way. That reflection will be done both by the pedagogue alone and by the pedagogue in relationship with others- other pedagogues, pedagogistas, the children themselves, their parents, politicians. (Dahlberg et al., 1999, pp. 147-148)

Dahlberg has constructed a number innovative and contemporary methods to analyze early childhood facilities in a postmodern society and has been a leader in educational projects in Scandinavia. As a result, her definition of pedagogical documentation, as well as her ideas on its broader implications for quality assessment, has greatly influenced the use and development of portfolios in Sweden.

Ingrid Pramling-Samuelsson demonstrates the importance of documenting through the child's perspective, not only so they can remember things that they did; and therefore, get help to change and develop, but also because "it can make them notice the variations in their way of thinking and how this is expressed in the different work" (Doverborg & Pramling, 1996; 179). Pramling-Samuelsson proposes that reflecting on variation can expand and deepen thinking, and be a positive practice with young children. This concept promotes documentation which comes directly from the child's, and influence and encourages his or her own reflection.Like Dahlberg, Pramling-Samuelsson connects the value of documentation to quality assessment.

> We believe that documentation and evaluation belong together. Because what happens in the pre-school and in the school should be evaluated, the teacher must see to it that the children have the opportunity to

document what they experienced and also to reflect on what happened. (Doverborg & Pramling, 1996, p. 187)

Portfolio Implementation: Observations from Three Swedish Preschools

The portfolio, defined as a "purposeful collections of student work," serves as a profile of the child's work and interests, constructed as an ongoing effort throughout the child's time in the early childhood facility (Dichtelmiller, et al, 2000; 58). Consequently, it becomes an excellent resource, to "capture the evolution of the child's competence, providing rich documentation of his or her classroom experience throughout the year" (Helm et al., 1998, p.57).

Although based around the collection of children's work, portfolios can take many different forms. Within the Swedish preschool system teachers shape their own methods of portfolio-building. The National Curriculum defines goals but does not describe any specific method resulting in a variety of practices. This diversity is evident in how each pedagogue utilizes portfolios in their particular setting.

To research early education documentation I used an ethnographic approach, immersing myself in the Swedish preschool system. For a period of ten weeks, I became a participant-researcher in the daily activities of Föräldrakooperativet Fjärilen, a cooperative childcare center in Göteborg, Sweden. (Throughout this paper the names of all the preschools, pedagogues, and children have been changed.)

To understand the role of portfolios in the Swedish ECE context I participated in the daily activities of Fjärilen, taking extensive notes on my on-site observations and in interviews with pedagogues. I attended teacher planning sessions and parent-teacher meetings. I conducted study-visits and teacher interviews at two other preschools in Göteborg. To facilitate a theoretically and politically comprehensive understanding of the field, I reviewed government literature on Sweden's educational policies and guidelines, research from the leaders of Swedish ECE, and international resources that had influenced the Swedish development of portfolio.

In my research, an ethnographic approach provided numerous benefits. Immersion into the natural, unmanipulated setting of the Swedish preschool helped me gain a genuine understanding of Swedish early education, and the cultural philosophy guiding their use of portfolio. Daily contact helped me.

I developed close relationships with teachers with whom who I worked, the children I observed, and their parents. In the Swedish preschool, practice, methodology, and philosophy are implicit. Being an active participant in the preschool and having the opportunity to meet with and interview teachers were essential in facilitating my understanding of the embedded value system behind the practice of Swedish early educators and their employment of portfolios. Working directly in the preschool exposed me to the web of interdependence between teachers, children, and parents. It helped uncover how national policies and local guidelines manifest within a specific educational setting, revealing the strong link between policy and practice in the Swedish context.

Ethnography was an especially appropriate research approach for studying pedagogical documentation because it is a method that requires reflection. It takes into consideration cultural values and how the subjects make meaning of societal institutions, which are important to acknowledge when utilizing portfolios and examining the quality of early childhood education and care. Like pedagogical documentation itself, ethnographic methods provided an opportunity to reflect on the research I was conducting. This reflection deepened my thinking, and in turn, made my research more meaningful and comprehensive.

During 10 weeks as a participant-researcher at Fjärilen, I observed the use of portfolios and their focus on engaging the children in reflection. Fjärilen had been working with portfolios for six months, although many of the contents that are included in the portfolios were recorded prior to the formal utilization of this method. Each child's portfolio consists of a file folder containing pictures (both digital and regular film) of him or her participating in preschool activities, drawings and creative work done by the child, and an audio tape of an end-of-the-term interview with the child about the theme they have discussed throughout the year, . The contents of the portfolio are separated by term in order to show the child's growth.

Emila's portfolio contains a wealth of pictures of her, alone and alongside other children, participating in the pedagogical activities at the center. These photos display her involved in a variety of preschool activities such as painting, on picnics and forest walks, baking, participating in holiday festivities, eating, engaged in fantasy play, and partaking in *samling*, the time when the whole group gathers together.

The portfolio also contains a "block", a spiral notebook filled with creative work done by Emila. The book was used for her individual interests, none of the drawings were pre- assigned or outlined. After filling up the entire

block, Emila sat alongside a teacher and reviewed what she had done. The teachers recorded on the inside cover of her notebook: "Emila began to write in this 'block' in August 2002. It was completed February 2003. She thinks the drawings are good. She is satisfied with her drawings. She counted 16 drawings which were especially fine."

The portfolio also contains drawings, which reflect on the preschool's specific activities. For example, after attending a theatrical presentation, Emila reflects on what she experienced by drawing. She also verbally describes some of her feelings about the performance; a teacher documents these thoughts on the top of the page. Emilia's description reads:

> It was cool — the pig was the funniest when he fell straight on the pavement and got a band-aid on the nose. The cow, the hare, the pig, the crow, and the rat were there. They searched for treasure, but there wasn't any.

Emilia's memories, feelings, and ideas are highlighted further by the audiotape of a reflective discussion between Emilia and one of her teachers at the end of the school year. In this reflection, Emilia is given a clear voice and a valued position in evaluating the quality of the center and the meaning of her learning experiences.

Vendela Petersson, a teacher at Fjärilen, finds the portfolio to be a valuable pedagogical practice. She asserts that through portfolio documentation and complementary reflection,

> children become aware of their own learning and can sense that they are part of the learning process, … their self-confidence is strengthened, … both teachers and children can go back and reflect on the knowledge gained and then plan new goals to expand upon this development, … [and] it makes it easier for people outside the preschool to see what is going on." (Personal communication, March 24, 2003).

A portfolio gives space for the child to express what knowledge is important to them.

Fjärilen preschool's provides an example of the beginnings of incorporating portfolio use into classroom activities. Still in its early stages, Fjärilen has begun to see the benefits of a portfolio system, and is working to fulfill the long-term goals the teachers have for this method, such as supporting the children's reflections and helping them build a greater understanding of their learning. Vendela stresses another key point of portfolio use: it is a process, constantly changing and evolving. The value of portfolio is not merely in the

concrete collection of children's work and products, but also in the process of building and reflecting on these contents.

Humlasvägen Förskola preschool began working with portfolios a year before I observed them. They begin the portfolio process with a box for each child in which they collect drawings, pictures, and "funny" quotes from the children. Every four months, the pedagogue then sits down with the child, and together they select items from the box to save and place in a notebook that becomes the child's portfolio. The teacher arranges the selected items inside the notebook so that they illustrate the child's activity in the preschool. Descriptions about the contents of the pictures are added, to make them a more understandable to an outside observer.

Lena Lindgren a teacher at Humlasvägen, stresses that the portfolio is used to "describe, not judge the child" and the true purpose of this method is to involve the child and help them "realize that they actually learned." (personal communication, April 9, 2003) She believes that an essential aspect of the portfolio process is that the "child is the owner of it" and this builds confidence within the child. Therefore, she maintains that everything in the portfolio "should be encouraging and bring about happy feelings within the child … so that he or she will be kept aware of his or her positive development."

The Humlasvägen Förskola teachers also draw on the portfolios when meeting with children's parents. The children are also present during these meetings, and so can use their portfolio to illustrate to their parents their preschool activities. The portfolio thus helps the child contribute his or her own voice to assist the parent in gaining a greater understanding of the learning and progress at the preschool and the progress.

At Daggmasksgatan Förskola each child's entire portfolio is formatted digitally via computer. Since the spring of 2002, each individual portfolio has been arranged as a PowerPoint presentation divided into a variety of categories and developmental domains to illustrate the child's multidimensional learning.

Evelyn's portfolio illustrates the items included and the variety of media used, including video, audio, visual, and text, in portfolios at Daggmasksgatan. Evelyn's portfolio includes a video demonstration of her walking along a balance beam, and an audio component of Evelyn describing her activity on the video. The portfolio also includes Evelyn's artwork. Many of the pictures are accompanied by stories created by Evelyn and told in her own words through an audio media.

Both the children and the teachers determine the items placed in the portfolio. The teachers of Daggmasksgatan feel that how the children use pens and scissors, as well as conduct themselves during mealtime, should be

included; and insist that these items be incorporated. Children also select items to include that are personally important. For example, Evelyn wanted to include how she liked to hug her friend Rosanna, an activity she felt was particularly relevant to her life at the preschool. Therefore, they included a picture of Evelyn and Rosanna in the portfolio with the title "Here I am with my friend Rosanna." There is also sound added to the picture where Evelyn says, "Rosanna is my best friend."

Even though the construction of Daggmasksgatan's portfolios are different than the previous two examples, classroom teacher Lizbeth Henriksson maintains similar reasoning for using portfolios: "to build confidence and pride … so that the child can say 'this is what I can do, … and to demonstrate to parents what the child has been doing while at school." (personal communication, April 10, 2003) This final goal is accomplished by burning a CD of the portfolio for the parents, which they can keep at home. Having a version of the portfolio on CD-ROM allows the child to be in close contact with the portfolio so that he or she can continually develop confidence from the growth it displays.

Each of the three preschools has taken a different approach to developing portfolios in their setting, but they share a common belief in the value of portfolio as a pedagogical practice. Each teacher maintained that the real value of the portfolio method is not based upon the final product. Instead, the *process* of creating the portfolio and the *reflection* that occurs alongside its formation are equally, if not more, important than the final collection.

In addition, all the teachers hoped that the children would use their portfolios throughout their school years, adding additional work to the collection, and building upon its contents. Each teacher repeatedly said that the portfolio is a mechanism to help the child take a more active role in their learning and, in turn, help build their self-confidence and contribute to their personal development. In Sweden, portfolios are viewed as something "owned by the children," not the school or larger educational administration. The portfolio should be carried alongside students as they progress through school, providing them with a display of their continual growth and accomplishments.

Furthermore, each pedagogue maintained that one of the greatest benefits of portfolios is that it makes visible a public voice for the student and teacher. As a concrete display of pedagogy and learning within the ECE context, portfolios provide a resource to inform parents and outside stakeholders to facilitate constructive dialogue and quality assessment. Consequently, portfolios bring democracy to program evaluation and development by encouraging and ensuring the contribution of multiple perspectives in that process.

However, in addition to these common benefits, each teacher commented on similar struggles with portfolios. Each pedagogue remarked on the difficulty of finding time to sit down and reflect with the children on the collected materials. Finding the right opportunities for reflection in the very active and fast-paced child-care setting can frequently present itself as an obstacle to using portfolios. The portfolio method requires a large time commitment reflection and discussion, and for recording. Therefore, it calls for a very committed and dedicated teacher to use it to its fullest potential. Nevertheless, it appeared all the teachers interviewed saw the great potential in portfolio and were willing to face these challenges in order to achieve its benefits.

Portfolio Use in the US: a Tool for Developmentally-Appropriate Assessment

Portfolios have gained recognition in pedagogical practices around the world. Due to the differences in how each individual country approaches early childhood and development, the exact format, utilization, and purpose behind portfolio can be quite varied. For example, documentation and portfolio systems have become increasingly prevalent in the US; however, why and how they are employed is quite different than the Swedish practices. Child assessment is at the forefront of the American mindset when looking at young children and the context for their learning. In the US, portfolio is used as a means of developmentally appropriate *assessment*, a word greatly avoided in the Swedish preschools. The National Curriculum for the Swedish Preschool clearly states that these earlier years are *not* a time for individual assessment of children:

> In the preschool the outcome of the individual child will not be formally assessed in terms of grade or evaluation…The pre-school should be secure, developmental and rich in learning opportunities for all children participating on the basis of each child's individual conditions. (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998, p. 4)

In interviews with Swedish pedagogues, they described their active attempts to make sure portfolios did *not* take on the characteristics of a standardized assessment. By constructing each individual portfolio around the child's specific interests and unique goals, teachers aimed to interrupt their use as a means of comparative evaluation.

However, in the US, in order to meet accountability demands and program evaluations, quality is often measured by assessing children's performance in achieving specific outcomes. "Data from such assessments are used increasingly for 'high stakes' decision making, for example, to judge program effectiveness and to determine whether policies and programs should receive continued funding" (OECD, 2001, pp. 68-69). Contrary to the Swedish national curriculum, "educational programs in the US define skills that children should, in principle, have mastered before entry into primary school" (OECD, 2001, p. 64), and put greater importance on defining and measuring school readiness. All but six states assess school readiness by using either statewide screening tests or evaluations constructed and implemented at the local level (Saluja, Scott-Little, & Clifford, 2000). In the US, there is a much greater stress put on the academic learning within the preschool, and consequently a high demand to find means for assessing the cognitive abilities of young children.

Assessing learning in preschool-age children is challenging, and controversial:

> During most of the early childhood years, it is difficult to measure and assess bits of knowledge and skills that are isolated from other types of knowledge and skills. Young children are not reliable test takers due to the many different confining personal, developmental, and environmental factors that affect their behaviors. In addition, just as children do not develop in an isolated manner, they do not acquire knowledge nor learn specific bits of information or skills without learning other things within the contextual framework.

Helm et al suggest that "Standardized achievement tests, with their narrow focus, do not provide information about how children integrate their learning and apply content knowledge to real-life challenges" (1998, p.15). They also go against the socio-cultural theories of Vygotsky, which suggest, "that what we should be measuring is not what children can do by themselves or already know, but rather what they can do with help or another person and have the potential to learn" (Helm et al., 1998, p.19)

Due to the increasing demand for accountability in the US, policy makers and educators search for new 'developmentally appropriate' ways to monitor and evaluate early childhood learning outcomes. Authentic assessments are performance-based evaluations (Grace, 1994), which involve children more comprehensively in their own assessments; and these provide a more suitable way to evaluate young children than standardized tests. Portfolios are a way

to help children reflect on their learning, and a means to assess student achievement authentically.

The examples from Swedish preschools illustrate the different approaches to systemizing a portfolio collection. Grace proposes components of portfolio as a means for assessment: anecdotal records, checklist or inventory based on instructional objectives and the development associated with the acquisition of the skills being monitored, rating scales, open ended questions and requests directed at children, screening tests used to help identify the skills and strengths that children already possess, work samples and other, more subjective, material.

A Portfolio Variation: The Work Sampling System

One variation, commonly used in the US, of the portfolio method is the Work Sampling System. The Work Sampling System is an assessment which evaluates a child's performance. (Helm et al., 1998, p. 148).

> Performance assessments are designed to document children's daily activities, to provide a means of evaluating the quality of work, and to be flexible enough to allow a teacher to take an individualized approach to academic achievement…. All performance assessments require that students demonstrate specific skills and competencies, and that they apply the skills and knowledge they have mastered…[in a] "real-life" context, one in which students perform chosen tasks as they would in the process of general instruction. (Dichtelmiller et al., 2000, p.4)

The contents of the Work Sampling System are pulled from the daily work of the classroom and aim to demonstrate the multiple intelligences of the child. The portfolio collection is restricted to a certain number of teacher-determined items of two types. Core Items, "document student work in five domains of learning: Language and Literacy, Mathematical Thinking, Scientific Thinking, The Arts, and Social Studies" (Helm et al., 1998, p.58). Individualized Items "represent a significant event, an integrated learning experience from multiple domains, or an area of special interest to a child" (Helm et al., 1998, p.58). The version of the portfolio is greatly influenced and shaped by the pedagogue.

The Work Sampling portfolio is accompanied by developmental checklists that record a student's growth in relation to teacher expectations, national standards, and developmental guidelines.

> Developmental Guidelines are a set of reasonable expectations used to evaluate student performance and achievement at different ages…[while] Developmental Checklists are lists of grade-specific performance indicators that are described in the Developmental Guidelines and are used for summarizing and interpreting the teacher's observations. (Dichtelmiller et al., 2000, p. 10)

Along with the child's collected work samples, and developmental checklists, the Work Sampling assessment includes a summary report for each child. The Summary Report provides information about student performance and progress to families and administrators. Its purpose is "to profile student strengths and difficulties across the domains [of development]" (Dichtelmiller et al., 2000, p. 130).

The Work Sampling System is designed to assess student achievement, and evaluate the skills they have obtained during the preschool years. In place of using standardized tests, the Work Sampling System, uses the child's collected work as an illustration of their abilities and levels of development, and acts as a more developmentally-appropriate means of assessment.

Swedish and US Portfolio Use Compared

The Swedish and US portfolios differ greatly in their foundations, goals, and implementation. The theoretical bases of these two methods are quite different. The Work Sampling System is a prescribed approach, which conflicts with Reggio Emilia's social constructionist perspective, the basis of the Swedish portfolio approach. "Pedagogues in Reggio have been very much against a textbook approach to their practice with prescribed rules, goals, and methods" (Edwards et al., 1993) This describes exactly the US work sampling system: a practice filled with checklists, criterion, and a clearly-designed course of action. The Work Sampling system uses many standards and benchmarks from the national, state and local curriculum groups, and US child-development research. These benchmarks are founded on scientific theories of developmental psychology, which establish a problematic discourse for early education:

> The project of developmental psychology as the presentation of a general model which depicts development as unitary, irrespective of culture, class, gender or history and means that difference can be recognized only in terms of aberrations, deviations and relative progress on a linear scale… The notion of progress whether of societies or through the life

> span, implies linear movement across history and between cultures. (As cited in Dahlberg et al., 1999, p. 102)

In recent years Swedish educators, including those in the Stockholm Project, have tried to create new assessment paradigms that move beyond developmental psychology and include the influence of culture, society, and the voice of the child in education. They consider children as co-constructors of knowledge, identity, and culture, and therefore, put primary emphasis on all areas of development, not just cognition. Further in the Swedish National Curriculum (1998), culture and democracy play a major role in Swedish ECEC, and these concepts permeate the Swedish implementation of portfolios. The Swedish portfolio system strives to bring their societal values, such as democracy, into their childcare institutions ECE. American educators reject these ideas and use portfolios to assess children against a standardized, linear, value free concept of development.

The differences between young children's portfolios in these two nations also stem from the different value each places on ECEC, the purposes these programs serve, and their definitions of a quality ECE setting. Sweden has been committed to an integrated care and education system throughout its history. Swedes take a "wider view of early childhood and do not wish to assimilate the early childhood institution to a school-like model" (OECD, 2001, p. 64). "They adopt a very child-centered, developmentally oriented system where there is little demand that young children should be assessed and a reluctance to place pressure on young children" (OECD, 2002, p. 20). These ideas are supported by the research of Sylva and Wiltshire (1993) which suggests that "when begun too early, formal teaching may actually harm the self-concept of young children, leading to anxiety, low self-esteem and mediocre literacy results in primary school particularly in reading" (OECD, 2001, p. 64).

The Swedish construction of ECEC results in a unique definition of quality, uncommon in countries such as the US, which emphasize evaluating school readiness and measuring quantifiable, objective, child indicators. Swedes see quality as the "adequate response to the needs of a particular group of children," and therefore, quality assessment is seen as primarily the responsibility of local administration and staff. This idea is described in depth in the OECD 2001 report on Education and Policy Analysis:

> … well-educated teams of staff and parents, guided by municipal pedagogical advisors, will usually generate their own quality observation processes and evaluation mechanisms. Here it is believed that to achieve

> system goals, co-construction of program aims and objectives must take place at the local level, with children, parents, teachers, and the social partners all given voice … In this perspective, evaluation moves from conformity to external standards toward trust in local responsibility and the professional quality of staff, though guided by national frameworks [such as the national curriculum where core understandings of young children, families, and the purposes of ECEC are elaborated] … Such trust presupposes that government or local authorities have invested well in staff and in the pedagogical frameworks, e.g. through thorough pre-service training, ongoing professional development courses and investment in self-evaluation instruments. (p. 64)

The Swedish means of quality assessment assumes available materials that provide the child's voice, giving those involved in the process a fuller understanding of the learning taking place in a ECEC setting. Portfolios serve as an illustration of the activities and learning within the preschool, facilitating discussion and constant monitoring of educational goals at the level of the pedagogical group and local services.

> [Portfolios] aim both to understand each child's learning processes and provide a platform for ongoing discussion within the pedagogical group … the purpose of such documentation is not to evaluate children against external norms, but to lead to a common reflection by professional and parents on the practice of the center and the well being of the child. (OCED, 2001, p. 71)

In the US, ECEC is focused on cognitive development and requiring pedagogues to prepare their students for assessment when entering compulsory school. This limits teachers' ability to follow a child's lead, and restricts how educators use portfolio. Lacking the flexibility and freedom enjoyed by Swedish preschool teachers, US preschool educators are confined by having to demonstrate program effectiveness through children's attainment of specific skills. Instead of an adaptable, open-ended process that leaves room for evolution and change, the portfolio method in the US becomes much restrictive by being prescribed by external standards.

Given their differences in defining and achieving quality assessment, goals for using pedagogical documentation also diverge greatly between Sweden and US. Instead of using portfolios to fulfill checklists and judge the child against developmentally-appropriate guidelines, as in the US, Swedes employ

portfolios as a means to promote democracy, and by initiating a reflective dialogue amongst teachers, parents, and local services. The child's interests guide the pedagogy and the portfolio much more strongly, resulting in a practice that build a child's curiosity and increases their enjoyment in learning.

Conclusion

In Swedish ECEC, portfolios are used as a vehicle for reflection and democracy. Portfolios provide a means to demonstrate concretely the learning and pedagogy of the preschool to all stakeholders. They include multiple voices in the decision-making process. Through using portfolios as a demonstration of the pedagogical activities in the preschool, a dynamic discussion can take place where multiply parties may have an influence.

The Swedish portfolios give the child a voice in these discussions, a factor often missed in quality assessment. The portfolio as a process of documentation shows that adults can provide the child with a visible identity in society and make them active participants in a system which is fundamentally meant to support them. The evaluation of quality and policy decision-making, based on child outcome indicators and the fulfillment of developmental guidelines, as in the US, neglects the different modes of expressions, means of learning, and potential that young children possess.

Methods that result in measurement and quantifiable data (for example, ticking off schemas, estimations, assessment measures) will, because of their lack of explicit values, lead towards an objective view of the child, where the observer puts her/himself outside what is happening. Such methods have a hidden effect, producing a technical view of pedagogical methods and excluding dialogue. (SOU, 1975, p. 340)

These objective methods neglect to take into account that children are engulfed in a network of societal and cultural values, including class, race, gender, language and social relations, which influence their development and well-being. "Self identity is constituted and reconstituted relationally, its boundaries repeatedly remapped and renegotiated" (Lather, 1992, p.101). These interrelationships and greater societal values that impact our lives are acknowledged in quality assessment of Swedish ECEC along with the dynamic and fluid aspects of childhood development. In the US, assessments simplify growth to a linear scale detached from culture and affect.

Children are active participants in the world that surrounds them, and thus should be treated as influential contributors in the realm of child-care decision-making. Their voice can be demonstrated through portfolios and

pedagogical documentation, and therefore, these methods should be considered as valued and integral practices in the pedagogy of young children. The construction of quality assessment in US ECE must expand beyond evaluating outcomes and monitoring child developmental indicators, providing for more democratic means of evaluation, including the voice of the child. Regulations should be changed to put less emphasis on defining skills for young children and requiring teachers to demonstrate their student's proficiency in these developmental arenas. Instead, providing a more general, national pedagogical framework for ECE, currently lacking in our system, should help ensure quality. In addition, comprehensive pre-service and in-service training for early educators that focuses directly on early childhood must be established. As a result, pedagogues would have an accurate knowledge-base to make professional, informed decisions specific to ECE, as well as more flexibility to focus their curriculum and pedagogical activities around the interest of the children with whom they work, rather than on the proper 'product' of childhood defined by standardized developmental criteria.

Quality evaluation should also be expanded to encompass more voices in the process of assessment. A greater effort should be made to involve parents in monitoring quality. By holding providing regular opportunities for teachers and parents to come together and discuss the activities of the preschool, as well as by allowing parents to have greater contact with school administrators and decision makers, assessment will acheive a broader and more meaningful conception of quality, beyond the quantifiable.

The 2000 Report from the Government Commission on Swedish Democracy meant to guide local municipalities states:

Development is not uncontrollable. It is in the nature of democracy that it is not determined by fate. Nor does it lie in someone else' hands. Therefore, it is not only individual measures, but also the overall political will that has importance for how society will develop. (SOU, 2000:1)

This very idea can be applied to ECE. Not only are the individual measures and outcomes of the children they serve important, but also the interrelationships within the preschools and the overall well-being of all involved, including children, parents, and teachers. When defining quality and making policy decisions, all voices must be heard. In order for positive changes to be made we must include all the rich, valuable, resources that each person brings to the table, no matter how big or small they might be.

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Postscript

Being immersed in a foreign childcare system was an incredibly enriching experience, and solidified my aspiration that working with young children was the life path I wanted to pursue. My participation in the Swedish practicum strengthened my appreciation for how culture influences how one works with children and how an education or childcare system is constructed, and encouraged me to reflect continually on the values and beliefs shaping my practice and pedagogy, as well as the educational settings in which I work. At the Swedish childcare center where I was a participant-researcher, I was challenged by language and cultural barriers, which led me to adopt new perspectives and ways of being with young children and their families. Now, working in New York City with children, families, and co-workers from a variety of backgrounds, I see how this experience greatly prepared me for working with a diverse array of individuals, and helped shape me into an open, responsive, and culturally-sensitive teacher. Further, completing a cross-cultural analysis between the US and Swedish early education practices helped me to see the amazing insights we can gain from experiencing and reflecting on divergent settings, as well as collaborating with others of different backgrounds and perspectives. This understanding has made my work much richer and more stimulating because it has opened me up to having discussions with, learning from, and cooperating with others as much as possible.