

«Do you talk about God in this nursery school?». Rhetoric and experience of the sacred in the reform of the Swedish childcare system (1968-1980)

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Abstract. In the second half of the 20th century, the Swedish educational system was subject to two parallel processes of secularization and *moralization*. The decline of the state church's hold on schools was accompanied by a growing emphasis on ethics, sense of community and social commitment in curricula and teachers' mission. The establishment of a state-run nursery school (*förskola*) in the mid-1970s is a striking example of this cultural dynamic. Drawing on the development and promotion of the new guidelines for *förskola* in public debate, the article focuses on the interweaving of political and transcendent expectations linked to this project, beyond its patent utilitarian rationale: facilitating women's participation in the labour market. While standing as the culmination of the most authoritative psycho-evolutionary theories of the time, the 'work plan' for day-care staff converted these theories into a practical doctrine, regulating everyday interaction between adults and children: so-called dialogue pedagogics (*dialogpedagogik*). State-supported campaigns aimed at popularizing the *förskola* among broader segments of society (parents of young children, immigrants, etc.) were paralleled by the sacralisation of esoteric rituals, spatial arrangements and lexical choices that identify it. Systematically opposed to suffocating family bonds (or to the alienation of the commodity society), the *förskola* emerges – in the rhetoric of officials of the welfare state – as something greater than a childcare provider. It embodies an enchanted realm, where modern society may enact its redemption from harmful conflicts and detrimental bias, but also a non-adversarial universe impervious to rational assessment.

Keywords: Nursery school; Welfare State; Swedish Model; Protestantism

1. Social utopia within a rational design: the rise of the *förskola*

This article considers the extent to which the reform of Sweden's nursery schools has promoted a *sacred* cosmology at the core of a secular welfare apparatus. At first glance, intertwining these two semantic areas might appear somewhat provocative. This is even more the case if we focus on the process that, by the end of the 1960s, had made the newly established nursery school, the *förskola*,¹ a proud emblem of women's liberation and a laboratory for a state-sanctioned anti-authoritarian style of education.² As a matter of fact, in both common and scholarly perception, the sacred halo is usually not associated with an emancipatory drive but rather with notions such as hierarchy, obscurantism, and alienation. Consequently, a working hypothesis such as this³ must involve a subversion of the common understanding of the boundary between the sacred and the profane. It calls on us to dive into

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¹ The term *förskola* literally means 'preschool', the official name, since 1975, for all types of *daghem*, or *dagis*, as day-care centres are called in everyday Swedish.

² On the ideological premises of the Swedish preschool system, see B. Hammarström-Lewenhagen (2013), *Den unika möjligheten. En studie om den svenska förskolemodellen 1968-1998* (Stockholm: Stockholm University) and P. Colla (2017), *L'héritage impensable. Conscience historique et technologies de l'identité dans la réforme éducative en Suède (1946-1980)* (Paris: EHESS. Unpublished doctoral thesis).

³ Manifestly, the sociological definition of 'sacred' to which I adhere extends far beyond the boundaries of the study of religious belief. According to Durkheim, the sacred is at the core of the social construction of meaning (*De la définition des phénomènes religieux, L'Année Sociologique*, 2 (1887-98), 25-26). In accordance with L. Kolakowski's definition, myth encompasses all realms of human experience where individuals act according to an unconditioned instance of truth, irreducible to technological or utilitarian motives. L. Kolakowski (1989), *The Presence of Myth* (Chicago: Chicago University Press). Following such a broad definition, culture falls to a great extent into the category of 'sacred'. See F. Champion, S. Nizard and P. Zawadzki (2007), *Reformuler la question du sacré en modernité*, in F. Champion et al. (eds.), *Le sacré hors religions* (Paris: L'Harmattan).

the Christian roots of a distinct, Scandinavian variation of rationalism,⁴ from which both the programmatic individualism of welfare programmes and the broad consensus for state intervention and social engineering⁵ might have arisen.

At an explicit level, the theoretical foundation of the *förskola* rests on two unequivocally anti-mythological assumptions:

1) firstly, on the political level, the emphasis on the autonomy of the child, which is also extolled for its role in liberating the working woman;⁶ and

2) secondly, on the pedagogical level, the reference to a programme that is underpinned by thoroughly scientific principles – taking pride in not neglecting any of the ‘natural’ stages in the neurological and cognitive development of each and every child.⁷

This article focuses on the main instrument used in this codification process: the work carried out by the *utredning* (‘state inquiry’) launched in 1968 under the leadership of the then-34-year-old (and future prime minister) Ingvar Carlsson.⁸ Its conclusions, submitted in 1972, laid the groundwork for the Child Care Act of 1975, which made it the duty of every municipality to provide a nursery school place for every six-year-old Swedish child.⁹ The inquiry also inspired the first official guidelines for the staff of the new institution.¹⁰ Following this reform, the day-care system became the only part of the education system to be planned down to the last detail of its remit: everyday interaction and social games, greetings at the beginning of the school day, the design of furniture and common spaces, etc.¹¹ It is this aspiration to comprehensiveness¹² as a pedagogical tool that prompted me to approach the preschool ethos as an independent and coherent ideological system. When compared with other branches of the Swedish education system, it is the *förskola* that most clearly displays a move from conventional craft knowledge towards instrumental rationality and value freedom. That is why, when the ethnologist Billy Ehn turned his attention to the *förskola*’s professional culture in the early 1980s, he concluded that it was a metaphor for two concurrent claims: *uncertainty* (with regard to absolute moral truth) and *order*, whereby all professional practice is supposedly in line with a set of formal and articulated objectives.¹³

For the sake of clarity, I am not interested in tackling the influence of theological trends on public socialization in early childhood or the survival of denominational rhetoric in the design of the new nursery school. I will limit myself to pointing out some features of this iconic institution within the Swedish *folkhem*¹⁴, which could witness a return of a sacred worldview in public deliberation. By ‘sacred’, I mean, ultimately, the social claim of a redeeming source of truth and the construction of a

⁴ See N. Witoszek (1997), *Fugitives from Utopia: the Scandinavian Enlightenment Reconsidered*, in Ø. Sørensen and B. Stråth (eds.), *The Cultural Construction of Norden* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press) and (2011), *The Origins of the Regime of Goodness: Remapping the Norwegian Cultural History* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press).

⁵ On the peculiar Swedish model of ‘state individualism’, see H. Berggren and L. Trägårdh (2006), *Är svensken människa?* (Stockholm: Norstedt).

⁶ Hammarström-Lewenhagen (2013), 19–21 ff.

⁷ See *Förskolan*, SOU 1972:26 (*del 1*), Chapter 1 (‘Theories on psychological development and the nursery school’s pedagogic programme’), 21–62, and Chapter 2 (‘Self-image, communication, conceptualisation’), 63–85.

⁸ The *Barnstugeutredning* (‘National inquiry on kindergarten’), 1968–75. See *Förskolan*, SOU 1972:26 (*del 1*) and SOU 1972:27 (*del 2*). When Carlsson was appointed, he was the leader of the Social Democratic Youth League.

⁹ *Lag om förskola*, SFS 1973:1205.

¹⁰ Socialstyrelsen (1975), *Vår förskola. Arbetsplan för förskolan*, 1, Stockholm.

¹¹ Note the simultaneous creation in 1971 (and until 1980) of a council for the play environment (*Lekmiljörådet*), under the authority of the State Administration for Social Affairs. On physical planning as an educational tool for nursery schools, see the section *Stimulans för begreppsbildningen* (‘Stimulation at the service of conceptualization’) in the final report of the *Barnstugeutredning*. SOU 1972:26, 189–92.

¹² Or ‘logocentricity’, drawing on one of the definitions of Protestant ethos by a current research programme on the ‘Aesthetics of Protestantism’ (<https://nord.unistra.fr/activites-scientifiques/aesthetics-of-protestantism-in-northern-europe>). This characteristic still seems to distinguish the social identity of the *förskola* even if, in contemporary Sweden, it seems rather to act as a vehicle for the diffusion of the culture of free entrepreneurship and rational management. See R. Thedvall (2019), *Fast Childcare in Public Preschools: The Utopia of Efficiency* (London: Routledge).

¹³ B. Ehn (1983), *Ska vi leka tiger?* (Stockholm: Liber).

¹⁴ ‘The people’s home’, the usual Swedish metaphore (since 1928) for the National model of Welfare State.

social space separated from everyday experience¹⁵ that is endowed with additional meaning and that sublimates the individuals who rely on it.

2. The *förskola* as a social imperative: tracking a metadiscourse

I will now single out three areas of research that move from the more articulate (political statements, legal texts, etc.) to the implicit and allusive. My source material comes from records of the decision-making process, the official guidelines that steer the work of professional actors, and the psychological and pedagogical expertise that the entire reform process was based on.

The first domain of ‘sacralization’ that I have found evidence of lies in the consistent claim of the providential status of a preschool institution in Swedish society today. The underlying assumption is a supposed collective responsibility on the part of the nation for the proper upbringing of children, within a specific institution and with a shared code. The best way to get a living picture of the self-image that the *förskola* projects – the way it markets itself – is to consider what it *refused* to see itself as during its reshaping process, as a distinctive branch of the Welfare State. The rhetoric used by its programmatic documents seems aimed at distancing the *förskola* from clichés that dismiss it as nothing more than a babysitting service provider : a ‘parking place’ for small children of busy parents.¹⁶ The strategic reason behind the state's decision to bring together, through the *förskola*, previous strands of childcare was apparently to invest them with a valued remit: as a report to the 1969 Social Democratic Party Congress put it, the aim consisted in equalizing the conditions for the upbringing of *all* Swedish children.¹⁷ The trend of incorporating child welfare (as well as a new educational style) within a national set of shared values would grow stronger and stronger throughout the 1970s.¹⁸ But was this trend really new?

When retracing the cultural origins of Swedish school reforms, I was struck by the fact that the symbolic appeal of preschool education took root well before its creation as a public institution in 1975. In the early days of the ‘Swedish model’, early childhood education was, in fact, very limited in scope, with fewer than 5000 places at the end of the 1930s and only 10,000 by 1950.¹⁹ What is more, it was split into two opposing traditions. On the one hand, it was housed in part-time, high-quality educational centres (*barnträdgård* or *leksskola*), which were available to the urban elites, and, on the other, in full-time day-care centres for the working class (*barnkrubba*): a utilitarian arrangement with no proper cultural profile. Despite this weak identity, this is where the imagined kindergarten wins a place in the symbolic construction of a community of equals. We can see it creeping into a wider narrative that unites science, social consciousness, and utopia: the narrative about a new society blossoming from its biological core, from a new collective responsibility for sexuality and reproduction (see pictures 1 and 2).

¹⁵ In Durkheim’s reasoning, it is precisely the social construction of two opposing spheres that is the distinctive sign of sacralization.

¹⁶ See C. Roman (2006), *Academic discourse, social policy and the construction of new families*, Working Paper 2 (Örebro: Örebro Universitet); and SOU (1972), 146. The promotion of the educational (and not only the utilitarian) value of the *förskola* would intensify when, following the reform of parenthood allowances (1974), the state proactively pursued the admission of children from birth up to three years of age. See Colla (2017), 653–61.

¹⁷ See Hammarström-Lewenhagen (2013), 58–69. The speech given by L. Enqvist, secretary of the Social Democratic Youth League, at the 1975 SAP congress would state this point even more clearly: ‘all children at the *daghem*: that’s the *folkhem* (welfare state) realized’ (SAP’s 26th congress, *Protokoll*, 793).

¹⁸ As witnessed by the proliferation of awareness-raising campaigns. See, on the one hand, the wide coverage of ‘enlightened’ educational habits and the legislation against corporal punishment in the family (1979) in the information material targeting immigrants, and, on the other hand, the reference to the expected awareness raising among immigrant populations in the surveys that accompany the reform of 1975. T. Hammar (1971), *Leva i Sverige* (Stockholm: Sveriges Radio), 93-97, and *Samverkan i barnomsorgen*, SOU 1975: 87, 123-30. See also Colla (2017), 698-700 and 707-708.

¹⁹ As late as 1966, the rate of preschool attendance did not exceed 2 per cent of all children in Sweden (source: *Statistiska centralbyrån*).



It costs but the equivalent of a few cents a day for the care and support of little Bertil in the Public Nursery. Here is where he'll spend the days of his early life in play with children his own age, learning the elements of getting along with people.

Picture 1

Source: *Sweden speaks... to the world of tomorrow* (Stockholm, Royal Swedish Commission, 1939)



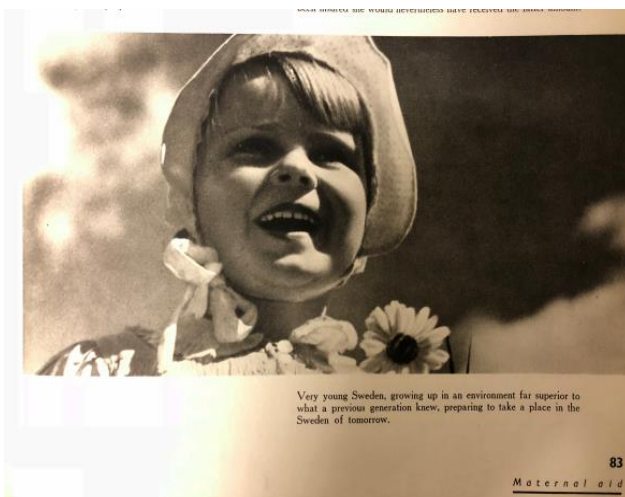
When mother is away at work during the day she may leave her offspring in the care of a public day nursery and kindergarten. Under expert supervision the child eats, sleeps, bathes and plays in the company of kiddies his own age. The charge varies according to the parents' income, from *nothing* to about one krona per day.

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Maternal aid

Picture 2

Among the vectors of this utopia, we find public health campaigns, as well as union and party leaflets. The aesthetics of physical strength and modernity and the ethics of harmonious socialization in the public sphere merge into a unifying icon: a healthy, smiling, blond-haired child (see pictures nos. 3, 4, and 5).²⁰



Very young Sweden, growing up in an environment far superior to what a previous generation knew, preparing to take a place in the Sweden of tomorrow.

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Maternal aid

Picture 3

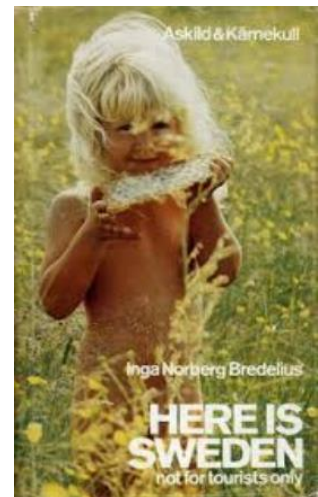
Source: *Sweden speaks...* (1939)



Introducing

Picture 4

Source: *Introducing Sweden* (1948).
Stockholm: The Swedish Institute



HERE IS SWEDEN
not for tourists only

Picture 5

Source: *Here is Sweden* (1970).
Stockholm: Askild & Kärnkull

²⁰ In pictures nos. 3 to 5, the juxtaposition of the three photographs, from the 1930s, the 1940s and the 1970s, clearly shows the persistence of a mytheme.

As the *new* nursery school peeks out from the social housing projects of the emerging welfare state (see picture 6), it is blessed with the same qualities as the ‘new’ family or the ‘new’ factory, as the ideologists of the social democratic reform policy – so-called social engineers – picture them: cleanliness and order, interclassism, social harmony, and efficiency.²¹ In comparison with other areas of public socialization, however, it brings with it one major added value: the utopia materializes in a fully artificial space, with no opportunities for the target of socialization to follow a different path. It provides a chance to plan the utopia into the social body, minimizing all risk of failure.



Picture 6

Source: HSB-Arkiv Stockholm, “Barn i sandlåda” Stockholm, 1930s

3. An oasis in a hostile world

The Swedish project for a universal nursery school foreshadowed the possibility of a society regenerated by the unifying mythologies of modernity. Still, an interweaving of psychological and cultural barriers would hinder the development of a nursery-school network for a long time. Its institutionalization in the early 1970s is marked by a different, more pressing argument that is found in every report and expert opinion drafted prior to the establishment of the *förskola*, i.e., that the takeover of public socialization by the professional childcare sector is in fact predetermined and inescapable.

On the one hand, the founding documents²² present the development of public education as a self-evident social imperative steered by global processes, such as urbanization, the split between the sphere of production and domestic life, and a decreasing birth rate. On the other hand, they portray public education as an opportunity to be exploited. The first argument is merely functional: it suggests that an advanced society cannot do without the *daghem*²³. The second argument, however, expresses a voluntary ambition, seeing the *daghem* as a project for nurturing better-socialized, more-considerate, and more-responsible human beings. The legitimacy of the *daghem* in the social arena would, in the end, rest on two uncontested principles: on the one hand, the objective dismissal of a

²¹ See Y. Hirdman (1989), *Att lägga livet tillrätta: studier i svensk folkhemspolitik* (Stockholm: Carlsson).

²² See SOU 1972:27; Socialstyrelsen (1975), *Vår förskola*; Socialstyrelsen (1978), *Små barn i daghem. Arbetsplan för förskolan*, 5, Stockholm.

²³ See footnote 1 above.

diminished family unit as a socializing agent and, on the other, its maladjustment to new productive, hygienic, and psychosocial needs. From this moment on, two narratives – or rather two registers within one narrative – develop in parallel, with sociological accounts of the crisis of family ties, such as Rita Liljeström's,²⁴ as sources of inspiration. Within the latter register, the polemical canon we meet more frequently aims to undermine competing myths, countering the uniqueness of the remit of the *förskola*. Prejudices or narratives that trivialize the providential function of professional care for children must be swept away. A frequent topos – which is commonly found in the mainstream sociology of the family of the 1970s and has been the frequent subject of surveys – is, for example, the critique of the maternal role (the so-called 'myth of the mother', *modersmyten*); the doctrine of the new institution would make its best effort to desacralize its aura for the benefit of the child's access to a less exclusive bond: a horizontal community and a child-friendly environment, where solidarity rules.²⁵

The shaming of a family group unable to see the link between correct educational methods and successful social adaptation is a recurrent theme in the early years of surveys on the reshaping of childcare. Assessing whether blaming the 'privatization' of education follows primarily from a pedagogical or ethical standpoint – from the health of the individual child or from unconditional claims about the unity of educational goals – is an impossible mission. Scientific and ethical standpoints are mixed up in the pedagogical programme outlined in the above-mentioned 1972 report, to the point of making them indiscernible. The idea underlying the programme is that applying the desired, objective approach (to the neuropsychological development of the child, to the conditions for socialization, to the need for independence) can only foster desirable social behaviours, or rather a desirable 'competence'.²⁶ The official goals of the *förskola* that were formalized between 1968 and 1972 are a patent expression of this oscillation between the two dimensions.²⁷

Since the late 1970s, researchers such as Daniel Kallós have questioned the soundness of this construction, reporting that it did not meet any scientific criteria.²⁸ However, the hybrid status of this new pedagogical trend is, in my view, its most intriguing aspect and, in some respects, its most effective asset. My question here is not about the trustworthiness of a pedagogical theory but rather about the opposition it builds between the realm of knowledge — defined by a set of functional routines — and the realm of ignorance, which amounts in fact to a fault: betraying the developmental objectives for children, objectives that, as stated in the 1972 report, are necessarily 'ideological'.²⁹ These objectives therefore transcend the pragmatic sphere and engage the entire adult world.

One thing is certain: during the 1970s, pro-*förskola* rhetoric moved from an early psycho-cognitive focus on individual well-being and on techniques for achieving it towards a *sociological* register based on the synergy between collective intentions and educational principles. This trend implies a move towards more emphatic rhetoric when it comes to defining the institution's goals, as well as a more universal (or hegemonic) ambition

²⁴ See R. Liljeström (1976), *Våra barn, andras ungar* (Stockholm: Liber); and Socialstyrelsen (1978), 18–22. On the politicization of family and childcare politics in the 1960s, see C. Florin and B. Nilsson (2000), '*Något som liknar en oblodig revolution*' (Umeå: Jämställdhetskommittén).

²⁵ See the supplement to the official working plan on the schooling of the youngest children at *förskola* (Socialstyrelsen, 1978). One of the recurrent themes is breaking the emotional exclusivity of families. There are self-assessment exercises at the end of each chapter that include items like the following: 'Is Mommy the best?' or 'I think that the youngest children should stay with their mothers. Why should I change my mindset?' (Socialstyrelsen 1978, 33).

²⁶ In the 1972 inquiry, this new key concept is still placed in quotation marks (SOU 1972:26, 59).

²⁷ This ambiguity is reflected in the simultaneous reference in the theoretical part of the *Barnstugeutredning* report of 1972 to a functionalistic (cognitivist or psychoanalytical) and utopian approach to development: Piaget and Eriksson, on the one hand, and Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich, on the other (SOU 1972:26, 37 ff.) A frank examination of the connection between the political and psycho-developmental goals of the *förskola* programme can be traced in SOU 1972:26, 39–44.

²⁸ D. Kallós (1978), *Den nya pedagogiken* (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand), 32–33.

²⁹ 'It seems essential to rely on a global political objective, which reflects the ideological background of the programme for *förskola*. This objective should clearly articulate the vision and care of the child that are specific to our society'. (SOU 1972, 41–42).

The goals set by the *Barnstugeutredning* concern the *förskola* to which every six-year-old child is entitled to be admitted. In other words, they apply, in principle, to the whole age group interested in its activities. This means that the goals that the Swedish Parliament has established apply to *all children* of pre-school age (SOU 1975, 1, 107-108).

The ideas that are conveyed by the *förskola* must be rooted in an ideology that can be encapsulated in the following key words: ‘democracy’, ‘solidarity’, ‘equality’, ‘security’ (Socialstyrelsen, 1981, 43).

To summarize this part of my analysis, a crucial element of the message circulated about the *förskola* is that one must think highly of it and regard its institutional ethos as the ideal embodiment of a responsible education. Unsurprisingly, image-building and universalization of the target become a growing concern for its development: both the adjustment of its internal organization³⁰ and its rhetoric are evidence of this.

Take, for example, the official guidelines, or *arbetsplan* (‘work plan’),³¹ which was revised both in 1976 and then again two years later, in 1978, to cover successively broader audiences: immigrants at the *daghem*, young children at the *daghem*, etc.³² The rewriting of the rules has often had the aim of directly making a desired target group familiar with the spiritual qualities and psychosocial objectives that only the *förskola* can embody. This is a sign of an interesting phenomenon: expert reports and even instructions for staff intervene on the social scene by making clear to the public – supposedly unaware or hostile – that the imaginary space that the institution delimits is endowed with a moral message. Nursery school appears now as an iconic place for *goodness* (see **picture 7**), and all necessary efforts are taken – in public reports and information sheets – to display the ethical qualities of the preschool environment.



Picture 7

Source: *Statens offentliga utredningar*, 25 (1981) Stockholm

³⁰ Like the creation of introductory procedures for newcomers. See the chapter ‘Starting at preschool or in-home preschool’ in *Bra daghem för små barn*, SOU 1981:25, 211–31 and Colla (2017), 661–76.

³¹ Socialstyrelsen (1975).

³² Socialstyrelsen (1976), *Invandrarbarn i förskolan. Arbetsplan för förskolan*, 4, Stockholm; and Socialstyrelsen (1978).

What are the virtues conveyed by the iconography we just met? In the first place, the notions of generosity, reciprocity, and a lack of ulterior motives: The intrinsic value of the human exchanges taking place in the *daghem* is the argument that explains why young children, children without siblings, foreign children, should all have access to its care. This provides a hint about an important rhetorical shift taking place at the level of the production of professional standards: the necessity of the *förskola* is no longer rooted in its pedagogical practices but in its very essence. It is not what the institution does that matters but what it *suggests* through its connoted routines: the exemplary message it is spreading. Public inquiries will advocate, for instance, on behalf of the importance of the *daghem* as a natural meeting place for the local community.³³ It embodies, for example, a place where *parents* can be socialized and educated.³⁴ An additional shift is that rhetoric about the benefits of preschool education originates from outside the preschool context. The inflation of a semantics of space in reform rhetoric of the 1970s – *barnmiljö* (‘children’s environment’), *lekmiljö* (‘playing environment’), *barnkultur* (‘children’s culture’) – reflects this turn. All these political keywords refer to a dreamed-of unity and generate tools and practices for organized virtue. They help make the *förskola*’s unifying cosmology inescapable.

4. A providential ‘dialogue’

To better capture what allows advocates of the *förskola* to credit its practices as a better alternative to the realm of everyday exchanges and relations, it is essential to change the plan of analysis. In other words, moving from the role the nursery school plays in the organization of social space – family and urban life – to the implementation of its doctrine.

To what extent can we call the *förskola*’s founding documents a ‘doctrine’? These documents – state surveys, expert opinions dealing with different types of users, etc. – provide a puzzling picture. The theory established between 1972 and 1975 is repeatedly reassessed during its first years of implementation,³⁵ often starting with empirical investigations carried out by the numerous university departments of psycho-pedagogy. The successive rewritings of the working programmes express, time after time, specific shifts in emphasis: from individual well-being to group dynamics, from free play to structured play, from autonomy to the value of clear rules. Let us dispel this ambiguity: the identity of the *förskola*, as an institution supported by a shared ideal, can hardly be reduced to a persistent theoretical construction. This does not prevent us from isolating a preschool ideology in practice, bearing in mind that this ideology is perpetuated not as a pedagogical project but as a diffuse body of expected behaviours and encouraged concerns: a mindset inculcated in professional operators, parents, and the broader public.

This is a further level of analysis I am giving priority to: the advent of a doxa embedded in power dynamics. We have already grasped the essence of this doxa: it is based on the *förskola*’s claim that it upholds the interests of the child in social space. The *förskola* claims to rule out all types of selfish intentions or interested manipulation; meanwhile, it stigmatizes the egoism of all other actors in a child’s life. The purpose of this stance could perhaps be to conceal what should not be thought of: namely, that the social logic of the actual proliferation of nursery schools is connected with the social

³³ Connecting and equipping all areas of children’s lives with a coherent mission – from common political goals – is the aim of the *Barnmiljöutredning* (‘State Survey on the Children’s Environment’), 1973–75, which released eight full reports in one year.

³⁴ The working group on childcare (*barnomsorgsgruppen*) (1973–80) was tasked with drafting national guidelines for parental education from the period before a child’s birth until the child enters school (see the final report, *Barn och vuxna*, SOU 1980:27). Let us recall that the idea the committee initially defended was to make this preparation compulsory for every citizen.

³⁵ A first important ideological revision took place in 1981, with the adoption by the administration of social services of new guidelines for nursery-school staff (Socialstyrelsen, 1981). On this occasion, the issue of free dialogue between adults and children gives way to a greater demand for goal-oriented activities and integration with the group.

instincts that one is trying to discredit, i.e. the selfish interest of adults, the demands of the labour market, other concerns besides the well-being of children.

What we are concerned with here is the imaginary role of an ideology rather than its social roots. On this level, two principles emerge that can be related to some evidence found in Weber's examination of the logic of Protestantism: on the one hand, a sacrificial or ascetic element, i.e. the unconditional affirmation of the will to do well, in opposition to fanaticism, aggression, corporate interests; and, on the other hand, the rationalization of putting a bitter end to all spontaneous practices, especially those assigned to irrational feelings, unconditional love, or indifference to one's neighbour. Love can be shared; it can never be exclusive and must be goal-oriented.

If before it was Daddy holding [10-month-old] Johan in his arms, it is now up to Lisa, the nursery nurse, to take him on her lap [...] Daddy stays by and talks to Lisa in a familiar way. This is how Johan understands that the adults who care for him get along well (Socialstyrelsen 1978, 141).

The main pedagogical tool the *förskola* provides to its actors – the one encapsulated in the popular expression *dialogpedagogik* ('dialogue pedagogy') – can be seen as a synthesis of these two values. This teaching technique provides the main tool according to which professional childcare is predetermined and rationalized. It requires the removal of the hierarchy implicit in the adult-child relationship, as in human relationships in general, a shift that is praised both for its positive effects on how children are raised and because all of society is supposed to benefit from an examination of conscience.

The pedagogy of dialogue must begin with the adult's recognition of his or her own values and the way in which they influence his or her behaviour towards children and adults (Socialstyrelsen, 1975, p. 52).

Dialogue pedagogy can be defined as a standard technique for verbal exchanges. It requires controlled and fully conscious management of interaction. Every adult is called on to talk to small children, to approach them in a rational and respectful way, while encouraging them to engage in self-disclosure. In other words, dialogue amounts to a way of experiencing the world, with no obligations except for the obligation to open up, to show authenticity in order to trigger a general drive towards authenticity. Direct restrictions or injunctions aimed at children are forbidden, as is the use of assertive phraseology. The purpose of speech is always to act as an invitation for self-disclosure. A sentence from the first curriculum (1975), for example, discourages the teacher from responding to an odd sentence by asking the child to explain what he or she meant. The curriculum states that the teacher should never ask the question, Why? because requests for explanations would damage the general climate of empathy and intimacy.³⁶

Both the normative texts and my main empirical field (the study of continuing on-the-job training for preschool teachers) convey a message: the virtues of the new pedagogical technique, i.e., dialogue, concern not only educational practice. "Dialogue" epitomizes a mental attitude: it is the *good* modality of one's relationship with a child, with colleagues, and with authorities.³⁷ In my view, the greatest misunderstanding associated with this scheme is the impression of spontaneity, of the absence of ends, that it creates. In the background, there is a moral metatext, an implied one. Exhaustiveness is one of these implied goals. All classical taboos (such as religion and sex) are rejected in a pedagogical machinery conceived as a maieutic tool. For example, children *must* talk and hear about what God is (or is not) and other existential questions, as the quote in the title of this article suggests. The quote below refers to children in nursery school up to three years of age.

In your *förskola*, can children encounter adults who speak frankly and in depth with them about issues concerning birth; illness and death; violence, hunger, and poverty; religion; God and the concept of divinity; the concepts of righteousness, honesty, and disloyalty; what happiness is? (Socialstyrelsen 2 1975, 69)

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

³⁷ That is why the term can also be found as an adjective, 'dialogue-pedagogical' in the normative texts, thus endowing specific language and modes of communication with the idea that they are correct and proper.

This warning clearly has a demonstrative (rather than pedagogical) value: It shows how the duty of sincerity must always prevail over prudence, privacy, secrecy. Here again, the *förskola* is presented as a space where ‘we’ relate to each other and speak to each other in a different way than in the rest of the (social) world. With the help of guidelines for the staff and in-house assessments, the social administration undertakes great efforts to bring into the actors’ consciousness the benefits of this practice: the virtues of norm-related dialogue.

5. Self-control and submission to the norm: some implicit injunctions of professional training

A field assessment by the representatives of preschool pedagogical theory can be taken as an example.³⁸ The investigation I carried out was mostly aimed at disclosing hidden power dynamics and status conflicts, concealed behind handy tips, praises and warnings to staff. Nonetheless, I was also able to identify a clear set of implicit moral patterns underlying the statements by experts on the performance of the preschool inspected. Through the interviews with the staff – whose main purpose is to clarify and emphasize the intentions of the new emancipatory doctrine – some patterns of Puritan ethics, as outlined by Weber, can easily be observed.

Obviously, tracking ‘symptoms’ of Protestant ethos in an impressionistic way is not a sound option: the goal of a sociological inquiry must be related to causal relationships. In the best of cases, this will help us get closer to the ‘utility’ of utilitarianism. What that flaunted pragmatism is for? A first striking element of the image of the ideal preschool that the above-mentioned implementing study articulates is the requirement that its pedagogy occupy the largest symbolic area: the experts make it clear that life in a nursery school must aim to stimulate all aspects of the physical, emotional, and moral life of the child – in line with the only legitimate aims, the three fundamental goals of the *daghem*.

We wanted to evaluate the children’s environment through the qualitative study of the processes that can lead to the overarching objective (Söderlund and William-Olsson, 1978, Introduction).³⁹

When faced with deviations from the desired model, experts involved in participant observation do not hesitate to take on a tone of admonition:

You are very good at teaching children norms that explain the behaviour expected from them. You can see that children listen to you with ease. But the real issue is: How do we expect children to behave? (Söderlund and William-Olsson, 1978, 146)

To this extent, preschool code can be described as a move towards control and systematization, a move directed against all forms of hedonism, what Weber calls ‘the spontaneous enjoyment of life’.⁴⁰ Here, hedonism is simply synonymous with irresponsibility: It might cover all sorts of free emotional expressions. Even anger or moral indignation, when they are ends in themselves, can be related to a desire for pleasure, for emotional release. These behaviours are here objects of reprobation, on the ground of the duty of the educational community to stick to a single rule of practice. Staff members’ attitudes are considered in terms of their conformity with institutional goals and, more generally, in terms of conscious goal orientation.

³⁸ The examples that follow in the main body of the text come mainly from a follow-up project carried out by the Stockholm school for teacher training between 1976 and 1977 in six nursery schools in the Stockholm area on the basis of the new official guidelines for nursery schools. A. Söderlund and I. William-Olsson (1978), *Försöka duger* (Stockholm: Högskolan för lärarutbildning).

³⁹ Söderlund and William-Olsson (1978), ‘Introduction’.

⁴⁰ M. Weber (2005), *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Routledge), originally published in 1905, trans. by A. Giddens, 18.

The above-mentioned field study also provides other information in the answers or free statements provided by staff members concerning the implementation of the dialogue technique; they become then secondhand sources of information concerning the common ethos of the institutions in question – a popular translation of the doctrine.

One of the primary forms that the rhetorical claim of the superiority of regulation and self-discipline takes is the discipline of *time* (when children are dropped off and picked up at nursery school) and the consequential criticism of parents who are in a rush as they leave their children or who fail to take the time to meet with the staff.⁴¹ This is the most anodyne way of embedding a clear pattern of discipline in this radically non-directive institution. Whoever fails to find a way to adjust to the institution's ubiquitous rules is shamed, is criticized for not taking into account the prescriptions of dialogue. Most of the time, the sinners and heretics happen to be foreigners, or Swedes with values that differ from those of the majority,⁴² although this fact almost always goes unsaid. The most recurrent concern I met in field observation reports is that of anxiety regarding conflicts and conflict resolution. The subject matter tends to be rather trivial: meals, how to dress the children, the extent to which children should be given direction. The authors of these reports articulate this by repeatedly questioning the staff on this topic. How do they deal with conflicts? How do they come to terms with conflict and channel it into the production of 'common rules'⁴³ and in discussions of an ever-increasing level of seriousness?

Why – one might ask – does a pluralistic and rational institution like the *förskola* assign such importance to morality? Why do God and the concept of Law have such an important place in the *förskola*'s doctrine? My answer is that this concern is *not* about metaphysics or about ultimate goals. Morality, as expressed in the form of a dialogue about values, or value consciousness, is mostly about a desire for collective efficiency and a way of enforcing consensus concerning an explicit goal. This is the purpose of specific preschool routines, such as the *samling* ('children's assembly'), which symptomatically enough appears in most iconographic representations of the *daghem*, as a summation of its identity. The ethical readiness the authors of the Stockholm study seem to value is an ethics of *action*, of communal action. That is why this morality is openly equated with everyday skills – familiarity with other forms of social discipline.⁴⁴ It helps to keep out otherworldliness, as Max Weber put.⁴⁵

All this brings us to a tricky question: to what extent is the *förskola* genuinely operating according its official goals, i.e. fostering criticism and individualism? According to the *daghem*'s doctrine, everybody is supposed to be allowed to take the floor, to construct a moral stance. That is why increasing the interest and physical presence of parents at nursery schools and involving immigrant populations are objectives extolled by every assessment conducted between 1975 and 1980.⁴⁶ *Conflict*, or a *cultural clash*, is the key term found in these reports, which are dominated by the idea that the institution must operate in accordance with its democratic mission and generate educational rules and norms that are shared by all actors. On the other hand, this also shows that the ultimate concern – echoed in in-house training, quality evaluations, external reports – is always about strengthening consensus, halting resistance, reaching a deal – in other words, escaping pluralism.

⁴¹ See Ehn 1983, 69.

⁴² Söderlund and William-Olsson (1978), 145–46, 175 ff. The most stigmatized fault is an excess of authoritarianism in relationships with the child, but also an emotional bond that is too strong or, on the contrary, indifference, both representing an infringement of the participatory logic of dialogue. See B. Ehn (1986), *Det otydliga kulturmötet* (Stockholm: Liber).

⁴³ This is also one of the few fields where the preschool doctrine assigns a pedagogic value to adults' conduct. 'Adults are also models for children. This is why it is considered essential that adults also resolve their own issues within the group of children' (Söderlund and William-Olsson 1978, 45).

⁴⁴ The 'activity stations' prescribed in the 1981 *förskola* programme range from 'talking to each other' and 'eating and resting' to 'discussing life's conceptions'. See Socialstyrelsen (1981).

⁴⁵ Weber (1905), 8 ff.

⁴⁶ Colla (2017), 643–676.

Pluralism is about value premises, while the official discourse about morality redefines every problem as practical, finalized. In the ideal *daghem*, the space of fantasy – but also tradition and preferences – is strictly confined. The observation reports are full of intriguing hints about this taboo: reprimands against *daghems* considered ‘too’ tidy and orderly, which might seem surprising, considering the extent to which conflict management was prescribed. The fact is that, in the view of the institution, even social harmony must be experienced within a rational framework. The communitarian ideal must be translated into a set of routines, where empathy and solidarity become the object of professional training. Dream-like harmony and emotional comfort are not legitimate goals.

The stated aim of both parents and staff is that the *daghem* should look like a HOME as much as possible. But what is meant by ‘a home’ is actually an ideal home: an idyllic place, very far from the reality of today’s families with children. A great, warm and good idyll, with the mother at the centre who solves everything [...] Does organizing an environment for the youngest babes mean escaping from reality? (Söderlund and William-Olsson 1978, p. 145).

But what does submission to reality (through a focus on ‘concrete’ concerns, ‘current’ topics, as the curriculum repeatedly stresses) mean if not simply submission to societal order? This can also explain the evocative status of manual labour that we meet in most visual representations of nursery-school life attached to the surveys and curriculum we have examined (see **picture 8**). After all, the subtext is praise for nothing other than voluntary submission to *fate*. It implies the inconsequentiality of the human being and the futility of individual rebellion. While being the apex of pragmatism, it is at the same time the apex of ascetism and spirituality. The ground where all human contradictions are dissolved, where free will and absolute discipline converge, is in essence the ground of mythical experience.⁴⁷



⁴⁷ ‘One can participate in mythical experience only with the fullness of one’s personality, in which the acquisition of information and the absorption of directives are inseparable’ (Kolakowski 1989, 128).

Picture 8

Source: *Statens offentliga utredningar*, 25 (1981) Stockholm

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