

Speaking of children's needs: The tricky terrain between preschool policy and practice

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SUMMARY

This article presents a way of understanding the concept of children's needs in preschool as a differentiating practice in the tension between special and general education where performative acts take place. Drawing on ideas of Foucault and Butler, the article examines official discourse regarding children's needs represented at a policy level in the Swedish preschool curriculum with its inclusive ideals. That discourse is shown to give rise to problems in relation to everyday preschool practice, which is seen as filled with dilemmas. These dilemmas concern questions about fulfilling the mission of a preschool for all as well as for every child, and include an understanding of how children's needs are negotiated in relation to equality, fairness and the resources available.

Keywords: *children's needs; differentiating discursive practices; ethical dilemmas; performative acts; Swedish preschool*

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Children's needs in a differentiating preschool practice

It is difficult to imagine preschool as one of society's educational institutions without some form of differentiation in which norms play a role. Norms have power within a disciplinary system, such as a preschool, in that they are used to compare human behaviours, actions, and performances (Foucault, 1975/2009). Here I consider norms as they relate to children's needs within the disciplinary system consisting of the Swedish preschool, and I will be concentrating on problems related to the discourse regarding all children's needs versus those of just certain children. The overall aim is to problematise and critically discuss discourse regarding children's perceived needs in the preschool context, in the tricky terrain between policy and practice.

In this philosophically and theoretically oriented article, discourse regarding children's needs will be shown to be associated with dilemmas in contrast to the prevailing assumption that the notion of needs is a self-evident, simple, and unambiguous

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concept that can be used unambiguously as a starting point in preschool. The article is organized as follows. First it will elucidate ambiguities and contradictions in the curriculum as it relates to needs. Second it will offer two empirical examples of the complexity involved in making ethical deliberations and choices in everyday preschool life. Following this, it will consider the conceivable effects of such deliberations and choices. The article begins by presenting an orthodox definition of the term 'need' followed by an alternative way of understanding the term.

An orthodox definition

The Swedish term '*behov*' ('need' in English) has its roots in early Old Swedish, and is defined as "an inherent demand for the cessation of a given lack, consciously or unconsciously; with respect to a real or perceived lack" (Need, n.d.). Its implications are associated specifically with "the deeper human impulses" and exemplified by the "need for expression; need for tenderness; innate [need]; outlet for their [need]; sub-conscious [need]; [and] children's [need] for adult contact" (Need, n.d.). The term can thus be understood as being closely tied to one or more lacks which, based on the inner individual, cry out for cessation, satisfaction, and hence remedial action. One can therefore conclude that the actual need associated with a lack may be tied to an individual perspective and that it always indicates an absence of something desirable. It thus seems impossible to speak of children's needs without at the same time speaking of what they lack.

An alternative understanding

There have long been, both nationally and internationally, theoretically related arguments as to whether children should be described as being *with* needs or *in* need. The different understandings signal differences in basic values, (special) educational approaches, and solutions to perceived difficulties. The elucidation of what this distinction may entail and its consequences for both children and inclusive education (i.e., education for all children) is important for the ways in which problems in preschools can arise and be prevented and "managed". In this study, I use a broad definition (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014) of inclusion as a policy, as a vision or as an ideal that concerns education for all children. Moreover, I construe inclusive education as a practice to meet the rights of all educationally, socially and spatially. In addition, special education in this study is defined as an educational practice in preschool where educational inclusion may or may not occur. Special education is closely linked to general education. The lack of clear and delimited borders between general and special education is well established. This raises the question, if it is necessary, in research and in practice, to separate special education from general, or inclusive, education.

There are good grounds for returning to, expanding on, and deepening the discussion about children's needs, both within (special) education and inclusive practices in preschool and in research into these matters (see also Kiuppis & Hausstätter,

2014; Palla & Vallberg Roth, 2020; Slee, 2018; Warming, 2011). According to Haug (2016), international organizations – such as the European Union, UNICEF and UNESCO – share ideals when defining inclusion. Inclusion involves the right to education for all and is strongly value- and ideology-driven. Haug argues that although the majority of the European countries have acknowledged that inclusive education is central to securing equal educational rights for all, the practices of inclusive education differ greatly in many of the countries and even in and between educational settings. There seems to be a gap between formulations and realizations of inclusive education, for example in preschools. However, recent research is clear regarding inclusive preschool for all being a right in the Nordic countries. As today's preschool is part of the education system, with an enhanced learning focus and inclusive ideals, there is a need to study terms and conditions for an inclusive preschool in different ways. The research in this area would for example benefit from illuminating “the fundamental values and views of children who for various reasons are defined as children in need of special education in preschool” (Palla, 2020b, p. 708). The present article constitutes such an attempt.

In the discussion of children's perceived needs below, the “orthodox” definition will not be used. Instead, the term *need* will be understood and analysed as something discursively constructed in relation to the defining practice. It will furthermore be examined in relation to linguistic actions in performative acts (Butler, 2004, 2005, 2007) and in relation to the preschool as a differentiating practice, where the normalising power compares, differentiates, homogenises, and excludes and in so doing creates value hierarchies (Foucault, 2000).

A child-centred place of education

It has been well established that the Swedish preschool is a child-centred educational institution (Lindgren, 2018; Palla, 2020b; Tallberg Broman & Vallberg Roth, 2019). The Swedish preschool has been said to welcome all children (Palla, 2011). It is thus unremarkable to assert that the discourse regarding children's needs has claimed a special place in discussions of special and inclusive education in preschool; that is, this discourse is assumed to be good and natural, and to be the basis for both nurture and development, and the starting point for teaching and learning. Children's needs are mentioned frequently in the curriculum (Skolverket, 2018). Preschool teachers' statements are often consistent with the formulations in this curriculum (Palla & Vallberg Roth, 2020; Tallberg Broman & Vallberg Roth, 2019), but preschool staff may also offer discursive resistance if their experience or personal knowledge contradicts such statements (Tallberg Broman & Vallberg Roth, 2019). These research results can be related to Foucault's (1971/1993) idea that not just anyone can speak about just anything at just any time in society and its institutions. The preschool and its policy documents may be viewed in this spirit as a practice that permits a certain type of expression regarding children's needs.

Taking into account teachers' statements, which based on their personal experience or knowledge may contradict the curriculum, permits ethical dilemmas that arise in everyday practice to be recognized as problems that need to be addressed. It is not self-evident whose needs should be brought to the fore in groups comprising some 15–25 children, nor is it obvious how and when the needs of all children versus the needs of one child or certain children are to be met. Research regarding ethical dilemmas in preschool has been focused in part on inclusion as a right for all children in Nordic preschool forms, and on the fact that it is difficult to argue for simple solutions or pat answers to complex everyday preschool-related occurrences (Palla, 2011, 2020b; Warming, 2011; Åmot, 2012). The actions of preschool staff are often related to their immediate assessments in the moment (Åmot, 2012), or to their extemporaneous pedagogy in difficult situations (Gjermestad, 2009; Wetso 2006). Åmot (2012) asserts that the immediate assessments that preschool staff make are tied in large measure to their perceptions of the requirements expressed in the policy documents.

The discourse regarding children's needs, then and now

This paper asserts that it is no more possible to dismiss preconceptions about children's needs in an inclusive preschool than it is to dismiss or avoid discussing preconceptions about terms such as *development*, *security*, or *learning* in the same context. It may be argued that an established and dominant child-centred discourse can be identified genealogically within the preschool as an educational institution (Palla, 2020a), within which discourse the speech regarding children's needs constitutes a nodal point. This discursive hegemony and the status that the concept of need has claimed and retained within the preschool as a specific educational institution contribute to shaping the mandate that the preschool has, as well as the ways in which preschool staff can and cannot express themselves regarding children's needs.

The discourse regarding children's needs can be discerned and traced to different times in the century-plus history of the Swedish preschool, in which varying connotations of the definitions of *needs* have come to the fore at different times. Regulatory and advisory documents and literature from different times show that children's needs have been related to, for example, hygiene, character formation, language, and forms of aesthetic expression (Palla, 2020a).

The discourse regarding children's needs that has been heavily influenced by the child and developmental psychology dominance at work in and influencing the history of the Swedish preschool (Eidevald, 2009; Nordin-Hultman, 2004) has not operated unopposed. Competing constructions of children have offered resistance. One example that may be viewed as an antagonist or alternative to the discourse regarding children's needs lies in the emphasis on the *competent child*. This concept became firmly established in sociological research on children and childhood, the public debate, and, not least, preschool practice in the 1990s. Within this discourse the child was brought to the fore as an active social agent and cultural co-constructor

of reality. It was a child with rights and a voice of its own. The idea of the competent child soon “became a nodal point in the Swedish preschool discourse” (Lindgren, 2018, p. 32). Broad differentiations are constructed between so-called general and special needs, both currently and in the history of the preschool (Lutz, 2009). These differentiations make psychological, educational, social, or medical claims in terms of definitions and motivations for constructions and differentiations of needs. For example, there has been the distinction between general needs (the needs of all children) and special needs (the needs of individual or certain children) (Palla, 2011, 2020a). There are thus different ways of approaching the term *children’s needs*, including in more contemporary settings.

An established fact – needs must be met

Children’s needs are a recurring theme in the Swedish preschool curriculum. Expressions regarding children’s needs or statements that children need something appear around 20 times in the 20-page document (Skolverket, 2018). This could be interpreted to mean that the discourse regarding children’s needs is key in the regulatory document, and a review of earlier versions of the curriculum (Palla, 2020a) shows that such discourse is well established at the official and regulatory level. The current curriculum (Skolverket, 2018) operates with formulations that may be interpreted as relating to all children, each child, and “certain” children. The expressions concerning all children and each child appear 20 and 16 times in the document, respectively.

A qualitative text analysis with close in-depth readings built upon the theoretical support of Foucault and Butler shows the following. When it comes to needs specifically, the definitions of ‘*need*’ are tied primarily to aspects of equality, to all children, or to those children whose needs are constructed as special or who are seen as needing more than others. Children’s needs are sometimes constructed as different, and sometimes as special. Several examples are provided below.

Under the Education Act, education must be equal regardless of where in the country it is provided. It must take children’s differing circumstances and needs into consideration, and be adapted for all children in the preschool. This entails that education cannot be configured in the same way everywhere, and that the preschool’s resources will consequently not be distributed equally. (Skolverket, 2018, p. 6)

This could be interpreted as meaning that children’s needs are viewed in relation to equality and with ties to resources, which are to be distributed differentially. The needs are presented as different, and as something that must be taken into account. However, education must be adapted for all children even as consideration is also given to differing needs. The regulatory document does not indicate how this is to be accomplished. In addition, it is stated that:

The preschool must, in particular, be aware of children who, for various reasons, need more guidance and stimulation or special support. [...] Children who temporarily or permanently need more support and stimulation must receive it, conformed based on their personal needs and circumstances. (Skolverket, 2018, p. 6)

Here the needs of certain children are seen in relation to something that can be interpreted as special education. That certain children are constructed as more needy points towards normative comparisons and differentiations of children (Foucault, 1975/2009, 2000); that is, children are divided (Foucault, 1975/2009) into those who need more and those who do not. The term *more* presumably refers to more than other children, even though this distinction cannot be stated explicitly (Foucault, 1971/1993) in the document regarding children's needs in preschool at a discursive official regulatory level. The needs are thus presented as being individual (i.e., "personal"), but also different. They are further constructed as variable over time, with some needs being more temporary and others more permanent.

The regulatory document further states that children's needs must be "tended to", that the daily rhythm must be "adapted" based on the children's needs, that the education must be based on a "holistic view" of those needs, and that:

The education in the preschool must take as its starting point the curriculum and the children's needs, experiences and what they show interest in. (Skolverket, 2018, p. 13)

The needs and interests to which the children themselves give expression in various ways must serve as the basis for the conformation of the environment and the planning of the education. (Skolverket, 2018, p. 16)

The statements in the regulatory document regarding children's needs are general, broad, and accommodating enough to allow for multiple alternative interpretations, but one recurring theme is that children's various needs constitute a starting point for preschool. In addition to the foregoing, specific professional categories must take responsibility for or arrange matters to ensure several aspects:

- the children have their needs respected and satisfied (preschool responsibilities, Skolverket, 2018, p. 12)
- take notice of and provide guidance and stimulation to all children, as well as special support to those children who, for various reasons, need it in their development (the work team, Skolverket, 2018, p. 15)
- conform the education and adapt the distribution of resources so that all children are given the support and the challenges they need for development and learning (headmaster's responsibilities, Skolverket, 2018, p. 20)

The official discourse manifested in the curriculum may be said to alternate between the needs of certain children and the needs of all children, between differing needs and needs for more. Based on this assessment of the regulatory document, conclusions can be drawn such as those asserted by Rantala (2016) in a study focusing on nurture:

As the missions are presented they may be perceived as difficult to interpret, and they also offer broad room for interpretation, with the mission of nurturing children being concealed behind value-laden terms such as democracy, basic values, solidarity, empathy, consideration and respect. Based on this vague mission to nurture, it becomes important to study how that nurturing is given form. (Abstract, no page number)

The same argument can be advanced in different ways in relation to the official discourse regarding children's needs as expressed in the curriculum. The mission of being aware of and satisfying children's needs is unclear in the regulatory document, insofar as this mission is presented in an overarching, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory and thus cryptic manner. Its discursive expressions switch between children's needs in a way that offers no guidance when it comes to translating the mission into practice, and may even create ethical dilemmas, as will be made clear below.

Awareness of and adaptation to children's needs are expressed officially at a policy level as a simple fact, or as dominant, established "matters of course" and "truths". However, it can be argued that they can be understood as something that must be reflected upon and negotiated in everyday preschool practice and in relation to, for instance, special and inclusive education.

So far, I have argued that this official politicised discourse can create difficulties and dilemmas in preschool staff's interpretations and realisations of their mission, not least in terms of equality issues and questions of perceived normalities and deviations. There are further aspects worthy of further consideration in the regulatory document. If children's needs are now so strongly emphasised as being different, and with all children's needs having to be satisfied and taken into consideration, how does this stand in relation to the other formulations in the same curriculum regarding those children who need special things, or those who need more? Are not these children also included under the umbrella of difference?

Are we then to understand that children's so-called special needs are not encompassed within the discourse about the different needs of all children? We may also ponder the following: If the curriculum now stresses that needs differ, and that preschool staff are to take the needs of all children as their starting point, just how is this to occur in concrete terms? One might ask whether the preschool staff are then being steered toward an approach that includes comparisons and perhaps categorisations of children's needs (Foucault, 1975/2009), with subsequent choices and value-based rankings in relation to the means available to satisfy those needs.

Recognizing needs as being constructed in a differentiating practice (Foucault, 2000), a deeper elaboration based on theoretical concepts regarding performative acts is called for. Additionally, an argument must be put forward that in constructions of children's needs within the institutional framework of a preschool with inclusive intentions, there is room for an understanding that these needs cannot be seen as freestanding or merely as inner, individual lacks, but rather as being related to various external factors and assumptions in the preschool. Such assumptions may be both

practical and ethical in nature, such as the availability of resources, or of a philosophical nature, such as fairness. The following sections demonstrate that the official politically rhetorical discourse can lead to ethical dilemmas in everyday preschool practice, and that the aforementioned assumptions or preconceptions must also be recognized and taken into account.

Children's needs in performative acts

If the discourse regarding children's needs in a differentiating (special) education context intended to be inclusive is taken as a starting point for this article, then Butler's reasoning concerning performativity is of particular interest. Butler (2007) believes that the one who acts is constructed in and through their various actions. Children's needs are then perceived not as being determined in advance, but rather as being constructed through assessments of the actions that are performed or not performed and the perception of actions that are expected based on prevailing norms and comparisons.

One example might be the extent to which one is, as a child, expected to "manage" at preschool. The issue might then concern norms in terms of managing to wait one's turn, managing to be in large groups of children, or managing to sit still in a gathering. If children's needs are not viewed as being contextually constructed and a child is unable to manage in a given instance, then this can be expressed as an individual deficit, or as a need for (special) support or "more guidance." Butler's (2005) reasoning is based instead on the idea that social practices create, for example, ethnicity, gender, and other social categories. We can similarly conceptualise how the preschool intended to be inclusive becomes a differentiating practice both via the creation and negotiation of shared or conflicting preconceptions about children's needs, and via the ways in which these needs are satisfied or dealt with, such as in the example of managing or not managing.

In relation to a preschool being part of a disciplinary system, Foucault (1975/2009) believes that a disciplinary power has a disjunctive, analysing, and differentiating effect on individuals. In this way, children who are ranked in terms of their need for special support (as distinguished from so called normal support) can be created as one or more categories. Foucault describes and discusses processes and societal institutions that include hierarchical surveillance and examination that divide individuals, identify deviations, and determine levels of merit, competence, and skill. A similar argument can be made about the discourse regarding children's perceived needs in preschool.

Preschool staff can create themselves and be created in this performative process as, for example, the good, empathic, resourceful, or professional person who cherishes, caters to, or bases their professional activities on children's perceived needs (i.e. the needs of the individual child, certain children, or all children). Such processes, which may be understood as part of subjectification processes, are clarified by Butler (1997) as discursive productions of identities. Butler defines subjection

as a sort of power in the creation of the subject. This power does not only affect the individual but is also involved in the creation or shaping of the subject, which in this case can mean both the child with its constructed needs and the positionings of the preschool staff.

Performativity can thus be described as a reverse cause and effect relationship (Butler, 2004), which in this case could be interpreted as meaning that children's needs are not synonymous with essential lacks and are not exclusively preceded by children's actions or behaviours. Children's needs are instead formulated and created on the basis of how they relate to dominant discourses about which needs children are presumed to have, or when, or which needs can be included within the general or differentiated as special. Whether something is perceived as a need then becomes context-dependent. The child is produced in the discursive practice as more or less needy based on the child's actions, in negotiations regarding whether and in what way children's needs can be differentiated, compared, and perhaps even ranked. This is in relation to, for example, ideas regarding fairness, or seen in the light of (un)available resources, as discussed below.

The official discourse manifested in the preschool's regulatory documents in part creates the framework for what is possible and impossible to express concerning children's perceived needs in the preschool practice. It also in part creates in and of itself dilemmas in professional activities when preschool staff are to orchestrate their tasks. For example, is it possible for preschool staff to choose between proceeding on the basis of the needs of all children, or of one, or of certain children in a preschool intended to be inclusive, or is it possible to do all three?

One example in which the needs of a single child are set in opposition to those of all children will serve as an illustration. The situation consists of a conversation between a supervising special educator (S) and preschool staff members (P1 and P2). (For a complete contextualisation and description of the empirical material see Palla, 2011, the quotation below has not been published previously.)

In this situation, the preschool staff members use the preschool curriculum to support their argument in the description of what appears to be a dilemma. The special needs of a specific child are set in opposition to all the other children's fundamental need or entitlement to have access to a preschool teacher.

P2: So, when a child needs a preschool teacher at their side to participate in the group or individually. The rest of the children then have one fewer preschool teacher available for their development and learning. And the curriculum states that all children, um, that it must be fun, comfortable, and instructive for all children, and good educational activity.

S: Mm.

P2: And then it's like, uh, this dilemma; a child's needs. In other words, what we work so much with. And you're there, and so on. But the others, who, like, speaks for them? Is it up to us to do it, or not?

[...]

- S: If I understand this correctly, we could say that there's a dilemma between children's needs and what one thinks that we adults [...], how many resources are available. To satisfy the needs of each and every one.
- P2: Yes.

The norms that are being tested and become evident in the foregoing quotation may be interpreted as being related to fairness, which can in turn be tied to ethics. This is because expressions concerning *all* children are set in opposition to the construction of *one* child's needs. The needs of the individual child stand out in relation to other children who do not "have" the same needs. A differentiation has thus taken place, and the needs of the individual child are constructed as special. In this performative act, it becomes unfair for the staff not to grant everyone equal access to the preschool teacher both physically and as a "professional" position, something that can be related to ideas of fairness. The special educator's statement can be related to a deliberation, and is tightly linked to available resources and a distribution thereof that brings the single individual to the fore through the expression "the needs of each and every one." The staff are enabled to take different positions, but two of these are in conflict: The idea of granting every child equal access versus the idea of granting access to each and every child according to their needs.

Deliberations and choices such as those presented probably recur in the everyday lives of preschool staff. Questions of interest include just whose perceived needs take precedence and why, which norms serve as the basis for such deliberations and choices, and how these linguistic acts can be understood if, as illustrated above, we direct our attention toward preschool staff in performative acts. With such theoretical support, we can imagine that the preschool staff orchestrate and create themselves as subjects through the ways in which they relate to the preschool's dominant discourses regarding children's needs.

In discursive practice, preschool staff are created and create themselves in their speech acts in, for example, negotiations regarding the needs of all children versus the needs of an individual child. These discursive actions can be decisive in terms of how the preschool staff's identities are formed, expressed, maintained, repeated, and negotiated. This was seen in the foregoing example, where a professional preschool teacher who was there for all children's comfort, development, learning, and education interacted with a special educator who acted as a guarantor and resource for the fulfilment of each child's needs. The speech concerning children's needs in the differentiating practice's performative acts can, as shown above, also be related to the issues of resources and equality. The connection between needs and resources appears both in the preschool curriculum and in the literature (Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2019).

As noted, children's needs are not examined in this article as causes of a specific behaviour, but rather constitute discursive negotiations/actions that are seen as being decisive in terms of how those needs are formulated and assessed by preschool staff. The term *needs* acquire a performative meaning when placed together

with preschool staff's arguments and thoughts regarding, for example, fairness and resources.

It is important from a theoretical point of view to return to the idea of understanding constructions of children's needs in an alternative (contextual) way, keeping in mind the preschool as a differentiating and norm-intensive institution with inclusive ideals. The statements regarding such needs may further be understood as being positioned in proximity to identity constructions which can, in Butler's (2007) words, be designated as effects. Identities are installed through repeated actions (Butler, 2005), or, as in the present case, through the claims about the needs. However, it is beyond the scope of the present article to provide deeper elaboration related to issues of identity, or to empirically investigate repeated performative acts. To make concrete this theoretical understanding of needs, the next section will give examples of processes that have proven to be recurrent and repeated, primarily within the special education practices of the preschool (Palla, 2011, 2020a). Such repeated actions can be set in relation to other research (Palla & Vallberg Roth, 2020; Tallberg Broman & Vallberg Roth, 2019), the results of which indicate that preschool teachers are pleased to be characterised by qualities such as sensitivity, awareness, and thoughtfulness. To maintain such identity-creating images, it is also necessary for something or someone to be sensitive to, aware of, and thoughtful about, such things as children's needs.

In the following example, norms are expressed with regard to fairness as it relates to arranging the preschool environment for a single individual with a particular temperament that is constructed as problematic. (For a complete contextualisation and description of the empirical material see Palla, 2011.) Here we again see the dilemma of one child being given more than other children.

- P2: I believe, because she's had such problems with her temperament, so much has been arranged for her, so consequently ...
- P1: I think it's wrong to make arrangements like that.
- P2: She ...
- P1: That was the right word for it. That was just the right word for it.
[Bilateral conversation for a time.]
- P1: Because there I can sense ... although I'm aware of it, I try not to ... that perhaps we're making arrangements for this girl.
- P2: Mm.
- P1: Because we know that she needs to have that ... Although in and of itself it may be positive that it becomes positive, so to speak.
[...]
- P1: I think she gets more.
- P2: Yes, you do think that actually.
- P1: But that's what she needs, isn't it?
- S: No, precisely. It's not that she gets to choose. Rather it's about creating the best environment.
- P? [identity of speaker unclear]: Mm. Let her show her good side and cope with what's happening here.

The norms that become evident in the quotation above can be interpreted as being related to a child who is temperamental, needy, and resource-intensive. This interpretation can become problematic in statements about making arrangements for this individual child, arrangements that give rise to a dilemma over some children being given more than others, indicating a differentiation and distribution that is thought to be based on certain preconceptions, deliberations, and choices. These arrangements can be seen in the discursive negotiations that occur as a strategy to enable the child to show her “good side” and manage to comport herself in accordance with the preschool’s rules and routines, demonstrating the normalisation processes of the disciplinary practice. The visionary expression about “creating the best environment” justifies the strategy that can lead to the child’s well-being, as her needs are being met. The unfairness of an individual receiving more than other children and of making extensive adaptations and arrangements for one specific child is tested, but then rejected, as the staff agree on the positive effects.

The norms that this analysis make visible may be viewed as different constructions of fairness; to give according to individual needs, or to give equal resources to all. Depending on whether the preschool staff argue in favour of fairness as equal resources for all, or with connotations of “to each and every one according to their needs”, it is conceivable that they will assume different identities or positionings in their performative acts. When the preschool staff’s expressions about some receiving more than others are presented as a problem, this conflicts with the curriculum’s official expressions and inclusive ideals.

In conclusion, performativity is not to be viewed as a single act, but rather may be understood as a repetition and a stylised ritual (Butler, 2004). Based on this reasoning, there may be a risk that children in the preschool will be reduced to nothing more than their needs, via the repeated, stylised, and thus simplified linguistic images of needs that can be expressed in and through performative acts during, for instance, the preschool staff’s time for reflection.

There is perhaps reason to further ponder issues pertaining to the availability of resources and the connection to statements regarding the ranking and meeting of children’s needs, particularly in view of the research by Persson and Tallberg Broman (2019). Persson and Tallberg Broman have identified the dilemmas and problems in the preschool teacher’s mission against the background of mental ill-health and high absenteeism due to illness. Among other things, they report on preschool teachers’ experiences in terms of having insufficient resources for children in need of special support, showing that resources for children perceived as having major need of nurture and care are severely lacking, as are adaptations of the educational, social, and physical environment. Analyses by Vallberg Roth and Tallberg Broman (2018) indicate a disconnect between the regulatory documents and the conditions and assumptions surrounding the preschool: “These contradictions create problematic situations and difficult prioritisations, particularly for preschool teachers and headmasters, who are most directly affected by changes in the regulatory documents” (Tallberg Broman & Vallberg Roth, 2019, p. 6).

The tricky terrain between preschool policy and practice

The preschool's inclusive mission includes defining and tending to children's various needs, but it can also be meaningful to be aware of what definitions and differentiations may entail. It can similarly be meaningful to ponder the effects of such definitions and differentiations.

The present article has offered an opportunity to see beyond the official politically rhetorical discourse, which can be rather difficult to interpret. The effort has instead been made to raise and ponder certain aspects that elucidate the complexities of everyday preschool practice, and to consider these aspects in relation to the contradictions in the curriculum. The discourse regarding children's needs in the preschool achieves something and creates effects for the children, but also achieves something for the preschool staff. As noted in the illustrative examples above, reflections within preschool practice can involve daring to bypass the official, dominant, and curriculum-based statements.

This may elicit questions such as "What does it mean that we think and speak as we do?" and "How can we think differently about children's needs and the opportunities and challenges they can bring?" These reflections may be viewed as processes that need both to be current and to take their time. This may involve, as in the examples above, daring to problematise and negotiate issues of basic values, so that dominant discourses with fixed expressions about children's needs are not simply reproduced time and again. Such opportunities for reflection can be understood as occasions for delving deep below the surface of the discourse in order to state and test alternatives and to make room for alternative ways of talking about children's needs in a politically regulated differentiating practice. Perhaps this article can contribute to an argument for opening up ethical discussions and a recognition of the preschool as a complex reality that is difficult to describe or explain in or through simplified and effective solutions, methods, or decisions. This seems especially relevant when it comes to how children's needs are negotiated in relation to equality, fairness and the resources available in a preschool with inclusive ideals.

Reflective summary and conclusions

Current ideologically-based policy documents present the discourse surrounding children's needs as a self-evident, positive and resolvable ultimate goal; all children must have their needs met. These policies do so with fixed assertions, the formulations of which create an ideal image in which the inclusive mission of the preschool is to create an education in which the need-free, successful, educable child becomes the norm. Impediments to the success of this child must be avoided to the greatest possible extent. I have, with some historical perspectives, shown that the focus on the needs of children has, over time, led to the axiomatic status (truth status) that this term has assumed and currently possesses.

In line with earlier research presented above, I have also pointed out how simplified the understanding of the concept of needs becomes if it is understood exclusively from an individual perspective in relation to internal deficiencies. Given the alternative understanding of needs, I have re-examined and expanded this understanding by showing how contexts, situations, and relationships can be interwoven with it. Looking beyond an individual deficiency perspective can expose the impossibility of satisfying all children's needs as quickly and efficiently as possible and, in the long run, of children having to be normalised on their path through the educational system, intended to be inclusive.

Using two empirical examples, I have chosen to illustrate how irresolvable dilemmas wind their way through discursive practice. These examples make clear the ways in which discourse at the policy level is intertwined in pedagogic and didactic discursive practice. It also becomes clear how difficult it can be to relate to overlapping and sometimes contradictory governing formulations concerning "all children", "each child", and, in particular, "children in need of special support". This paper argues for the need to create ongoing opportunities for preschool staff to reflect on such issues at a deeper level, one in which context and value differences are made visible and tested in the tension between special and general education.

The issue of whose perceived needs are to take precedence then comes to the fore in negotiations of value-laden rankings and hierarchical divisions. Such negotiations are guided by what is possible, or impossible, to express regarding children's needs in general and regarding children who are constructed as being in need of the special, especially when the effects of the policy-bound discursive power assert themselves in the discourse on preschool educational practice at the day-to-day level.

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