



Book Review

Annelie Maria Fredricson
*Barnträdgårdens didaktik:
Kontinuitet och förändring i talet om
material och arbetssätt i tidskriften
Barnträdgården 1918–1945*

Stockholm University (PhD diss.)
2020, 184 pp.

In her dissertation *Barnträdgårdens didaktik* (*The didactics of the Kindergarten*), Annelie Maria Fredricson analyzes discussions about Kindergarten didactics during the period 1918–1945. The dissertation is based on Fredricson's interest in the newspapers' potential to spread ideas, which subsequently is converted into a didactical practice. This leads her further to questions of how contents of the journal concerning material and working methods formed ideas of the didactics of a kindergarten and which arguments that were brought up in order to maintain or change the prevailing material and working methods. To answer these questions, Fredricson has studied the journal *Barnträdgården* during the period 1918–1945 in order to make change as well as continuity visible. The choice of investigated period is motivated by the fact that the Swedish Froebel Association was established in 1918, and also because the period was characterised by radical societal changes which became crucial for women's emancipation.

Regarding previous research, Fredricson emphasises that her contribution lies in the focus on the didactics, which in this context, consist of materials and working methods. Previous research has focused on the relationship

between the kindergarten, the homes, the teachers, gender, and Froebel's influence on the practice, while Fredricson's dissertation instead seeks to analyse how the authors of the journal arranged and structured discussions about materials and working methods in the kindergarten. The purpose of focusing on materials and working methods consequently contributes to make visible *what* children and teachers should work with and *how* they should do it. By paying attention to the answers to the didactical questions of *what* and *how*, it becomes, according to Fredricson, also possible to understand *why* a material or a way of working was considered to be better compared to other methods.

The empirical parts of the dissertation are presented in a chronological order and are structured around four different themes, which were identified through a thematic close reading. The themes are: (1) setting the agenda, (2) critical perspectives are accentuated and the new takes place, (3) the consolidating of the new through Elsa Köhler and the readers are activated, and (4) free creativity and improvisation—the new thing. In each chapter, Fredricson discusses how the journal argued for and against ideas concerning material and working methods and how these could be applied in the best way. The first theme shows, for instance, how to shape the ideal kindergarten. It was important that leftover materials such as empty spools of thread, matchboxes, strings etc. were reused and not thrown away. Anna Warburg, one of the prominent persons in the kindergarten, argued that the simplest material could

be very useful giving the children many opportunities to develop and use their fantasy, which ready-made toys could not. This was also a way of teaching the children economy—to reuse something old in order to create something new. Warburg also emphasized the importance of letting the children choose freely which material they wanted to use—the teachers were not allowed to interfere too much into the child's activity. That is why Warburg criticised Froebel's materials, because she thought they were limiting the children's opportunities to choose freely. According to her, using Froebel's ready-made templates did not benefit the children's development.

The criticism and suggestions of how to improve Froebel's material was a recurring issue in the journal. The material was considered garish and too difficult for the children to use. Influenced by US educationalists, some authors suggested that the so-called building blocks should be bigger to make them easier to use. The discussions about which material one should use, emphasised the importance of relating the teaching to the children's world of experience and of course also to the surrounding society. Under the influence of the Austrian educationalist and psychologist Elsa Köhler, the discussions became more scholarly in the 1930s. The new child psychology aimed at teaching the leaders how to observe the children's needs. This would make it possible to use the materials in new and different ways. In her last empirical chapter Fredricson highlights that free creation and improvisation were important elements in the discussions. It was considered important that the children got opportunities to choose among different materials to be able to create freely. This would benefit self-activity as well as cognitive

ability. It is obvious that in the end of the investigation period, Warburg's ideal kindergarten (from 1918) got a strong foothold, among most writers in the journal. This might be explained by the impact of the new child psychology.

In her conclusion, Fredricson emphasises that the debates concerning the material and working methods in the kindergarten had a greater impact than previous research had brought up. The analysis shows that the debates concerning material and working methods were closely related to ideas of how the environment should be designed in order to make the children aware of the importance of cleanliness. Having an environment adapted to the children, like small chairs, tables and kitchen sinks, was considered to facilitate their independent work. It would also develop their self-activity. Furthermore, the analysis shows that the discussions also embraced different views concerning, for example, freedom, how to handle new ways of thinking and how to renew the kindergarten through new pedagogical observations. Freedom, in the pedagogical situation could, for instance, mean that the teachers dared to think freely without being caught up in a planning which would limit the children's freedom. Freedom could also implicate that the children's choice of material was not controlled. Instead, they should have the freedom to choose whatever material they wanted. This was a way of creating independent children. At the same time, too much freedom could entail less demands on the children and not everyone was convinced of this as a desirable development.

The discussions in the journal thus created an arena where thoughts of an ideal kindergarten and its didactics were created, shaped, negotiated and changed. Fredricson argues, that there

was some ambivalence to Froebel's material. This ambivalence became stronger over time. Froebel's material was indeed a cornerstone, but the teachers should not become too attached to it, because it might have a negative impact on the children's self-activity. The ambivalence contributed to the modification of Froebel's material in order to be in accordance with the new pedagogy and the modern child psychology. The writers of the journal considered it to be important to combine new ideas with old ones. This approach would contribute to change, but in a controlled and a conscious way.

Fredricson's investigation of the journal *Barnträdgården* is substantial and compelling, but is not without limitations. There is a lack of a clear theoretical framework which makes it difficult for the analysis to rise above the descriptive level. In the method chapter, Fredricson argues that she uses the narrative inquiry approach ("den historieberättande tolkande ansatsen," p.53). However, no explanation is given to what this approach means and why it is suitable for this study. The study would also have benefitted, if Fredricson discussed her results in relation to the societal changes which characterised the period, more so since Fredricson stresses that these changes were of importance to the choice of the period, 1918–1945. It is, of course, quite probable that the discussions concerning the didactics of a kindergarten were influenced by the surrounding societal context.

Nevertheless, Fredricson's dissertation is a solid piece of work and shows in an initiated way how the discussions about the didactics of the kindergarten were articulated in the journal *Barnträdgården*. The well-balanced number of quotes invites the reader into the teachers' world, and this makes you un-

derstand how the teachers constantly were trying to improve their work.

As a result, the dissertation enables the reader to distinguish certain similarities between the discussions carried out in the twentieth century and our current didactical discussions concerning material and working methods in preschools and schools.

Emma Hellström
Uppsala University
emma.hellstrom@edu.uu.se