

Anette Sandberg¹
Martina Norling²
Anne Lillvist³

Teachers' View of Educational Support to Children in Need of Special Support

Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate, analyze and describe how preschool teachers experience the educational support for children in need of special support. In this interview study, the preschool teachers emphasize educational support to children in need of special support from two perspectives. In the first perspective, the preschool teachers stated that they don't do anything unique for children in need of special support, versus the view that the children need and receive more help from the staff in everyday preschool activities. In the second perspective, the preschool teachers point out the specific educational support within two themes, indirect and direct support. This study has implications for both practice and theory as it increases the knowledge and understanding about educational support that children in need of special support are offered in preschool today.

Keywords: children in need of special support, preschool education, educational support, preschool teacher

Background

This study is a part of a project entitled 'Early intervention for young children in preschool – general and specific support'. The project's overall purpose was to examine educational activities that are offered to young children (1-5 year olds) in need of special support within Swedish preschools.

Preschool education and inclusive practice in Sweden

In Sweden, 86% of all children aged between 1 and 5 attend preschool. A free general preschool is offered for 4-5 year olds. When children are six years old, 95% of them go to preschool classes, and most of the staff members in preschools (96%) are educated to

¹ Anette Sandberg (Corresponding author), Professor in Early Childhood Education, Mälardalen University, School of Education, Culture and Communication, The Research Program CHILD, Västerås, SWEDEN, anette.sandberg@mdh.se

² Martina Norling, M.A., Lecturer in Education, School of Education, Culture and Communication, The Research Program CHILD, Västerås, SWEDEN

³ Anne Lillvist, Ph Student in Psychology, Mälardalen University, School of Sustainable Development of Society and Technology, Research Program CHILD, Västerås, SWEDEN

work with children. Approximately 50% of the staff members in preschools are preschool teachers with a three year university degree, while day-care attendants, who constitute the other major staff category, have upper-secondary qualifications.

In Sweden, municipalities have the responsibility for children in need of special support with regard to their development. Some children are considered to be in need of special support based on traditional disability categories, e.g. a diagnosis or a medical condition. Other children are not formally identified to have disabilities or medical conditions, but have difficulties participating in daily preschool activities, therefore are perceived to be in need of special support based on a functional perspective (Lillvist, Sanberg, Björck-Åkesson & Granlund, 2009). According to a prevalence study of children in need of special support based on 571 preschools, the majority of children in need of special support are undiagnosed children with difficulties functioning in the preschool context (Lillvist & Granlund, 2009).

Since the 1970s, preschools have emphasized the importance of providing special support to children in need. Above all, interaction with other children and stimulation that children receive through staying in preschool is important. In the curriculum for preschools, Lpfö (National Agency for Education, 2006), the individual child's well-being, safety, development and learning in addition to cooperation between the preschool and home is emphasized. Further, the social and physical environment should be adjusted to the child's needs, and the preschools should provide necessary adjustments to meet the need of every child. Care and education (educare) is often stated as the general goal of early intervention. Educare is highly incorporated into the Swedish preschool system, but in order to understand how the goal of educare corresponds with the special needs of individual children, it is necessary to investigate how preschool staff perceive the support provided to children in need of special support.

Educational support to children in need of special support - what do we know?

The educational support to young children with disabilities and undiagnosed varies internationally. In the United States, children in need of support are enrolled in specific preschool programs targeting the special needs of disadvantaged children or children with a specific diagnosis. One example of this is 'Head Start', which is a state-funded preschool program enrolling children from families with low SES. Programs and methods used in U.S. preschools were mapped out in a literature review by Gilliam and Ziegler (2000). They concluded that research about assistance methods in preschool for children requiring special support is an area not extensively researched, and they argue that the state-funded preschool programs are seldom evaluated and that, "considerably more needs to be known about the effectiveness of state-funded preschool programs" (Gilliam & Ziegler, 2000, p. 465). Another literature review of the impact of out-of-home integrated care and education settings on children 0-6 years of age, showed that more work is needed on clarifying the concept of inclusion in educational programs for young children, as it now serves as an umbrella term encompassing many different meanings (Penn, Butterworth, Lloyd, Moyles, Potter & Sayeed, 2004). Similarly, Lieber et al (1998) demonstrated that although teachers in their sample provided a homogenous

definition of inclusion, their implication of the concept to the everyday activities in the preschool varied greatly. They concluded that the beliefs and practices of teachers are important to investigate, as they bear consequences for the outcomes of individual children. A study by Gessler, Werts et al (1996) proposes that teacher's perceptions of their need for support and resources are related to their ratings of the severity of their students' disabilities. Teachers who perceived the students' disabilities as severe or who perceived the students as more involved viewed the availability of support and resources as lower than the required level. By discussing the concept of educational support and other important notions regarding intervention and education for young children in need of special support; methods and programs facilitating integration can be developed and evaluated.

Educational support - general and specific interventions

The educational support provided to children in need of special support consists of general and specific methods. The general interventions are provided to all children in the preschool and constitute the overall quality, norms, values and practices based on the program or curriculum for the preschool. The specific interventions are tailored to meet the specific needs of individual children and are often based on child's eligibility to receive additional resources. The criteria for eligibility for receiving additional resources are generally based on traditional disability categories, although they give little information about how the child functions in the preschool (Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004; Simeonsson, 2006).

Taggart et al (2006) have suggested that high quality preschools can serve as an effective intervention for reducing special educational needs, and are especially beneficial for disadvantaged children. Björck-Åkesson and Granlund (2000) argue that although general intervention (such as preschool enrolment) likely reduce the number of children at risk in general, they might not help an individual child in a specific context. The educational support to young children in need of special support in Sweden is generally carried out in the child's natural environment, for example the home or preschool. However, the two types of support and how they are organized and viewed by preschool teachers has not been well researched. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate, analyze and describe preschool teachers' experiences in this area, both with diagnosed children with identified conditions, and undiagnosed children perceived by teachers to be in need of special support. The specific research question is: How do preschool teachers describe their experiences regarding the general and specific educational support provided to preschool children in need of special support?

Method

Participants

For the current study, 38 preschool units out of a larger sample of 571 preschool units were contacted. The participating preschools were located both in city and rural areas within two Swedish counties. The majority of staff members who were interviewed were educated preschool teachers. All but one of the participating teachers were female. The

preschool selection criteria was that the preschool should have at least one child with identified disabilities and one undiagnosed child perceived to be in need of special support by teachers. A total of 15 boys and 5 girls (with identified disabilities) attended the preschool units, and the number of undiagnosed children was 58, consisting of 43 boys and 15 girls. Children that had been formally diagnosed were assessed by specialists in order to determine eligibility to additional resources, such as psychiatrists, speech and language pathologists or speech and language therapists. The functional difficulties for children with identified disabilities were related to social competence (9 boys, 4 girls), speech and language (2 boys, 1 girl) and mental developmental delay (4 boys). For undiagnosed children perceived by teachers to be in need of support, difficulties arose primarily in the areas of social competence (29 boys, 13 girls), speech and language (10 boys, 2 girls) and motor difficulties (4 boys).

Table 1

Information on functional difficulties of the children in the preschools

	Identified disabilities		Undiagnosed children in need of support	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Social competence	9	4	29	13
Speech and language	2	1	10	2
Mental/Developmental delay	4	0	0	0
Physical difficulties	0	0	4	0
Total	15	5	39	15

Procedure

The teachers that participated in this study were contacted by telephone and information letter was sent. One preschool teacher from each unit (n=38) participated. Information regarding the cooperation, presentation of the interviewer and the purpose of the study was described, and a time and location for interviews was reserved. The interviews were conducted in a quiet room at the preschools. All interviews began with a description of the study and of ethical rules in social science research, i.e. requirements for confidentiality, consent, information and autonomy, and highlighting that participation in the study was voluntary (Swedish Research Council, 2002).

Instruments

A questionnaire study in the project, entitled 'Early intervention for young children in preschool – general and specific support' was developed to gain a deeper understanding for the educational support provided to special needs children. A pilot study of the questionnaire at a preschool where special needs children are enrolled. Four preschool teachers discussed the questions together with one of the authors, and the interview questions were also discussed in the project group.

The preschool teachers were interviewed about: the educational work with preschool children in need of the educational support given to the children both generally and specifically; and what is unique about the support that is given. The interview questions were as follows:

- a.) Tell me which support do you provide to children?
- b.) Tell me what methods of support do you use?
- c.) Tell me what is unique about this method for a specific child? Why?
- d.) Describe what you do when you provide support? Give examples
- e.) Describe how you do it?
- f.) Tell me why you do this?
- g.) Tell me what is special about what you do?
- h.) Tell me what goals do you have when you do it?

These questions were the foundation for further conversations to obtain an insightful description and deeper understanding about the educational support to preschool children in need of special support. The preschool teachers were encouraged to speak without restraint about their experiences in order to get their full perspectives. In the interviews, the preschool teachers explained and exemplified their thoughts. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed, and lasted between 45-60 minutes.

Analysis

The method in this study was inspired by a phenomenographic approach. Phenomenographic research describes variations with regards to how individuals apprehend, understand and experience different phenomena in the world around them (see for example Marton & Booth, 2000). We have assumed a second-order perspective, because this study explored preschool teachers' experience of reality in terms of how they, as preschool teachers, view the educational support for children in need of special support. A "second-order perspective" is an investigation and description of an individual's experience of the world from their point of view. We have analyzed the interviews in order to identify variations in the way that individuals apprehend, understand and experience the support children in need of special support receive.

The analyses were carried out using five steps. In the first step, each interview was read several times to gain an overall view and understanding for the underlying meaning. In the second step, from a central analysis, the data was reduced. This means that all meaningful quotations were extracted as *support* from each question in the interviews, along with the context from each quotation. Thereafter, in the third step, quotations that had general relevance to specific support and unique support were marked, and in this analysis, a large number of meaningful statements emerged. In the fourth step, the

content of the significant statements was then grouped for the total sample into meaningful categories, whereby each unit had a descriptive meaning. The fifth step was to study the similarities and differences of these meaningful units in each theme-producing category. Some categories included subcategories, which had a shared meaning on lower levels.

Validity and reliability

Within phenomenographic research, validity and reliability is the extent to which the descriptive categories correspond to the participants' perception. It is supported by two criteria, i.e. the categories are illustrated with quotations from the interviews, and a co-examiner (i.e. one of the authors) controls the correspondence of the categories with statements in the interviews (Alexandersson, 1994; Marton, 1994). In this study, quotations are used to illustrate the results. Observe that reliability estimations are based on quotations in Swedish.

Results

In the main analysis based on the statements from all preschool teachers, two themes emerged: indirect and direct support. The theme of direct support was divided into three categories: attitudes, speech and language support and support for motor development. The theme of indirect support was divided into support by peers and support in the physical environment.

General support for all children in preschool

Preschool teachers' descriptions of the general support provided for all children in preschool correspond with the curriculum for the preschool, Lpfö 98, (National Agency for Education, 2006). Safety, wellbeing, democracy, interplay, play, learning and development were emphasized by the preschool teachers. And the same topics are highlighted in the curriculum for the preschool as being important.

During the interviews, the preschool teachers stated that wellbeing means that all children enjoy being at preschool. The concepts of safety, happiness and calmness in preschool ensure that parents feel secure leaving their children with preschool teachers during the day. Development is important in order for children to be able to strengthen their own abilities and fulfil their needs. During the interviews, the teachers described the importance of both democracy and to influence preschool activities, which indicates that there is a desire for equality and friendship between the children, and also that preschool teachers give an appropriate amount of attention to all children. According to the preschool teachers, influence means that children both have and feel that they have influence.

The specific and unique support for children with identified disabilities and undiagnosed children

The results of the interviews showed a variation close of experiences concerning the educational support given to children in need of special support. The ground for

educational support in preschool was described as proximity to the children, safety and peace and quiet. Above all, educational support consisted of staff supporting children in need of special support in everyday preschool activities - giving them additional time when needed, being clear with instructions, listening to them and supporting them in conflicts.

"We must be very clear in communication with the children at all times. For example, we must often follow up instructions given to a child. During circle-time, we must say "now we will go and wash our hands" and "come now, we will go and wee-wee". One must speak the whole time about what we shall do, otherwise the children don't realize what should be done."

However, there are different attitudes regarding how staff should work with children in need of special support when there is one resource-teacher for the child. Staff members either share the responsibility for the children, because the children are so demanding, or implement a resource staff who is always with the child. During the interviews, preschool teachers expressed that often the child is "pulled away" from the situation and educated individually. It is common that children in need of special support are only occasionally together with the other children and staff in preschool during the day. However, both children and staff receive educational support from external professionals, for example from special education teachers through supervision. Staff described that their work then became more well-considered, and that they considered it functional better for the child.

Teachers stated that educational support can also mean that speech therapists or physiotherapists introduce them to intervention programs for individual children in need of special support. During the interviews, teachers mentioned that there are other co-workers from whom children and staff receive educational support, for example speech therapists and child psychologists from child welfare centres and social services.

Theme and Categories of Educational Support

The preschool teachers apprehend educational support in two different ways. Staffs believe that they don't do anything unique for children in need of special support, versus the view that children in need of special support need and get more from the staff through direct and indirect support. The first perspective emphasizes the point of view that children in need of special support do not receive specific educational support beyond that which the other children in preschool receive, or that the staff members are not aware of or assertive in their educational attitude.

"I don't know if it's something unique, I think what we do is sufficient at most times... or I don't know. Usually I work like that. One doesn't think too deeply about what one does. One thinks so little about what done does."

In the second perspective, the preschool teachers point out that specific educational support has two predominant themes - indirect and direct support - and that this support can be given directly to the individual child in need of special support, or several children in need of special support in a group. Direct support refers to the educational

support that is given directly to the child, and indirect support refers to educational support that is provided through more general methods.

Direct support

In the preschool teachers' statements, the theme 'direct support' is expressed as the staff attitudes, and the speech and language support and support for motor development that children in need of special support receive.

Attitudes

In this category, there is emphasis on the staff members' attitudes towards children in need of special support. It concerns how staff members treat children in need of special support with respect to positive comments and feedback. However, the preschool teachers express that it is difficult to maintain a positive response. A quotation that illustrates this is:

"It's a balancing act the whole time. It's like going through a minefield, one must watch each step. One must learn how to handle such children."

Effort

In this category, the teachers expressed that effort is an important educational support mechanism. In educational support, it is shown that staff should work with a positive, conscious effort, meaning that they should not focus on overly negative responses without highlighting the positive in communication with children in need of special support. It is important to give praise when the child does something positive, because encouragement and praise confirms the child's self-esteem.

"One tries to get them to understand that they are special and that they have accomplished a task. You want to show the child that has done something positive, not that the adult has done it for them: 'Did you see what you did, and how happy you made him?' This positive reinforcement shows that we are aware about what they have done. Then they can hear 'I can, I can'."

Here we can see that the preschool teacher describe how they give positive feedback to children in need of special support, and how they focus on this in their attitude towards the child. They reaffirm the child's positive characteristics and do not focus on the negative characteristics.

"It's important that one act consistently; when she's angry we lift her away, fast. Although she may think one is both stupid and mean, we must ignore it. I often say 'stop, now I am angry at you, but I like you'. That confirms that one likes her and says, 'I think it was silly what you did. But I like you all the same', and when she exhibits good behaviour she gets additional credit."

The preschool teachers seem to be both determined and aware of personal integrity, but they also give additional praise and display appreciation. The preschool teachers want children in need of special support to have friends - the praise these children receive is often in the presence of other children. Furthermore, preschool teachers give them easier instructions to carry out, for example when fetching items, the teachers try to set

children in need of special support in focus without the child feeling bad. The staff member's positive attitudes and effort affects the child in a positive manner.

Based on the preschool teachers' statements, it is identified that eye contact is important, and that extra eye contact should be given when parents leave their child at preschool. The preschool teachers experience indicates that eye contact is also important in order to develop the child's social competence.

Children receive additional attention - partly because the child is need of special support, and partly because they require more attention. The staff also give more attention in order to show the other children in the preschool group that these children belong to the group.

"If all the children want to come up in my arms and give hugs, they want to be seen and want to be close. They get it, but the children in need of special support get a little more.

In: In which way?

IP: Maybe they are the ones that are lifted up first.

In: Why do you do it?

IP: Because they need a little more, in order to show the other children that children in need of special support also exist. When we prepare a meal, fetch something or go walking, we make sure that that all children hold hands. We have a plan for meals, which states who you shall sit beside, as all children take turns to sit together with me. But the children that need additional attention maybe sit two out of three times beside me."

This shows that preschool teachers claim that children in need of special support get more of the staff's time. The child both gets and takes more time in all that they do, which means that they automatically gain more contact with adults. This additional attention is also directed at the parents and the children in need of special support when leaving and picking up the child from preschool.

Man-to-man marking

In educational support, the use of man-to-man marking of children in need of special support is necessary in order to prevent difficulties and in order to support the child in everyday preschool activities. Staff members prepare the child for new situations as they approach, in order to eliminate conflicts. Staff members also use this marking approach with the child during free play so that the child learns how to play in an appropriate manner.

Support in transition

The transition between different situations is critical. The educational support is provides in transition between different activities. The preschool teachers expressed that there are often conflicts regarding dressing for outdoor play, and that children in need of special support have difficulties with transition from outdoor play to coming inside for lunch.

"We always guide the child through change activities; sometimes it is when we go inside. This way they can manage themselves, their clothes, and wash themselves. With guiding this occurs very calmly."

Furthermore, staff members help the children in need of special support that cannot use the appropriate play codes, to get into play. The staff members initiate play, then the other children come - and in this way the child in need of special support is included in the play activities. In free-play, the staff members are together with the children that are troublesome and read or play games (or similar). Thereafter they become calm.

Speech and language support

Children in need of special support receive other educational support when it comes to speech and language. Staff and the other children talk more with hands, expression and show the child correct, incorrect and instructional behaviour. Children have also been divided into different circle time groups according to speech and language needs.

"We have a little group where we have children with linguistic needs, where we read simpler fairy-tales. We explain more, and it is a little more basic."

Furthermore, the teachers work with sign language and helping gestures, and are also supportive in language. A preschool describes how the preschool teacher tries to 'use his language' and explain for the benefit of the other children. But their experience indicates that it can occasionally be difficult to understand how he or she thinks.

Support for motor development

Children in need of special support receive support for motor development through gymnastics. Children that have poor body understanding get support through additional gymnastics and movement. In some preschools, the staff have special programs developed by physiotherapists for work with children in need of special support

Indirect support

This theme focuses on indirect support and details both the child support and support in the physical environment categories.

Support by peer

According to the preschool teachers, other children are 'supporters' for children in need of special support. The educational support means that teachers bring additional children into different activities. This can mean that the children and the child in need of special support play alone and undisturbed in a playroom, or that the staff and the 'supporter' do something by themselves along with the child in need of special support (for example, playing a game). A preschool teacher described how a child becomes quiet while passing out fruit together with another child. The other children in the preschool always go by themselves and divide out fruit. This also shows on an educational support level that the children support each other. The preschool teacher felt that all children think this is fun.

Furthermore, this means that in some preschools, the staff members have learned that the older children in the group will support the child in need of special support. In this way, the children can show substitute teachers how and what should be done in the special programme. An additional aspect in children supporting each other is that when a child sits next to the opposite sex in the circle, they become quiet. In this way, the other children assume the role of a mediator.

Support in the physical environment

In this category, preschool teachers described that children in need of special support often receive their motor training outdoors, whereby the child goes out and is active. Furthermore, the forest serves as an important place for training. They play a lot and have gymnastics in the forest. The preschool teachers describe that the forest is a valuable form of educational support because children have freedom and space. There are fewer requirements, nothing is predetermined and there are no limitations.

Training for children in need of special support also happens indoors through swimming with staff and occasionally other children from preschool. The staff members also ride with children in needs of special. There is an understanding regarding how staff place children in need of special support. The child can sit near the staff member or on their lap, in order to encourage a calm situation. These children usually have certain places to be both at circle time and during meals. The children can distance themselves from the other children at meals, both through an eyeshade and by sitting in a secluded room with fewer children. This allows for peace and quiet, as well as closer contact for conversation and discussions.

Exclusions from the child group

In this category it is emphasized that the child is separated from the child group. For example, the child has to sit at the computer in order to work together with the preschool staff, or to work with materials from the speech therapist (for example). In the interviews, the preschool teachers expressed that problems occur primarily at mealtimes, which means that the children are excluded from the other child group. At one preschool, a child with identified disabilities had to eat breakfast earlier because she needed quiet. However, the purpose is that all children have the same opportunities to do the same things. If this fails, then the children in need of special support will be taken away from the child group at mealtimes, the circle time, and during rest time and structured activities. The child is guided to a calm activity, for example drawing or a puzzle. At time for rest and fairy-tales, educational support for children in need of special support is individualized when they are alone with an adult, or have to go into a separate room with a staff member to read.

Discussion

How do preschool teachers describe their experiences about educational support offered to children in need of special support?

Previously, the typical approach has been to view children in need of special support and their limitations independently of factors from the environment (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2006). However, today, National Agency for Education (2004) expresses that it is the preschools' activities and educational work that shall be evaluated, and not the individual child and their achievements. This means that a focus on the environment in preschool can create problems. The National Agency for Education (2004) notes that the preschool shall adjust to each child's needs. In this study, we can see that there are variations of support to children in need of special support, and that the staff members have a significant consciousness about how they shall work in order to support the children.

In a study of Sandberg, Lillvist, Eriksson, Björck-Åkesson and Granlund, (accepted) two general perspectives for definitions of children in need of special support were discerned. 70% of the preschool staff gave definitions that focused on the child, while 30% gave definitions that were focused from an organizational perspective. The results indicated that if the proportion of children in need of special support is larger, then staff must involve children in need of special support in the main preschool activities to a larger extent than if just one or two children in the preschool units had special needs. If few children in the preschool units are in need of special support, special effort is arranged outside of ordinary routines. If a preschool has many children in need of special support, the children are more involved in developing stimulated 'activity settings' than the children that have special effort for just one child in need of special support. These results support the findings in this interview study showing that preschool teachers describe both that the children became involved but also received special attention.

Nutbrown & Clough (2004) claim that early education is best when it contains inclusive education, and points out that it possibly depends on the individual's needs, 'development of appropriate practice' and parents' participation. This study also shows this, as the preschool teachers emphasize attitude and that children need a great deal of support and positive responses from adults. The preschool teachers also explained that they have instinctive feelings. The educational support is also about participation, i.e. the feelings that can be seen and that the children need and get more attention from the staff in order to actively participate in everyday preschool life. A quotation that illustrates this is '...the others get it also but those who need more get more'. The preschool teachers point out collaboration between the staff and parents as especially important for children in need of support.

Nutbrown & Clough (2004) argue that teachers' professional development is a key factor for successful inclusion. In this study, the preschool teachers describe that supervision are important for them in their work. It's a challenge for municipalities to

create opportunities for staff to develop in their work. Supervision and continuous in-service education are important in order to secure the quality levels in preschool. In-service education is significant in several aspects, partly in order to participate in research but also to get reflections over attitudes present in this educational work (Sandberg, Anstett & Wahlgren, 2007).

Results from this study have implications for both praxis and theory both in Sweden and in other countries, as the study increases the knowledge and understanding of educational support that children in need of special support are offered in preschool today, which has importance for educational intervention in preschool.

The data collection in this study is based on semi-structured interviews. A benefit of this approach is to highlight the preschool teacher's thoughts and reflections regarding children in need of special support. One limitation of this approach is that the preschool teacher's variations of perceptions are collected and categorized in themes. When statements are categorized into themes, loss of data and variation will always occur. Therefore it's not possible to find out how many preschool teachers have a specific perception. Pedhazur and Pedhazur-Schmelkin (1991) argued that it is important that the interviewer is competent and takes into consideration that the feedback in the interview is not biased in the response process in the interview.

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