



INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (IECE) PROJECT

EXAMPLE OF IECE PROVISION: SWEDEN

1. Abstract

Swedish pre-schools are provided by all 290 municipalities and are regulated by the government through the Education Act. Swedish municipalities are obliged to provide pre-primary education to children aged 1 to 5. If parents are unemployed or on parental leave for a sibling this obligation still applies, although for a limited number of hours (minimum 15 hours a week). In 2011 there were just over 10,000 pre-schools in Sweden. Since the introduction of a maximum fee in 2001, there has been a continuous increase in the number of children attending. In October 2011, 83% of all children aged 1–5 attended pre-primary education. From the autumn term when children turn 3 they are entitled to free pre-primary education for at least 525 hours per year (known as ‘general pre-school’). After an increase between 1990 and beginning of the 2000s, the average group size has remained fairly constant since 2006 at just under 17 children per group.

Children who, for physical, intellectual or other reasons, need special support in their development shall, according to the Education Act, be provided with the relevant support. The amount of resources and support personnel is equivalent to approximately 4% of all full-time employees in pre-primary education (The Swedish National Agency for Education, Facts and Figures, 2012).

The Education Act and the revised pre-primary curriculum state that pre-primary education should offer children the opportunity to develop both their Swedish and their first language, but in reality only around four out of ten children with a first language other than Swedish are given this chance. Between 2001 and 2011 the number of children with a first language other than Swedish more than doubled, from 40,000 to 92,200. This means that two out of ten children in pre-primary education have a first language other than Swedish.

Botkyrka is a municipality in the suburban area of Stockholm with almost 90,000 inhabitants. Of these, 56% were either born outside Sweden (39.8%) or have two parents that were born outside Sweden. This makes Botkyrka the municipality in Sweden with the highest proportion of inhabitants with foreign backgrounds. About 100 different languages are represented within the municipality. Botkyrka has a large proportion of young inhabitants, with a quarter of the population being children aged 0–17. Botkyrka has also a fairly large number of socio-economically disadvantaged inhabitants.

Botkyrka has 49 public and 22 private pre-schools accommodating 5,000 children



aged 1–5. Classes for 3–5 year olds normally have 22–24 children and three teachers. The goal is to have at least one teacher with a university degree in each classroom, but the educational level in Botkyrka is low in comparison to Swedish pre-schools in general (22% in Botkyrka have a university degree compared to 53% across the country). The main reason for this is a difficulty in recruiting qualified staff.

The pre-school Örtagården is situated in the northern part of Botkyrka. It is a multicultural area with a high number of socio-economically disadvantaged families. Örtagården is organised into seven different classrooms, three for 1–2 year olds and four for 3–5 year olds. The pre-school has one head teacher and normally three teachers per classroom plus extra resources, depending on the children’s needs. Seven of the teachers have a university degree and 24 languages are represented. The pre-school is open 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. The number of hours that the children attend the pre-school for is determined by the parents’ working hours. One third of the children attend pre-school 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., about 55% between 7.30 a.m. and 4.30 p.m. and about 15% from earlier than 7 a.m. until later than 5 p.m.



Figure 1. Botkyrka’s location

2. Inclusive features

Inclusion is a fundamental principle in the Swedish school system. The revised pre-primary curriculum clearly states that education will be adjusted to fit the needs of all children. Children who need support for a shorter or longer period of time will get this support based on their individual needs. Furthermore, the curriculum stresses the staff's ability to understand and interact with the child and the importance of gaining the parents' trust in order to make pre-primary education into a positive support system for children with special needs. The curriculum also states that in pre-primary education all children shall experience the joy of making progress, overcome difficulties and be an asset in the classroom.

Regarding children with special needs, pre-schools co-operate with disability centres (see section 4 below) and sometimes with child psychiatry, both organised by the county. Usually children aged 3–5 have already been attending pre-primary education since they were 1–2 years old and as such prominent special needs are well-known by the time the child is three.

In Botkyrka, as in all Swedish municipalities, the vast majority of children with special needs are included in mainstream pre-school classes. There are 19 specialist places for children with autism, multiple disabilities and language and communication disorders.

The pre-school head is responsible for ensuring each unit is based on participation and inclusion. As in all pre-schools in Botkyrka, supervision focusing on special needs is available via seven centrally organised special needs educators/teachers. The goal of this supportive function is to contribute to the achievement of an equal and accessible pre-primary education, where all children can be included and participate.

The pre-school is open to all children. Generally support is not given to individual children but to the entire class. If required, the number of staff can be increased or the number of children in the class decreased. Interventions concerning communication or interaction, for example, include the entire class. Also smaller groups can be created within the class to meet children's different needs.

Because of the multilingual environment, there are general measures concerning language development. Botkyrka has developed five fundamental principles ('keys to language'), designed to promote language development. These are:

- Support children in acquiring the language by using a lot of verbal communication;
- Stimulate the children to produce rich language;



- Ensure that pre-school activities give children many opportunities for verbal interaction where they can express themselves;
- The teacher should give continuous feedback on the child's development based on evaluative documentation that clearly describes the child and their activity from the point of view of language development;
- Teachers should make language comprehensible by using context-related language.

3. Inclusive highlight

Örtagården has many challenges connected to the catchment area of the children. The pre-school also has several children with a variety of special needs. Some of the pre-school's inclusive highlights include centrally-organised special needs educators/teachers, co-operation with social services, co-operation between head teachers regarding inclusive education and a leadership that focuses on inclusion.

4. Other evidence of quality IECE

- Focus on language development;
- The municipality offers parental training for parents of children of all ages, as a general prevention technique;
- Co-operation with social services in the municipality;
- Co-operation with the county's services for children with autism, hearing impairment, visual impairment and other disabilities;
- Co-operation with other pre-primary education settings and networks promoting inclusion, e.g. networks of special needs educators/teachers and representatives from social services, child health centres and maternity centres.