Orchestrating and studying children’s and teachers’ learning: Reflections on developmental research approaches

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Abstract

Theory-driven and practice-driven research are often separated, but in this article we shall argue for a research approach that is theory-driven but practice-oriented and shares features with the specific kind of early childhood education pedagogy this research approach has generated, what we refer to as developmental pedagogy (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008). On the basis of numerous empirical studies in the field of young children’s learning carried out in a specific context, namely the Swedish early childhood education system, we shall first briefly describe the approach to learning and then analyse the specific features the empirical studies behind it share. The clear parallels between the pedagogical approach with children and the research studies are that: 1) they are both theoretically driven; 2) they both orchestrate and direct what we want children to learn in educational practices, and what to study in research, respectively; and 3) they both focus on children’s and teachers’ discernment and meaning-making.

Keywords: developmental pedagogy, educational approach, meta-analysis, research approach

Introduction

In our research group we all share an interest in creating what Marton calls a pedagogy of learning (Marton & Tsui, 2004), which in the area of early years education is now designated developmental pedagogy. This pedagogy is based on the results of numerous research projects in recent decades (see e.g., Pramling, 1989, 1994; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2003, 2008). The purpose of this article is twofold: first, to present developmental pedagogy and, second, to present the particular research approach associated with it, an approach aimed at studying the development of children’s learning as well as teachers’ professional skill in developing children’s understanding of different aspects of the world around them. We shall argue for a method that combines theoretically sound research in naturalistic settings in preschool with the intention of also developing the practice that is, facilitating children’s learning in such settings. On the basis of the mentioned studies, we will explain and discuss the methodological issues involved in this approach and clarify in which ways it is similar to and different from other approaches, in particular action research. We will first present developmental...
pedagogy and then analyse the research features of how the knowledge that has been
generated in the research behind it has led to its theoretical formation.

The pedagogy presented here and the research that underpins it are based on an
interest in children’s learning, which is considered to be culturally and historically
situated (Säljö, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). Both the pedagogy and the research approach
combine strong theoretical and basic components and our ambition is to improve
practice and to do research in practice. Such a combination might appear strange
and even impossible, but in this respect we follow Stoke (1997) who argues in his
widely read book Pasteur’s Quadrant that basic and applied research, do not define
one dimension with “basic” and “applied” as two diametrically opposed components.
Instead, he claims, “basic” and “applied” represent two independent dimensions;
research might be of high basic and high applied interest, of high basic but low
applied interest, of low basic but high applied interest. It is our ambition to
contribute research of the first kind.

When learning about different aspects of the phenomena in the world around us,
we must focus on these aspects. In the pedagogical approach and research, we try to
direct children’s attention by creating interesting and exciting learning situations that
motivate them and their capacity to learn. Throughout thematic work, learning
situations are carefully planned and arranged to attract and maintain their interest.
By focussing children’s attention on different phenomena and analysing what they
notice, discern and concentrate on, we have discovered the structure of their attention
in some areas. This has been done by adopting a phenomenographic approach
(Marton, 1981) in the sense that we capture what things look like from children’s
points of view – in terms of which critical aspects of phenomena they discern and
focus on.

Much of the research referred to in this article from our research team concerns
conceptual development. However, from our perspective, concepts are interpreted as
tools for experiencing the world. The emphasis is on how the children make use of
various concepts when encountering early mathematics, literacy, aesthetics and
science, and to explore conditions that contribute to their conceptual development
and reveal how conceptual development can be enhanced by educational means.

In order to reach this aim of developing what may also be referred to as a child-
centred didactics, the research team works together with teachers to develop themes,
within which the teachers work with various content areas in ways that provide
the children with opportunities to undergo conceptual development in the different
domains. We have followed work focussing on the conceptual development in
children that has occurred in various projects and compared it with that in children
not working with the themes (see e.g., Pramling, 1996).

Our view is that in any domain or sub-domain of a young child’s learning there
are certain critical aspects that he/she must discern before his/her conceptual
development can take place. One premise is that if the teachers create conditions for
children in learning to discern these aspects, the learning will also be more durable. The main focus is on the interaction and communication between teachers and children, between children, and between children about phenomena. What characterises preschool is that there is an endless interaction between both the children themselves and between the teachers and the children. The children hardly work by themselves as individuals in the context of preschool – it is a collective arena. Further, interaction is central to children’s play, which preschool uses as a basis for getting children interested in and learning about particular phenomena.

The constituent concepts of developmental pedagogy and its history

The research approach behind developmental pedagogy (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2007, 2008) has its theoretical basis in phenomenography (Marton, 1981; Marton & Booth, 1997). In phenomenography, the topic of research is to find out the various ways people experience something. When it comes to young children, both their bodily and verbal expressions can provide the basis for discriminating qualitatively different ways of experiencing something. Hence, this is research that concentrates on the learners’ (the children’s) perspectives (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson & Hundeide, 2010) on various phenomena in their world. The pedagogical approach as such has been developed in the course of many empirical studies where teachers and researchers have worked together. We will come back to what this means in a concrete sense. Different aspects have appeared step by step in these studies, and these are now beginning to form a theoretical platform for a pedagogy for young children.

We would like to explain developmental pedagogy as such. Its purpose is to facilitate children’s discernment and meaning-making about various aspects of the world around them, dimensions of young children’s lives that are related to their experiences (acting and participating), and how these are experienced (perceived) by each child. In this process it is not only the child’s intellect that is active, but their meaning-making is also influenced by social and emotional dimensions/factors as well as the context (Hundeide, 2006). The discernment and meaning-making are always about something, referred to here as the object of learning – what the child’s learning is directed towards. In contrast, the act of learning, that is, how children learn, encompasses four central dimensions: 1) accepting children as playing learning individuals who do not separate play and learning (Johansson & Pramling, 2006); 2) using communication and interaction on different levels, firstly in joint communication and reflection and, secondly, in discussions on a meta level; 3) meta-level talk, which has to be guided/directed by the teacher towards the object of learning; and 4) using variation as a means of making the object of learning visible to the child (also see Pramling Samuelsson, 2006; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008, for this pedagogical approach).
So how does developmental pedagogy differ from other approaches to learning in preschool? Fröbel (1995) is regarded as the founding father of preschool. With the aim of developing children’s mathematical and moral skills, he developed systematic material for children. He saw “the home” and the mother as key features and believed that children should be involved in household work, gardening and woodwork in preschool. The teacher’s role was to engage the children actively with the help of specific tasks and concrete materials. According to Fröbel, children should work, play and learn in preschool. Montessori (1989) also based her preschool approach on concrete actions, which she labelled work. Play was not a part of her approach – rather the opposite – fantasy and stories should wait until children had a solid understanding of reality. Her material is, however, still widely used as tools for developing children’s understanding about different objects of learning. According to her, the teacher’s role is to organise the environment, produce materials and communicate with children.

A popular preschool approach today is the Reggio Emilia pedagogy. It is said to be based on post-modern perspectives (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999) and it does not have any proposed curriculum since this is assumed to hinder teachers from meeting every child on his/her own terms, that is, accepting their experiences and knowledge (Malaguzzi, 1993). The focus is on creating meaning but not about anything decided in advance; the meaning is expected to grow with children's experiences. The teacher’s main role is to listen (Rinaldi, 2001). According to the Reggio Emilia pedagogy, children are born with resources and teachers have to be facilitators for whatever each child brings with him or her.

In the 1970s an approach called dialogue pedagogy was introduced in Sweden, where communication and interaction as such became key factors in preschool education (SOU 1972:26). With this approach, the object of learning became invisible. Now the circumstances have changed once more. In Sweden (as in many other countries around the world), we now have a national curriculum with a number of learning objectives that preschool should contribute to developing in children (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 2006). Little is known, however, about how these learning objectives are related to the foundations of learning, for example, literacy, music and science. It is here that our research has contributions to make.

In relation to earlier preschool approaches, developmental pedagogy shares with Fröbel the idea of using everyday life as a foundation for children’s learning, although more is involved than the home and the garden. We also share with both Fröbel and Montessori the systematic work towards objects of learning but without focussing on physical materials as they did. We regard the theoretical features we will present below as the key notions teachers should adopt and apply whenever or wherever a situation appears in which children have a chance to learn certain skills or knowledge. As for the Reggio Emilia approach, we share their notion that the
experiences of children and their ideas are a means for developing their knowledge of the world around them. The approach advocated in this article is, however, centred on both children and the object of learning simultaneously (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008).

Features of specific developmental studies – the origin of developmental pedagogy

During almost two decades, research on young children’s learning, on their developing understanding of learning as such (Pramling, 1983), on communication between teachers and children (Pramling, 1995), on emergent science, literacy and mathematics (e.g., Doverborg & Pramling Samuelsson, 1999, 2001; Gustafsson & Mellgren, 2005; Pramling, 1994, 1996; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2007) and, more recently, on aesthetics (Pramling Samuelsson, Asplund Carlsson, Olsson, Pramling & Wallerstedt, 2009) and play (Johansson & Pramling Samuelsson, 2007) has all shared certain features. First, in all these studies the teachers were active participants in orchestrating the phenomena they wished the children to develop an understanding of in their daily practice. Second, this implies that the teachers, through in-service training and/or feedback on their work, develop competence in the area of research. Third, children’s meaning-making has been central. This means that learning is perceived in terms of the way children experience and express their perspectives. Fourth, this research is done as part of the regular work of teachers in early childhood education. Fifth, the projects as such develop both the children and their teachers. Sixth, there is always a theoretical base for the work with children, although it has varied in different projects. Finally, video recordings have often been used for both generating empirical data for analysis and for the development of teacher awareness.

1. Active partnership between teachers and researchers

When studying children’s learning of various contents, the teacher ‘orchestrates’ or ‘puts on the stage’ what to study. This is done in close cooperation with the researcher. In one of the first studies with this approach, the focus was on the communication between teachers and children. This means that interaction in practice was followed by the researcher with a video camera, once a month for one and a half years (Pramling, 1995). Once a month there was also a joint analysis of the video recordings, beginning with the teachers giving comments on what they had discovered about their own acting. Other studies, varying in length, have dealt with early science, mathematics, literacy and aesthetics. In every case, the content to work on has always been decided by the teacher and the researcher together. Often the researcher has an idea about the content area on which to focus, that is, what they want the children to learn, while the teacher is the one who carries this out in practice with the children. This means that the learning object, namely, what
children are supposed to learn is a central question. Since these studies have all been conducted within the framework of the goal-directed practice of Swedish preschool, the ambition that children should learn (develop their awareness of) something has always been in focus. The teacher and the researcher discuss children’s expressions and constructions of meaning and how they develop and can be further developed over the course of the project.

2. Development of teacher competencies in the area of research
In all the projects the teachers were involved in some kind of in-service training. This included both knowledge about the content (the knowledge domain) from which the learning objects were taken (e.g., dancing, mathematics or ecology) and methodological aspects (i.e., principles for supporting children’s learning). Let us illustrate this with a project about aesthetics (for a more extensive presentation of this project, see Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2009). In this project, the term “aesthetics” referred to the areas of music, dance and poetry. The 30 teachers who participated were introduced to these domains of knowing through in-service training once a month over a period of one and a half years. The meetings concentrated on the three different content areas, through: (i) specialists in each area giving inspiring lectures; (ii) the teachers reading theoretical pedagogical literature and discussing it with one another and the researchers in relation to their work; and (iii) giving teachers feedback on their work with the topic they had dealt with when the researchers video-recorded their work.

Here we shall illustrate what this means in relation to focussing on poetry with young children (Pramling, 2009, 2010). The teachers were introduced to some of the “tools of the domain” (Kozulin, 1998) that could constitute learning objects in the area of poetry. These tools included: rhyming (see Pramling & Asplund Carlsson, 2008, for an empirical study of how teachers worked with developing children’s rhyming skills), alliteration (i.e., that several words in succession begin with the same or a similar sound, e.g., “run rapidly”), simile (X is like Y), metaphor (X is Y), line-breaking and repetition (cf. refrain in music). The teachers then worked on making children aware of these ‘poetic tools’ in different activities, planned as well as enacted on the spot in response to, for example, children’s language play (rhyming, inventing nonsense words etc.). For examples of the ensuing poems that the children made up in collaboration with their teachers, see Pramling (2009) and Pramling and Asplund Carlsson (2008).

3. Children’s discernment and sense-making
One of the most important aspects of early childhood education is to contribute to children’s learning in terms of their own ability to make sense of the world around them. This means that children’s learning has to a large extent been focussed on their construction of meaning, that is, how something appears from their points of view.
This act can also be discussed in terms of what children discern (Marton & Tsui, 2004). When children make sense of something, for example, in the domain of mathematics, what is ‘first’ and ‘last’, they show in their behaviour, actions or reactions, that they perceive or discern it in qualitatively different ways (Doverborg & Pramling Samuelsson, 2011a). This variation among the children in the group will then be used as a pedagogical principle in the teachers’ work with the children, as we will explain below.

In the study by Doverborg and Pramling Samuelsson (ibid.), children aged 1 to 3 years were given four animals to play with. After playing for a while, the teacher asked a child if the animals should go for a walk in a long line and began putting them in order: “and first comes the bear, after that we put the sheep, and then comes the goat, and last comes the cat”. After that, she asked the child which animal went first and which last. The children solved the task in three different ways representing how they experienced the question (Hundeide, 2006) or discerned ‘first’ and ‘last’ (Doverborg & Pramling Samuelsson, 2009). The responses differed between those children who: (i) knew both first and last; (ii) knew the first and said that the last one was the second animal; and (iii) knew only the first. There were, of course, also children who did not do this task at all, but went on playing with the animals. From the specific context, task and how they perceived what to do, it was possible to distinguish three categories representing the meaning the children made, which was closely related to how they discerned.

4. Research in everyday practice as a collective task

Studies with the intention of both developing practice and studying central and genuine questions about children’s learning have to be done in practice and in everyday life there. This means that data are always gathered by following work with the children. The teachers are not asked to do something different from what they are supposed to do when the researcher is not there, but the focus is on doing this as well as possible. That is why the teachers need to be involved in in-service training – to get a sense of becoming more competent in the areas they are working on. They are supposed to do what they do in everyday life but as consciously as possible.

One of the key factors in improving their work with children is that the teachers are all members of a group, which means they all obtain a feeling of creating something new together. They also often have a feeling in the beginning of not knowing what to do, but after a while they slowly begin to grasp what it means to develop children’s understanding of something, which is a perspective that is not common in early childhood education since the tradition there is to work on different activities and to take it for granted that children learn (something) from what they are doing (Johansson & Pramling Samuelsson, 2007).
5. Developing children and teachers simultaneously

In many of the research projects mentioned above, teachers were involved for longer periods of time, often one and a half to two years. Change takes time, and what we want is to change the teachers’ way of thinking both about the object of learning and the act of learning. In developmental pedagogy this is done by focusing teachers’ attention on children’s learning of different phenomena. It is then assumed that the teachers will have the knowledge about the content they will develop during their in-service training. What teachers need to know on a deeper level is what it means to develop a certain skill, that is, understand something, such as learning to listen to music in an informed way (Wallerstedt, 2010) or developing mathematical notions (Doverborg & Pramling Samuelsson, 2011b).

When teachers follow how children make sense of something, it also becomes obvious what the difference is between the teachers’ intention with children’s learning and the different ways children discern features and create meaning. Teachers can also become aware of this meeting between their world and the children’s world in shorter studies such as learning studies (Lowis, 2002, Holmqvist, 2005; Pramling Samuelsson & Pramling, 2008; Runesson, 2011). A “learning study” is a form of teacher-researcher cooperation that is similar to but quite distinct from our approach to learning and research. Inspired by both the Japanese “lesson study” (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999; Yoshida, 1999) and a design experiment (Cobb et al., 2003), a learning study (Pang & Marton, 2005) combines a development project and a research process. In a learning study, the children’s experience of patterns of variation and invariance plays a central role, and the point of departure is always the learners’ understanding. It is focused on the object of learning, i.e. what the students are supposed to learn. Teachers and researchers cooperate closely, working as partners in an iterative process, gathering data about teaching and pupils’ learning, analysing the data, planning and revising in a cyclical manner. Although teachers and researchers have different roles in the process, they have a common goal: to improve pupils’ learning. There is systematic and theory-based research involved in the process – a particular learning theory is used as a guiding principle when analysing and designing learning. In accordance with their theoretical foundation, learning studies have aimed to enhance students’ ability to discern those critical aspects of the various kinds of phenomena they have to deal with. “Critical aspects” refer to those aspects that must be discerned in order for the learner to see or understand something in a certain way.

The results of learning studies have been extremely encouraging so far. Learning studies in Sweden and Hong Kong (Holmqvist, 2005; Kullberg, 2004; Lo et al., 2005; Runesson, 2005) have reported how involvement in such studies has enhanced the teachers’ sensitivity to ways of achieving the intended learning outcomes. In 24 of 27 learning studies, a positive effect on the performance of the whole group was found,
which means there was a significant increase in the mean score in the post-test. The learning study was found to be particularly beneficial to the low-score group. It was found that, in 25 out of 27 studies, the low-score group showed significantly better progress than the high-score group (Lo et al., 2005) even when a correction for ceiling effects had been made.

The learning study is clearly structured, as follows: 1) deciding what children’s attention should be focussed on and planning to provide for this; 2) working with children on the learning object; 3) video recording the interaction and analysing it; 4) creating a new task with the same learning object based on what the critical aspects seem to be for understanding, from what children understood/did not understand or, rather, how they understood what was being taught. This cycle could be repeated many times, enabling the teachers to become more and more competent to design learning tasks and talk with children in a way that would help them focus on the object of learning. So teachers learn and children learn.

However, we wish to point out that the learning study approach to developing both teachers and children originated in school, where the objects of learning are narrow and the content specific. We have tried the more narrow learning study approach in studies in Swedish preschools and found that it works for certain learning objects and not for others (Pramling Samuelsson & Pramling, 2008). But trying this out in early education also raises many critical questions about the appropriateness of being so narrow and specific when stating what young children should learn. What we can say is that the cycle of focussing on children’s sense-making in learning studies is similar to that in the methodological approach we describe in this article, but that the time frames as well as the learning objects are very different. Learning studies are limited in time and narrow in scope, while in advocating developmental pedagogy we often work for longer periods and have a broader perspective of what children should learn, which is more appropriate to the thematic nature of organising learning situations in preschool. This also has implications for what knowledge is generated in the various approaches.

6. A theoretical base – the crossroads between learning objects and children’s experience

The way of conducting research that we present in this article – orchestrating or putting on stage what one wants to study – is based on the idea that practice has to be based on teachers holding a theoretical perspective and not on materials or certain methods. The teachers must have made the theory a part of their whole approach to early childhood education, that is, to be able to live according to the theory and to put it into practice in different situations. This means that the teacher must be aware of the learning object as well as meeting each child in his or her own experience, which implies listening very carefully to the meaning children create (cf. Rinaldi, 2006).
It is not until teachers know what to draw children’s attention to and can simultaneously engage with the “playing-learning child”, who brings in his or her own imagination and ideas, that children’s sense-making can be studied in the way we suggest (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson & Hundeide, 2010). At this point, they are aware of what to generate knowledge about both from the researchers’ point of view and from the teachers’ point of view. It is all a question of communication and negotiation of meaning. The variation in the ideas about the topic (theme) among the group of children is used as a pedagogical asset when making the children aware of these differences and similarities (Pramling, 1994, 1996). The teacher also challenges and supports the children’s discernment and sense-making with the intention of developing their knowledge of the theme currently in focus.

A comparison with action research

We are often asked how our approach to research differs from what is often referred to as action research. In order to clarify this issue, we will make a short comparison. At first glance, they may look similar and are similar in being praxis-oriented, but there are distinct and important differences. Let us begin by spelling out our understanding of action research by quoting Rönnerman (2005). She writes, “What distinguishes action research from strict academic research is that it is based on the practitioners’ questions and cooperation between the researchers and practitioners. In this encounter there is an effort to use the competence of both the researcher and the practitioner. This cooperation can take many different forms, although the most common one is supervision” (p. 15; our translation).

Our approach focuses on how children develop knowledge and what this knowledge consists of, while action research focuses on teachers changing their practice. This means that we have a specific object (what) of knowledge, while action research has a more general focus on change (how). The origin of the methodological approach we advocate is theoretical, namely, it is based on a theory about how learning comes about, while action research takes its origin in practice with an interest in the questions brought up by practitioners. Another important difference is between our interest in children’s learning and the interest of action research in teachers’ learning.

In the research on which developmental pedagogy is based, the researcher and the teacher have already agreed on what to try to develop in children in terms of the teacher directing their attention to certain objects of learning or specific content areas, while action research has a kind of approach where the learners themselves decide what to learn. Although the teacher and the researcher work together in our approach, it is the researcher who suggests the object of learning, while in action research there is a ‘bottom-up’ process where the researcher is the supervisor following the teacher’s intentions and ideas (Rönnerman, 2004).
In a way practice is at the centre of action research, while research is at the centre of our approach. In other words, our research has a theoretical framework, while action research is concerned with problem solving in practice. When we study children's learning in specific contexts, we look for general knowledge, while action research claims that no practice is like another, meaning that knowledge cannot be transferred between practices (Ferrance, 2000).

Still another way to compare the two approaches is that we see the teacher's learning as a result of learning about their children's sense-making, while the teacher's learning and development as such is the key aim of action research. This also implies that research and the development of practice are two separate actions in our approach, that is, we ‘put on the stage’ and ‘orchestrate’ what we want to generate knowledge about, but research methods and work with teachers differ, while development and research are indistinguishable in action research. This can also be seen in the light of how data are generated. In our approach, the researcher generates the research data, while in action research it is the practitioners who generate data by, for example, observing their own practice, keeping log books and reflecting on this.

Consequently, a precondition for generating data in our approach is that teachers are close to the children when data are generated, while in action research the teacher must work on getting distance from their own practice when generating data. The notions of knowledge generation and competence development also distinguish the two approaches from each other (McKay, 1992).

**Discussion**

A central question is what is being analysed in the research associated with developmental pedagogy – the approach we advocate. There are many possibilities. The process as such, that is, the interaction between the teacher and children could be the focus. But the focus could also be on either the teacher or the child. Another focus for this kind of research could be the outcome, such as: (a) children’s learning; or (b) the teacher’s learning, but it can also be, and usually is in these studies; (c) the relationship between these two, namely, how teachers challenge and support children’s learning and how children respond to these opportunities. Both this kind of research and action research can contribute to the development of practice but, as already mentioned, while this is the whole idea of action research, developmental pedagogy is interested in the development of both the teacher and the learner.

Bae (2009) discusses how theoretical notions in combination with practice can contribute to development if one's own role is viewed critically. In both action research and development pedagogy, theory plays a central role, but in different ways. In developmental pedagogy research, the researchers' direct activities (orchestrate) to a much greater extent than those undertaking action research. In both approaches, the teachers’ experience is recognised, and the teachers also participate in a process of
becoming more competent. In developmental pedagogy, the aim is to create better
conditions for children’s learning, while in action research there is a much broader
perspective and the goal is a change of practice. Still, what we share with action
research is a belief that changes take time, whether they are about becoming better
able to understand and challenge children’s learning or, for example, changing the
whole structure of the classroom.

In developmental pedagogy research, one of the main aims is to make the teachers
focus children’s attention on a specific content or learning object (Pramling
Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008). It is a question of acquiring a “guiding
attention tool” in Bae’s (2009) words. She also claims that the theoretical perspective
is necessary for “guiding attention tools” in everyday life, which can be quite chaotic
in preschool. “Notions are helpful for discerning the object of attention and becoming
aware of the interaction involved in everyday life” (ibid., 27). In order to function as a
guiding attention tool, notions have to be embodied by the teachers. So, in a way, we
researchers work with what we want teachers to do with their children to assist their
meaning-making or to help them discern phenomena in the world around them.

In Scandinavia, there is much discussion on the subject of “practice-near”
research, but it should be pointed out that this refers to various perspectives.
Lorentzen (2011-03-23) defines it as research: 1) that is thematically focussed on
work or actions in preschool or school; 2) is done in or close to the field of practice;
3) where the practitioners have a central influence on the research project in both
planning and carrying it through. The two research approaches we have been talking
about here can be linked to issue no. 2) in the case of developmental pedagogy and
no. 3) for action research. The research approach we advocate here is related to
theoretical ambitions in research and to generating knowledge about what is at the
heart of the educational mission – to provide the best possible conditions for young
children’s meaning-making in everyday pedagogical settings where children’s
experience is used as a source of learning.

Finally, another important aim in research related to developmental pedagogy is
to challenge the teachers to really invite children to participate and express their own
perspectives, with the focus on a partnership between teachers and children
(Harcourt & Conroy, 2011), in naturalistic settings (Gray & Winter, 2011). Harcourt
and Conroy (2011:41) write that: “If researchers want to work with children rather
than on children, it is critical time is dedicated to establish a research relationship
with children”. In the research underlying developmental pedagogy, it is the teachers
who have a longstanding relationship with children, who work with them, while the
researchers analyse the results. In this way, the researcher is not particularly central
to the children. Kupfer (2011:101) claims: “Listening to children’s voices is one of the
teachers’ most important strategies (if not the most important) for recognizing
what is happening for children”. This is the focus of both the teacher in her task
of contributing information about children’s knowledge construction and the researcher in maintaining a developmental pedagogical approach to research.

The parallel between the teacher’s work with children and the researchers’ knowledge constructions is the combination of being aware of where to go (the direction) and being open to the children’s and teachers’ collaborative meaning-making.

**Early childhood education in a wider perspective**

Although this article is not about various approaches in Early Childhood Education, but about a research approach for developing knowledge of a special kind in the context of early education, and for early childhood education, here we will briefly discuss this approach in relation to some other approaches. To this end, we will use John Bennett’s (2008) distinction of preschool approaches. He distinguishes between what he refers to as the social-pedagogical and the academic approach. The first approach has its basis in Froebel’s view of a wholeness between play, learning and work, a socially-oriented approach clearly separated from school pedagogy. Various activities constitute the organisation of the day, and children are supposed to learn by participating in these. In contrast, the other approach, namely the academic approach, is more clearly linked to cognition and school subjects, with a clear separation between, for example, play and learning. In accordance with the latter approach, children are supposed to be involved in short lessons where different school subjects are practised.

The early childhood education we present the basis for in this article does not fall into either of these traditional approaches. Instead, it is an approach where communication is at the heart of education and where is it the child’s meaning-making that is in focus. This means, among other things, that the teacher’s role as a participant in the child’s everyday life is considered decisive for their learning (Pramling & Pramling Samuelsson, 2011). The teacher is both the one organising children’s learning and the one supporting and challenging them in their meaning-making. This means that the teacher has to be both skilful in working in a goal-directed manner (Doverborg & Pramling Samuelsson, 2012) and be knowledgeable about the topic at hand (see e.g., Pramling & Pramling Samuelsson, 2010). In addition, teachers need to relate to children as playing-learning individuals that teachers have to learn from (i.e., make visible their sense made) in order to support their further development (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008).

If we instead look at the Reggio Emilia approach, which is very popular in Sweden today, there are similarities between this approach and the developmental pedagogy approach we argue for, in that communication is also at the heart in the Reggio Emilia approach. At the same time, the latter pedagogy is called the “pedagogy of listening” (Åberg & Lenz Taguchi, 2005). Obviously, to be able to communicate with children the teacher has to listen to children, but from our point of view it is not enough to listen since the teacher must also be a skilful communicator who knows
what to focus children’s attention on in a learning process (for a more elaborate discussion, see Pramling & Pramling Samuelsson, 2011). In Reggio Emilia there is no curriculum, although we have one in Sweden. In contrast, the approach we argue for here has both a focus on contents, although being different from the academic approach and at that same time being child-centred in taking the child’s perspective as both a means and as a goal, that is, as something to build upon as well as something to develop.

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