

## Introduction to preschool: strategies for managing the gap between home and preschool

Ann-Marie Markström & Maria Simonsson

To cite this article: Ann-Marie Markström & Maria Simonsson (2017): Introduction to preschool: strategies for managing the gap between home and preschool, Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy, DOI: [10.1080/20020317.2017.1337464](https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2017.1337464)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2017.1337464>



© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 12 Jul 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 484



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Introduction to preschool: strategies for managing the gap between home and preschool

Ann-Marie Markström<sup>a</sup> and Maria Simonsson<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Behavioral Sciences and Learning, Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden; <sup>b</sup>Department of Social and Welfare Studies, Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden

### ABSTRACT

The overall aim of this article is to investigate Swedish preschool teachers' perceptions of the interaction between home and institution in relation to children's introduction to preschool. The focus of this article is on their talk about how they manage the gap between home and preschool in the introduction process. A discourse analysis is carried out, based on focus group interviews with seven preschool teacher teams that have started to use a more parent-active approach during the introduction of children to preschool. The results show that a parent-active introduction positions and governs parents to take a more self-regulative role in preschool from the beginning. The construction of the parent-active introduction discourse/practice produces new subject positions for the parents (and teachers) and creates expectations of intensified parental involvement in this institutional practice. Furthermore, the results indicate that the parents' active introduction also changes the teachers' own role and their attitudes toward the parents. The boundary work between the home and preschool seems to consist of negotiations and of the construction of an intermediate domain between home and preschool that draws on discourses of responsibility, performativity and efficiency.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 22 December 2016  
Accepted 30 May 2017

### KEYWORDS

Preschool; parent-active introduction; accountability; domains; soft governance

### Introduction

In Sweden, preschool service must be offered by all municipalities to all children. From a historical perspective, however, there has been tension – and sometimes a significant gap in opinion – between citizens and institutions in the welfare state. This gap ranges from a preference for the family to decide on a child's upbringing and education to more influence from society, and from a family-focused perspective to a child-focused perspective. Different ideologies have driven our development and comprehension of what is best for the child. Similarly, many different rationales can be traced over time in official steering documents and in practice concerning relations between home and preschool/school (Epstein, 2001; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Vincent & Ball, 2006). A dominating discourse is that parents/guardians (hereafter referred to as 'parents') and preschool teachers should cooperate and act as close partners in the best interest of the child (Markström, 2013a, 2013b; Markström & Simonsson, 2011, 2013; Osgood, 2012).

The process of introducing a child to an institution and leaving the child there for the first time can be sensitive and sometimes emotionally trying for all actors (Osgood, 2012). Different routines are established to facilitate the transition between home and preschool. In some countries, parents are not allowed

to participate; in others, parents are expected to participate in the transition in different ways, and to participate in everyday practices at preschool as well. Ideas and discourses about how to make this transition a good experience for everyone involved have changed over time. However, preschool teachers' perceptions of this cooperation, and especially of the initial establishment of relations between actors when a child encounters preschool for the first time, are not well known.

The aim of this article is to investigate Swedish preschool teachers' perceptions of the interaction between home and institution in relation to children's introduction to preschool. The focus is on their talk about how they and the parents jointly act during the child's transition, how they manage the transition, and how they manage the gap between home and preschool in the introduction process. The analyses in this article are based on focus group interviews with preschool teachers.

### The Swedish context

In Sweden, about 83% of all children aged 1–5 spend much of their daily time in preschool, and a child's stay starts with an introduction period (Skolverket, 2016). The curriculum for Swedish preschool states that preschool teachers are responsible for each child

and parent having a good introduction to preschool (Skolverket, 2016:15). The formulation in the curriculum permits local actors at preschools to form their own interpretations of governmental regulations and act on these when organizing introductions; consequently, different kinds of introduction methods are used in Swedish preschool. The traditional model ranges over approximately two weeks. The daily hours of the child's stay are gradually extended, and the child plays an increasing part in routines and activities without his or her parent(s). The second model is the more parent-active introduction. This ranges over 3–5 days, during which the child and parent(s) stay at school from 9 am to 2 pm. The third way to introduce children to preschool is group introduction.

### Previous research

Policy makers and researchers usually present cooperation between home and educational institutions in a positive light. Some researchers (Epstein, 2001; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002) have studied parents' diverse roles in relation to the school institution, as partners, consumers, advocates for the child, problem solvers, culture bearers or employees. However, some critical research has questioned whether cooperation is beneficial for everyone involved (Crozier, 2000; Markström, 2013a, 2013c; Osgood, 2012; Vincent & Ball, 2006). For example, inequalities in economic or ethnic background have been indicated as problematic in cooperation between home and school (Bæck, 2010; Bouakaz & Persson, 2007; Englund, 2010; Osgood, 2012).

The demands on school professionals have changed, and some teachers see the parents' increased influence in a positive light while others find it problematic (Alasuutari, Markström, & Vallberg-Roth, 2014; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000; Månsson, 2013). Parents are placing increasing demands on preschool institutions and preschool teachers; in fact, parents have become more like customers on the educational market, with the educational institutions acting as producers of education. Osgood (2012) argued that the relationship between home and preschool has hardened as a consequence of the marketization of these institutions. She also argued that 'nursery workers feel the "terrors of performativity" from a neo-liberal climate shaped by demands for accountability, transparency, efficiency, performativity and so on' (Osgood, 2012, p. 19). On the other hand, there are also demands on parents to take more responsibility and to be more active in their children's education (Simonsson & Markström, 2013).

Parents and teachers sometimes have different and even opposing interests and agendas about parent-hood, childcare or what is best for the child (Osgood,

2012); these can contribute to a sense of insecurity and lack of power in meetings between the actors. Furthermore, a lack of outspoken rules and routines – that is, explicit or implicit discourses of how to behave as a 'normal' preschool child or parent – can also be experienced as problematic in meetings between the actors (Alasuutari & Markström, 2011; Markström, 2011). In Alasuutari's (2010) interview study of preschool teachers in Finland, she showed how parents and teachers act in a complementary way as partners possessing different knowledge that is needed to solve a joint task: caring for an individual child.

In recent years, cooperation between parents and preschools has become increasingly important for preschool teachers in the Swedish context as a means of achieving one of the goals of the early childhood education curriculum (Simonsson & Markström, 2013; Tallberg Broman, 2013). It is likely that the preschool and parents have both common and different goals for the introduction period. A common goal is for the child to be comfortable with the transition between home and preschool, and to consequently have a satisfactory introduction and be successfully included in the preschool group (Simonsson, 2015).

In the literature on early childhood transition, different approaches have been used to study the transition between home and preschool. Children's participation in this transition has been studied both in the field of psychological research (e.g. Balaban, 2006) and in the field of socio-psychological research, through studies of, for example, how children act in relation to new adults at preschool (Dalli, 2000). Moreover, Vogler, Crivello, and Woodhead (2008) identified studies with developmental or socio-cultural perspectives on transition – studies that have focused on structures (age, gender, group) in transition, on transition between systems and on children's participation in their own transition. Thyssen (2000) showed that starting preschool is partly about separation from the family and partly about the potential for new activities and social relations.

Some Swedish studies on children's introduction to preschool have taken their point of departure from the child's perspective and examined how young children adapt socially and emotionally to the new environment (Lindahl, 1995; Månsson, 2013). Simonsson and Thorell (2010) focused on children's peer relations during the introduction period and showed the diversity of the newcomer's network with teachers, as well as other children (Simonsson, 2015; Simonsson & Thorell, 2010).

### Method and empirical material

The data for the analyses of the empirical material draw on a larger research project, which investigated the introduction processes in preschool from different aspects. The study was carried out in a large

regional area in central Sweden. For this article, we chose focus group interviews from seven preschools that have made changes to their means of organizing the introduction to preschool; the teachers at these preschools also have long-term experience in different ways of organizing this introduction. The data from the project were re-examined in order to gain more knowledge about how preschool teachers talk about the gaps between home and preschool, and how they manage these gaps in relation to new children's introduction to preschool.

The analyses draw on seven audio-taped and transcribed focus group interviews with preschool teams that have worked together for several years and that have both extensive and recent experience in introductions to preschool. These seven preschool teams were involved in one session each, for a total of 17 educators, with 2–3 participants on each team. In addition, the preschools cover a variety of backgrounds in terms of socio-economic conditions, geographic variation and urban versus rural area. The preschool teams preferred to meet at their preschools, so the sessions took place in the school staffrooms. A researcher acted as the moderator (Morgan, 1998) and carried out the focus group sessions. The preschool teams discussed a specific set of topics: (1) the meaning of the introduction period at preschool, (2) the planning and realization of the introduction period, (3) the method of the introduction and (4) the roles of the child, family, preschool staff, group of children, preschool environment and objects present. Open questions were used, along with follow-up questions to gain additional information. In total, the data included 10 hours of audio-recorded focus group interviews collected in accordance with ethical research standards. The entire study was also conducted in accordance with ethical research standards ([www.dodex.vr.se](http://www.dodex.vr.se)), see Vetenskapsrådet (2012). All participants were informed about the study as a whole, about the fact that they could withdraw their participation at any time during the process, about how the interviews were going to be used and about confidentiality (i.e. all names and other identifiers have been anonymized).

The focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim. The qualitative analysis of the data was accomplished using procedures that were influenced by a discourse analytic framework (Wood & Kroger, 2000). The point of departure was that in spoken discourse, it is possible to examine patterns of what can be talked about in this context. The present analysis is based on episodes that expose implicit or explicit expectations about the interaction between home and the institution in relation to the child's introduction to preschool. In the first stage, the content and phrases were categorized and labelled. The material was then investigated in relation to the

research question. The second stage involved analysing different kinds of accounts about the interactions; in the third stage, different ways of talking were analysed (Wood & Kroger, 2000). The analysis focused on key themes that showed dominant and deviant statements and was built around different dimensions and discourses based on the teacher's understandings of phenomena.

A point of departure for the analyses is that people are both products and producers of discourses (Davies & Harré, 1990). In order to find answers to our research questions, we use concepts related to knowledge, power and subjectivity (Davies & Harré, 1990; Walkerdine, 1990).

### Cooperation between home and preschool – a process in transition

Various practices are constructed in preschool in which the preschool teachers and parents try to manage the gap between the family and the institution – that is, they try to shape the interactions between actors by using routines on an everyday basis and by incorporating specific practices, such as the preschool introduction phase. The teachers say that it has become more important for them to demonstrate to parents, both pedagogically and directly, how they follow policy documents such as the curriculum for preschool. The teachers refer to goals that point to their responsibility to ensure well-functioning cooperation between the parents and the preschool.

Our data suggest that the teachers have new experiences in terms of how cooperation with parents is established and constructed during children's first contact with and socialization into preschool. The teachers discuss how things used to be, and reflect on the shift from an introduction that lasted two weeks to one that lasts a week or less.

We changed the method of introducing children; we traditionally used two weeks. The children stayed one hour the first day and one hour the next day and maybe one and a half the third day. It was very protracted. Today, many parents are stressed and want to begin work and don't want to take two weeks off to introduce their children to preschool. And before, the parents would leave the child as much as possible and they weren't here so much. We didn't get to know them enough. It was like that. It was supposed to go faster, and we also wanted to get to know them better.

All the preschool teachers mention that they have changed the introduction process in various ways. Above, the teacher says that before the change, the parents thought that the introduction phase was too long and found it stressful. She also reflects that the teachers did not get to know the parents well enough in the traditional system, in which the goal was for

parents to leave their child as much as possible. Paradoxically, the teachers argue that they now get to know parents better, although the introduction period is shortened and parents only participate in preschool for a few days.

In the following example, a participant describes the teachers' modified ideas about the introduction, and what she thinks the introduction should help to achieve:

Now, we feel like the focus is not on leaving the child at preschool, as before, but the focus is on getting to know each other and to have fun. So we don't think it's something to work on, to leave the child, it's better to train them to get to know and to have confidence in each other.

According to this teacher, the focus is preferably not on the separation process, in which teachers train the parents and child to be apart from each other. Instead, teachers have shifted their focus to an expectation of having fun and developing mutual trust. She argues that she and her colleagues position the parents as important actors in the introduction process in a new way – that is, they govern the interaction and focus it on constructing good relations. In all the interviews, the teachers make it clear that they think it is important to establish a good relation between the home and the institution when a child starts preschool.

### ***Managing the gaps – a dynamic of demands and constructions of trust***

The analyses of the statements in the focus group interviews show different aspects and strategies that the preschool teachers talk about in relation to managing the gap between the family and the institution. They discuss how this new way of managing the introduction phase has changed their views on cooperation between the home and the institution. The teachers argue that roles and expectations have changed over the years, from a perspective that viewed home and preschool as separate domains, to a new perspective of different and overlapping domains (home and institution) with the actors working as partners to do what is best for the child. In the following discussion, we present some aspects that appear to be important in the teachers' talk about the initial transition between home and preschool, and about the specific practice of the preschool introduction.

### ***Demands on parents and preschool teachers***

In the introduction phase in preschool, the actors must navigate the situation, and offer and adopt different positions. The teachers discuss the changes in their expectations regarding the parental role

during the introduction process. The following excerpt illustrates some common thoughts participants share on this topic:

The parents have an active role now; that is, it is very different from before. Before, they were expected to be passive, so to speak. Preferably, to bring a book and sneak out of the room and sit by themselves. Not be seen or heard in the room. The child tried to find his or her friends and tried to be with us as much as possible, alone. And now that is not the case, almost vice versa. Now the parents are supposed to be together with their child and play with him or her and perhaps help their kid too, and talk with the other children. They're together with their child all the time and then we are in the periphery. We will interact and cooperate with them when the situation is good for the child, when we get an opportunity to, and we will make contact and make sure that we get to know this child too, of course.

In this description, the preschool teacher highlights two different positions offered to the parents, which she has encouraged and experienced during introduction procedures at her preschool. In the traditional situation, the parents are positioned on the sidelines, and are not involved in the preschool activities at all. They are expected to be passive and almost invisible in their child's introduction. However, the newcomer and the preschool teachers are active in creating a relationship with each other and with the other preschool children. Here, the child is governed to cope on his or her own, without the parents' help. The teacher describes this type of parental behaviour as obsolete and no longer desirable.

The other parental position in the example above, and in the teachers' discussions, is linked to new expectations and discourses on governing and managing the gap between home and preschool in new ways. It offers quite a different position to parents during the introduction period, one in which they are involved and informed – that is, governed to take an active parental position in preschool during the introduction phase.

Thus, we require parents to be active. [...] That they are active [...] they are involved in every moment that takes place during the day. They're with us when we eat, they can see every activity, the way we do things, they see other children together with their own children, they see how the adults act.

According to this teacher, the parents are now expected to be active, which means that they are positioned to be more involved and active in all of the child's activities during the preschool day. More specifically, the parents are supposed to follow their own child in all the routine activities and situations, in play and in other preschool activities. If the child needs help or care, it is now primarily the parents' responsibility to provide it. Moreover, the parent and child are expected to introduce themselves to the

teachers and to the other children in the group. Here, a more peripheral and observational role for the teacher emerges in the teachers' talk. In this role, the teacher positions herself to closely follow the child and the parents in their interactions and doings, while simultaneously obtaining insight into the family relations. The teachers are supposed to make contact with the child through the parents and learn more about the child by observing child–parent interactions in situ. One teacher says:

Thus, our activities must be intact, and they participate; and the purpose of that is that the child is able to see what we do and how, and make friends, and the parent is able to see our work and activities, and see the other children, and get to know their friends, and so on.

Here, the teacher describes her expectation of an active parent and of different interaction dynamics in the cooperation between actors during the introduction. Several teachers say that they think the active participation of parents in everyday activities at preschool makes the child's needs and routines visible, and shows them ways to comfort the child. This viewpoint can be interpreted as the teachers' desire for transparency, efficiency and performativity (cf. Osgood, 2012), but also as a form of pedagogization of the parents. Furthermore, the teachers suggest that the fact that the child can observe collaboration and interaction between the parents and the teacher facilitates his or her acquaintance with and acceptance of the ('good enough') teacher.

However, in some of the focus group interviews, the teachers mention problems regarding parental responsibilities during this form of introduction, and describe parents who do not live up to the institutional expectations:

*Teacher 1: Many parents still want to sneak away when their child is digging in the sandbox. We find it strange that it still prevails, but we are, of course, very clear that the child has to see that you are leaving.*

*Teacher 2: And we encourage the parents to be involved, but it is quite difficult to get parents to participate in the rhythmic exercise. Some parents are just watching, while some participate and crawl on the floor and chatter and do everything we do, and dance.*

*Teacher 3: Often the parents are more difficult to manage than the children.*

This quotation shows both the expectations and demands that the preschool teachers have on parents, but also that the teachers think that some parents show resistance to the new demands to be an active

parent – that is, they position themselves as more passive than the teachers expect them to be.

During the interviews, the preschool teachers do not only talk about changed expectations and the role of the parents. They also emphasize the change in their own professional role and behaviour during an introduction period with the parent-active model. During a traditional introduction model, one of the staff members has primary responsibility for the newcomer and prepares a special programme for that child. Below, a preschool teacher reflects on how things used to be. The quotation also illustrates how this teacher talks about her changed behaviour and about how she governs herself:

Yes, but as I think about those two weeks, when they come, and you have to smile for an hour. You couldn't be natural in the role during these two weeks, I felt. And now, when we have parents here all the time, you have to be who you are [...] We don't need to be mannered [...] And also, parents are responsible for their children, so you are less tense. You don't need to control them as before; at the same time, you can be with the other children, the group. It's good for the other children. That we are available to them and to the other parents too, so it is an advantage, definitely.

The teacher emphasizes that the former longer and more parent-passive introduction created a constrained situation for all the actors. She felt that she needed to 'smile' and could not behave in her usual manner, as she feels she is now able to do during the new kind of introduction. Moreover, she argues that in a traditional introduction, she was constantly focusing on and controlling both the newcomer and the parent. According to the interviewees, the role of preschool teachers is now merely to introduce the parents to the routine of the introduction process, and instruct them how to be active in this process. In the traditional introduction routine, the child and the responsible staff member acted separately from the regular activities of the preschool. The teachers emphasize the benefit of the three-day model: namely, that they can now engage in regular activities with the class and do their normal work. The advantages of the new model, according to the teachers, are that parents can meet the staff in a realistic context, and can observe how activities play out in everyday life at the preschool. This strategy can be interpreted as an endeavour to form a partnership with the parents, and as a pedagogization (Markström, 2013c; Popkewitz, 2003) of the parents. In addition, these strategies can be seen as a new form of control, and as a means of governing parents to be preschool parents – that is, as a means of soft governance (cf. Foucault, 1991; Rose, 1999).

### To share knowledge

The teachers emphasize that they must collect a range of information about the newcomer and the family during the introduction period. They refer to this information as shared knowledge and relations. The teachers argue that when the parents are actively engaged in the introduction process, they are able to share and construct common knowledge – an asset that contributes to a child's opportunity to achieve a smooth transition between home and preschool. They describe how they are able to collect information in two ways: by talking to the parents and asking them questions, and by observing the interactions between the child and the parent during different activities at preschool. Some teachers say that they get to know the child better when they observe him or her, as opposed to when they only talk to the parents.

*When parents put food on the plate for their child, then we can see approximately how much that child eats. What size of portion the mother or father gives [to the child]. How they shred the food, how they mix or serve the bits and pieces separately. Then we see things like that. If they want water or milk. [...] Then we can see how they act.*

The interviewee says that the teachers are able to decode and understand individual children's needs regarding care and how to comfort them. In this information-collecting process, the parents are identified as experts on their child and on his or her behaviour, routines (eating and sleeping) and various procedures. This kind of information is predominantly connected to the child's various abilities and to how that child may be cared for – information that the teachers need for their future interactions with the child. However, the teachers also say that they 'must listen to the parents, to what they have to say'. It is clear that the teachers now offer an alternative subject position to preschool parents, compared with the traditional one. Here, the parents are positioned as experts who have desirable knowledge about the child. That is, the teachers want to obtain insight into the domain of the home by listening to the parents' stories and observing their conduct *in situ* during the three full introductory days, while the parents participate and are involved in the preschool activities.

Furthermore, the staff members say that they need to inform the parents about different preschool routines, rules and expectations on the parents. One of the teachers says:

*They can observe what we are doing, for real. I feel that we almost cheated them before. The introduction was so stilted when they attended preschool for one hour. We went around smiling, excessive. We are very nice now too, but they get to know the reality in another way, and get to know us in another way.*

In this quotation, the preschool teacher emphasizes that parents now obtain insight into 'real' everyday life at preschool; this is seen as a contrast to how things used to be, when parents received only a partial view of their child's preschool day. Parents previously took part in a special introduction programme for the newcomer, in which they were positioned as passive recipients and received limited and 'formulated' information from teachers. Now, parents receive what one teacher calls 'a bigger picture' of what kinds of activity occur in preschool, and are able to build relationships and a partnership with the staff. The parents are now referred to as more active subjects that have the agency to produce their own information about preschool actors and preschool practices. In Foucauldian terms, this can be interpreted as a strategy to 'create preschool parents' through self-regulation (cf. Dean, 1999; Foucault, 1991).

The parents are also positioned as being more active; they now have the power to decide how to collect valuable information about preschool 'reality', which teachers consider to be necessary for a preschool parent. The teachers stress that both parties need to obtain knowledge about each other's domains; that is, the parents and teachers start to create and form a common knowledge domain. However, the teachers say that this process starts with the parents needing to understand why preschool is important for the child.

*When they [the parents] attend preschool, they can see what it is, they can ask us. We have to explain why we do as we do and that a lot of activities are connected to the curriculum that we have to follow nowadays. We can explain why, and they are invited to read the curricula if they want to.*

During a parent-active introduction, the parents are supposed to ask questions and inform themselves *in situ*. In the above quotation, the teacher also points out that they teach the parents what is at stake at preschool, and show them that preschool is a socializing institution that is governed by a curriculum. This can be interpreted as a teacher-initiated construction of an intermediate knowledge domain where the preschool discourse is taught. Here, the teachers construct themselves as 'gatekeepers to a restricted and exclusive realm of knowledge' (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999, p. 27), which they impart to the new preschool parents in a pedagogical style. In this example, the position of the parent as a learner emerges; parents need to be educated and receive the 'right' knowledge about the preschool institution in order to be preschool parents. In other words, this process is a pedagogization of the parents (Popkewitz, 2003). The introduction process can also be interpreted as a process of creation and formation of the

parents, transforming them into preschool parents who can negotiate and cooperate with the institution in certain ways (cf. Markström, 2013b, 2013c; Popkewitz, 2003). It is also the process of introducing the child and his or her family to the preschool.

Furthermore, the teachers argue that when parents are actively engaged in the introduction process, they are also more active in giving and taking – that is, in sharing information. The sharing of knowledge can be interpreted as a strategy to construct an intermediate domain and to construct trust.

### Relational trust

The teachers talk about the importance of relational trust for both the child and the adults when a child starts preschool. They emphasize the importance of relational trust – in terms of respect, competence and concern for the child – between the actors, and suggest that the parent-active introduction is used as a strategy to support the construction of good relations.

The following excerpt illustrates the teachers' talk about their preference for the new position of parents that is established in the parent-active introduction.

*We see them [the parents] as more important. Or, they are now seen as more important, maybe. In a way, we find them more valuable, now that we do things like this. [...] I came to think about it as I said it, I think. We find their role as parents more important.*

Here, the teacher reflects that the new strategy of involving and engaging parents in preschool from the beginning has changed the teachers' views on the parents' subject position, both in the introduction process and regarding preschool in general. Certain preschool parents' positions are visible in the teachers' talk, in which they are acknowledged to both produce discourses and adopt positions. The teachers find it important to respect the parents, and point out that the parents' role and commitment are central for the preschool. The opposite is also true: it is important that the parents recognize and respect the position of the teachers, who have a crucial part in the child's (and family's) life.

*Teacher 1: Parents are very important. That we have a good relation. That they have a positive opinion of us and of our preschool, because you feel that. Then you have a good relation with the child, too. Children learn from their parents.*

*Teacher 2: And us.*

*Teacher 1: If the mum and dad like preschool, that it is something fun and [if the child] can see that [their] parents laugh and have fun with us... It's a positive signal to the child, that you can joke and so on. We try to invite that because...*

*Teacher 3: Try to make an effort toward that, to invite parents to leave their child with confidence in us.*

Here, the teachers stress the parents' positive attitude, and affirm the importance of the preschool activities. A desire emerges for a mutual respect for each other's tasks; this is seen as important for the child's everyday life in preschool.

Another aspect of relational trust that can be found in the data relates to the competences of the parents and the teachers. The preschool teachers want the parents to trust in their competence and in what they consider to be good practices.

*We talk about the preschool on a general level, but also about the activities: that we are usually outside a lot, what we do when the child gets sick, [what we do] about clothes. And then we tell them about the introduction method that we use here. And, recently, we made a written document to hand out. We didn't have that before, but now they [the parents] get it and can go home and talk about it.*

The third aspect of relational trust relates to shared personal concerns for the child. In the following quotation, the teacher suggests that it is important that they, the preschool teachers, show the parents (and that the parents understand) that the teachers care for the child, so that the parents can feel safe with that knowledge.

*[We want to ensure] that they [the parents] trust us, and that they feel that they can leave their children to us. That they [the children] will have a good time here. That they [the parents] can trust what we tell them, that we will tell them if the child is sad, that we don't lie about such things. In the introduction phase, they [the parents] are supposed to learn about the routines so they know what we do in preschool every day. And the child is probably sad in the beginning when the parents leave them, but then the parents must have trust in us, the child will get over it. [...] They must have confidence in us as teachers, that we will take care of their child.*

In addition, the teachers describe how intense the presence of the parents is during the introductory days. They want to give parents more opportunities to observe the teachers during activities, and to see how the teachers handle, interact with and support the parents' own and other children. The teachers think that things are much easier when they get to know the parents quite quickly from the beginning. They find it easier to cooperate with the parents, to negotiate and decide how to act in different situations involving the child, and to solve problems; that is, it is easier for the actors to manage the interaction between home and preschool and to understand what differs in the two domains and what the domains have in common. The teachers talk in terms of a decreased distance between the



domains, which makes them more secure and relaxed in their communication with the child and the parent.

It is easier when we get to know each other better. There is no distance, so to speak, between parents and staff. We are supposed to cooperate regarding their children, and they need to feel that they are important too. And that we want them to be involved in everything we do.

Here, the teacher makes it clear that the goal of the introduction is to build a partnership and create an intermediate domain. According to this teacher, and in the data as a whole, the intermediate domain consists of, for example, shared knowledge about the child; interactions between the parents and children, the preschool and the preschool teachers; and expectations for a parent–teacher partnership at preschool.

The teachers give different examples of how they manage to bring the different domains closer together. They are very clear about the kind of subject positions that must be offered to preschool parents. The positions the teachers offer to parents are characterized by mutual respect and an acknowledgment of each other's competences. The teachers' talk contains little mention of the possibility that the parents will show resistance to the adoption of this position of trust. Knowledge about the child, the parent and the preschool is seen as important, and this knowledge is jointly exposed and constructed by parents and teachers in the preschool context during the cooperation processes.

### **Boundary work between home and preschool**

The process of managing the gap between the home and the institution, and constructing an intermediate domain in this kind of introduction model, is not free from problems. One of the issues that emerges from the interviews concerns the parents' readiness for their child's start at preschool, and their preparedness to cooperate with the introduction in a preferred way. There is also the question of whether the parents will adopt or reject the kinds of subject positions (i.e. how to be a preschool parent) that are made available to them when they enter the institution. One preschool teacher expresses:

*Parents... if one feels that it doesn't work, if the parents are not calm or safe in this... We have met parents that have been home with their children for a long time, and they feel, 'Oh God, should I leave my child?'. It is separation. I think it is tough because then you don't have the parents with you. And then it will be a harder job, you have to introduce both of them [to preschool], the child and the parent too.*

This example suggests that teachers encounter some parents that the teachers consider to be insufficiently capable of being involved in their child's introduction. This teacher talks about parents who are not yet ready to leave their child at preschool because, in this case and in her opinion, they have stayed at home with the child for too long. It is seen as too big of a step for such parents to separate from their child and permit the professionals to take care of him or her. The separation is too big of an emotional risk for these parents. For this reason, the introduction period gives rise to emotional resistance. Being a preschool parent is not a desirable position for every parent; sometimes, they are forced to adopt such positions due to external conditions. This quotation indicates what teachers perceive to be the required level of readiness on the part of the parents in terms of (emotional) performance, accountability and efficiency. According to the preschool teachers, in such cases, they must work with the parents' emotions and provide additional support to them during the child's introduction, in order to negotiate and construct an intermediate domain in which all actors feel comfortable. The construction of the preschool parents does not include emotional vulnerability.

Another aspect of the parents' participation and involvement that the teachers refer to as problematic is when parents 'take too much space' in the introduction phase.

It is very difficult when parents take too much space. You have to subdue or control them a bit. But it is pretty unusual.

The above teacher uses the term 'too much space'. That is, there appears to be a limit to how much a parent can interact with or intrude on the preschool domain. The parents are typically expected to have agency and to be involved in every situation; they are expected to be curious, but not *too* curious, for example by being overly interested in other children or families. If this situation occurs, it must be managed by the teachers. In such situations, the teachers say that they try to control the parents by telling them that as professionals, the teachers are governed by the law of confidentiality and cannot provide that kind of information. The teachers call attention to ethical aspects such as these at an early stage during the introduction, and indicate to parents that 'what they see and hear at the preschool must also stay there'.

### **Discussion**

We have critically examined some Swedish preschool teachers' talk about the interaction between home and preschool in relation to a new way of introducing children to preschool. The results show that the

teachers included in this study have changed their expectations and strategies regarding how to meet a child and parents and introduce them to preschool, and have shifted from a parent-passive strategy to a more parent-active strategy. We have analysed focus group interviews and pointed out the consequences of the parent-active introduction strategy: the teachers emphasize that they have changed their way of approaching and thinking about the parents' role in preschool. The teachers describe how they allocate new subject positions to the parents (as experts, team members, learners, supporters and active participants), in which the parents are seen as more competent and important in their children's education than before, and in line with this, more important in the introduction phase in preschool.

With the parent-active introduction, the parents are now expected and governed to take a more self-regulative (cf. Dean, 1999; Foucault, 1991) and active position in preschool from the start, and to be active partners in the relation between home and preschool. It is also apparent that some of the technology of power (Foucault, 1988) is in operation here, such as in the regulation and setting up of limitations regarding how parents act and behave as *active* parents. In addition, the teachers have demands regarding how the mutual trust between the parents and teachers functions, and they monitor this trust continuously. The teachers' talk leaves no room for the possibility that the parents may resist the available subject positions or create new ones. In this way, the teachers seem to shape and foster the parents, as well as *teaching* them how to become participating and self-regulated (not too emotional, but reflective) preschool parents – that is, the teachers exert soft governance (cf. Foucault, 1991; Osgood, 2012; Rose, 1999) over the parents. The teachers seem to use a wide range of techniques to educate the parents in how to be a 'good' preschool parent and a responsible subject. We claim that the parent-active introduction results in the emergence of a normalization of new parental subjects – the new 'ideal parent', who has the agency to be involved in preschool education in certain regulated ways. Thus, there is a certain limitation to parents' agency in relation to preschool.

The way the teachers talk about the parent-active introduction illustrates how this process has changed their own role as teachers, as well as changing the boundary work between home and preschool. The interviewees' examples and arguments can be interpreted as drawing on discourses of performativity and efficiency (cf. Osgood, 2012). This more intense, parent-active introduction is talked about as a helpful strategy to accelerate and facilitate the introduction. Furthermore, both parents and teachers are seen as having a responsibility to realize a good introduction to preschool. In

other words, it is a duty for the parents, as well as for the professionals, to negotiate the gap between home and preschool. The power of expectation operates on both the parents and the teachers, in terms of how they are expected to act and work together in this process.

However, even as the teachers say that they invite the parents to be more involved and active in preschool, the teachers seem to draw on both old and new discourses. On the one hand, they want the parents to take part in everyday life at preschool; on the other, the teachers construct new boundaries on how far parental involvement can go. When the teachers perceive parents as not being 'normally' active, the teachers consider that these parents require more or less explicit signals. That is, the new form of parent-active introduction produces an understanding on the part of the teacher regarding what a good and desirable parental subject position is (Davies & Harré, 1990; cf. Markström, 2013c; Popkewitz, 2003). It also creates new boundaries in the intermediate domain between home and preschool.

In this study, the practice of a preschool introduction can be interpreted as producing active, flexible and self-regulated parents who are desirable partners. The process requires the actors to be prepared to negotiate different issues regarding the child and their own positions, and to (re-)negotiate the gap between the home domain and the preschool domain. In this process, parents and teachers are both the products and the producers of discourses (cf. Davies & Harré, 1990).

### Acknowledgement

Thanks to Dr Ingrid Karlsson, Linköpings University, for valuable contributions during the focus group interviews. Financial support from Linköpings University is gratefully acknowledged.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### Funding

This work was supported by Linköping University.

### References

- Alasuutari, M. (2010). Striving at partnership: Parent-practitioner relationships in Finnish early educators' talk. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 18(2), 149–161. doi:10.1080/13502931003784545
- Alasuutari, M., & Markström, A.-M. (2011). The making of the ordinary child in preschool. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 55(5), 517–535. doi:10.1080/00313831.2011.555919
- Alasuutari, M., Markström, A.-M., & Vallberg-Roth, A. C. (2014). *Assessment and documentation in early childhood education*. London: Routledge.

- Bäck, U.-D. K. (2010). "We" are the professionals": A study of teachers' views on parental involvement in school. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 31(3), 323–335. doi:10.1080/01425691003700565
- Balaban, N. (2006). *Everyday goodbyes: Starting school and early care, a guide to the separation process*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Bouakaz, L., & Persson, S. (2007). What hinders and what motivates parents' engagement in school? *International Journal about Parents in Education*, 1(0), 97–107. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/2043/5152>
- Crozier, G. (2000). *Parents and schools: Partners or protagonists?* Stoke-on-Trent: Stylus Publishing; Trentham Books.
- Dalli, C. (2000). Starting child care: What young children learn about relating to adults in the first weeks of starting child care. *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 2(2). Retrieved from <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v2n2/dalli.html>
- Davies, B., & Harré, R. (1990). Positioning: The discursive production of selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 20(1), 43–63. doi:10.1111/j.1468-5914.1990.tb00174.x
- Dean, M. (1999). *Governmentality. Power and rule in modern society*. London: Sage.
- Englund, T. (2010). Questioning the parental right to educational authority – arguments for a pluralist public education system 1. *Education Inquiry*, 1(3), 235–258.
- Epstein, J. L. (2001). *School, family and community partnerships. Preparing educators and improving school*. Colorado: Westview Press.
- Foucault, M. (1988). *Technologies of the self*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Foucault, M. (1991). Governmentality. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon, & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality. With two lectures by and a focus group interview with Michael Foucault* (pp. 87–104). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Hanafin, J., & Lynch, A. (2002). Peripheral voices: Parental involvement, social class, and educational disadvantage. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 23(1), 35–49. doi:10.1080/01425690120102845
- Harré, R., & Van Langenhove, L. (eds). (1999). *Positioning theory: Moral contexts of intentional action*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Hughes, P., & MacNaughton, G. (2000). Consensus, dissensus or community: The politics of parent involvement in early childhood education. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 1(3), 241–258. doi:10.2304/ciec.2000.1.3.2
- Lindahl, M. (1995). *Inläring och erfارande. Ettåringars möte med förskolans värld*. Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis.
- Månsson, A. (2013). Familjens inskolning i förskolan – ett rum för möjligheter. In I. A. Harju & I. Tallberg Broman (Eds.), *Föräldrar, förskola och skola Om mångfald, makt och möjligheter* (pp. 79–94). Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Markström, A.-M. (2011). To involve parents in the assessment of the child in parent–teacher conferences: A case study. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 38(6), 465–474. doi:10.1007/s10643-010-0436-7
- Markström, A.-M. (2013a). Children's perspectives on the relations between home and school. *International Journal about Parents in Education*, 7(1), 43–56. doi:10.1111/chso.12114
- Markström, A.-M. (2013b). Garderoben som sted for samarbeid og forhandlingen mellom hjem og barnehage. In E. Foss (Ed.), *Til barnas beste. Veier til omsorg og lek, læring og dannning* (pp. 218–239). Oslo: Gyldendals Forlag.
- Markström, A.-M. (2013c). Relationen hem och institution – Pedagogisering av föräldrar i förskola och skola. In I. A. Harju & I. Tallberg Broman (Eds.), *Föräldrar, förskola och skola. Om mångfald, makt och möjligheter* (pp. 209–227). Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Markström, A.-M., & Simonsson, M. (2011). Constructions of girls in preschool parent–teacher conferences. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 43(1), 23–41. doi:10.1007/s13158-010-0024-4
- Markström, A.-M., & Simonsson, M. (2013). *Utvecklingssamtal: Kommunikation mellan hem och förskola*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Morgan, D. L. (1998). *Planning focus groups*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Osgood, J. (2012). *Narratives from the nursery: Negotiating professional identities in early childhood*. London: Routledge.
- Popkewitz, T. S. (2003). Governing the child and pedagogicalization of the parent. In M. N. Block, K. Holmlund, I. Moqvist, & T. S. Popkewitz (Eds.), *Governing children, families and education. Restructuring the welfare state* (pp. 35–61). New York: Palgrave.
- Rose, N. (1999). *Powers of freedom: Reframing political thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Simonsson, M. (2015). The role of artifacts during transition into the peer group: 1- to 3-year-old children's perspective on transition between the home and the preschool in Sweden. *International Journal of Transitions in Childhood*, 8, 14–24.
- Simonsson, M., & Markström, A.-M. (2013). Utvecklingssamtalet som uppgift och verktyg i förskolläraernas professionssträvanden i interaktion med föräldrar. *Nordisk Barnehageforskning*, 6(12), 1–18. doi:10.7577/nbf.355
- Simonsson, M., & Thorell, M. (2010). Att börja på förskolan. Exemplet på barns sociala samspel under inskolningen. *Educare*, 1, 53–73. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/2043/10531>
- Skolverket [National Agency for Education] (2016). *Läroplan för förskolan, Lpfö, reviderad 2016 [Curriculum for preschool, Lpfö, revised 2016]*. Stockholm: Skolverket.
- Tallberg Broman, I. (2013). Föräldrasamverkan i förändring. In I. A. Harju & I. Tallberg Broman (Eds.), *Föräldrar, förskola och skola. Om mångfald, makt och möjligheter*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Thyssen, S. (2000). The child's start in day care centre. *Early Child Development and Care*, 161(1), 33–46. doi:10.1080/0030443001610103
- Vetenskapsrådet [The Swedish Research Council] (2012). *Forskningsetiska principer inom humanistisk-samhällsvetenskaplig forskning [Ethical principals for Social Science]*. Retrieved from: [www.codex.vr.se](http://www.codex.vr.se)
- Vincent, C., & Ball, S. (2006). *Childcare, choice and class practices: Middel-cross parents and their children*. London: Routledge.
- Vogler, P., Crivello, G., & Woodhead, M. (2008). *Early childhood transitions research: A review of concepts, theory and practice* (Working Paper No. 48). The Hague, The Netherlands: Bernard van Leer Foundation.
- Walkerdine, V. (1990). *Schoolgirls fiction*. London: Verso.
- Wood, L. A., & Kroger, R. O. (2000). *Doing discourse analysis. Methods for studying action in talk and text*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.