

# EARLY YEARS TRANSITION PROGRAMME

## TRANSITION FROM PRE-SCHOOL TO SCHOOL: EMPHASIZING EARLY LITERACY

The education of the child shall be directed to...  
the development of the child's personality,  
talents and mental and physical abilities  
to their fullest potential.

*United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)*



## COMMENTS AND REFLECTIONS BY RESEARCHERS FROM EIGHT EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

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## “In pre-school we speak Swedish.” Children’s Perception of Multilingualism

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### 6.1 Abstract

Within the **EASE** project one of the aims has been to ensure the inclusion of more marginalised children and their families. Children should be encouraged to reflect on their own learning process and empowered to become autonomous learners throughout life. In order to achieve these aims, respecting the rights of the child has been a starting point, as well as giving extra support to children’s homes and second and foreign language acquisition. In this chapter, the focus will be on children with another mother tongue than the majority language, taking a Swedish perspective.

### 6.2 Introduction

In the last few years Sweden has seen an important change in language choice within different areas due to increased internationalisation, and as of July 1, 2009, a new act established Swedish as the official language in Sweden (SOU, 2008, p. 26). Over 150 languages are spoken in Sweden, and a recurrent issue in the media concerns the achievements of multilingual children during their school years. A report presented by the Swedish National Agency for Education [Skolverket] (2008) shows that the academic performance of multilingual children ranks lower than that of their native Swedish counterparts. The question of support for multilingual children was raised in an NGO report by Rädde Barnen (2004) to the UN, and a concern was expressed regarding the children’s educational future.

The Article 29 in the UN Convention (1989) on the Rights of the Child states that the child has the right to his/her own cultural identity, language and values. This is the most internationally acclaimed document regarding children’s rights. In Sweden pre-school is mandatory, but it has its own curriculum

[Ministry of Education and Research in Sweden](#) containing overall goals to strive for. It is up to the teachers to determine how the goals are to be implemented in their daily practice. The importance of the mother tongue in Lpfö 98 is expressed as follows:

Children with a foreign background who develop their first language improve their prospects of learning Swedish as well as developing knowledge in other areas. The pre-school should help to ensure that children with a mother tongue other than Swedish, receive the opportunity to develop both their Swedish language and their mother tongue. ([Ministry of Education and Research in Sweden, 2006, p. 7](#)).

Research emphasises that the learning of new languages is facilitated if children have a well developed mother tongue ([Hyltenstam, 1996](#); [Thomas & Collier, 1997](#)). Children who get to strengthen their language during their early years develop not only their spoken language but also their cultural ways of thinking ([Skolverket, 2002](#)).

### 6.3 Background

Sweden today is a multilingual country, and nearly 17 percent of pre-school children have another mother tongue than Swedish. The pre-school is a place where many children meet for the first time in larger, diverse groups and take their first steps towards an educational future. This leaves teachers with great responsibility for implementing the curriculum and working out how to make their pre-schools a socially inclusive arena for everyone ([Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, & Walsh, 2004](#); [Cannella, 1997](#)). Documents in early childhood policy give children the right to their own cultural identity and language, although statistics for Sweden still show that only 17.8 percent of the children with another background than Swedish receive the mother tongue support that they are entitled to ([Skolverket, 2009](#)). According to the Swedish National Agency for Education ([Skolverket, 2002](#)), the general attitude among Swedish politicians is that they believe that teachers should concentrate on children learning the Swedish language. Many teachers and politicians talk about the importance of the mother tongue, but there is still a need for deeper understanding of why it is significant and how it can affect children's educational future as well as their participation as citizens of a democracy. The ambivalent attitudes shown by the present Swedish government can create confusion among teachers working in different institutions. This leads us to question how the steering documents are being implemented, and more specifically, what the children perceive when it comes to their mother tongue in institutional settings?

### 6.4 Theoretical and methodical framework

This chapter is based on a study conducted by the author; parts of which were devoted to the **EASE** project. The aims of the study were twofold: first and foremost to get a deeper understanding of how multilingual children perceive the functions of their mother tongue and the majority language. Secondly, to explore what purpose these have for children in institutional settings when it comes to language and communication. The children in the study are viewed as active, constantly contributing to their own learning and being able to shape their own ways of understanding and using them to influence their surroundings ([Hundeide, 2006](#); [James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998](#); [Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson,](#)

2003; Säljö, 2000; Sommer, 2005). The theoretical starting points are found in the socio-cultural perspective, and in the variation theory. They both underpin the environmental and social settings for learning. The variation theory is suitable when trying to understand how children perceive the phenomena in focus, and the socio-cultural perspectives underline that knowledge is co-constructed and shared between participants in a setting. From the socio-cultural perspective language is viewed as an individual and collective tool for thinking (Säljö, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978; 1986). The variation theory emphasizes perceiving as important, since how we perceive a phenomenon will affect how we act in different situations (Marton & Tsui, 2004). According to Marton and Booth (1997), this is the perspective of the learner, and the research object is the variation in the way that people experience phenomena.

The data represent the voices of eight multilingual children that were about to turn, or had recently turned, 6 years of age. All but one of the children (a girl) were developing their languages simultaneously. Data regarding the mother tongue were collected by participating in the children’s culture and writing field notes. Additionally, interviews were conducted with the children, and the field notes were used to facilitate the construction of the interview questions. As the study was an empirical study, visits were made to the pre-school once or twice a week over the space of 15 weeks. Each visit lasted from 1.5–2.5 hours. The analysis of the interviews was influenced by the phenomenographical perspective, i. e. patterns were sought in the variation of how children perceived the functions of their mother tongue in pre-school. During the entire research process the guidelines outlined by the Swedish Research Council [Vetenskapsrådet] were used (Vetenskapsrådet, 2009). The information collected was kept in a safe place, and the voice-recorded files were deleted after transcription. The names of all the children have been changed to similar cultural names, and the amount of information given about them is limited to protect their identities.

## 6.5 Findings

The results show that children perceive that there are differences with regard to when to use the mother tongue and when to use the majority language in institutional settings. The mother tongue could be used in various contexts, but not in pre-school. The children did state that they used the mother tongue in pre-school, although this only occurred in the absence of teachers and with the awareness that it might be unsuitable and associated with feelings of shyness. The official language, Swedish, is also the dominating majority language in pre-school and used in the communication with others. Unlike the mother tongue, there were no specific areas where one could not speak Swedish, and this indicates that children do use it more or less in all contexts they participate in.

When it came to the importance of speaking the mother tongue, the children emphasized the significance of culture, ethnical identity, and communication with others. They also drew attention to the importance of communicating with one’s family and peers and, using Gumperz’ (1982) term, speaking the mother tongue seemed related to social closeness. As for the importance of speaking Swedish, the children also pointed to the importance of social closeness (relations to peers), but this was overshadowed by the associations with being or becoming a member of society. Accordingly, reading and writing skills were outlined as a key factor for educational and societal success. Moreover, although reading and writing skills in the mother tongue were found important, these were nothing one needed to learn within the near future. While some children already viewed themselves as active citizens, others felt

the importance of developing tools for becoming active members of society. The following excerpts will demonstrate how the children expressed this:

Excerpt 1 – The following excerpt is taken from the researcher's (Hiba's) field notes.

- Nathalie I have to learn how to write good Swedish because in school they will give you plenty of homework and I have to do well or the others will tease me.
- Hiba So reading and writing is good to learn because you want to be able to do your homework?
- Nathalie Yes and if I want to have a driver's license I need to know how and if I want to read all signs.
- Hiba What about Kurdish?
- Nathalie Kurdish? When I grow up I will understand that, not now.

Excerpt 2 – From the interview with Ali.

- Hiba Do you remember when you drew the Iraqi flag?
- Ali Yes.
- Hiba How did you know what it said in Arabic?
- Ali My brother told me that, but I do not know how to write it.
- Hiba So why don't you learn to?
- Ali I will later on.
- Hiba Later when?
- Ali When I am 20 years or older. In school you need to know how to write in Swedish and all the books are in Swedish, so I need to know that first. I already know how to read and write, but not that much.

Excerpt 3 – From the interview with Shirin.

- Shirin When I start class zero I will play a lot and then I will start in the ABCD school and that is when I need to write it all. That is when the teacher will tell you how good you are and if you are good you will write numbers and letters and everything and write.
- Hibo But you already know how to read and write?
- Shirin In school I will learn to become faster, I think.
- Hiba Do you know how to read and write in Kurdish?
- Shirin Oh no! Never ever, ever.
- Hiba Why not?
- Shirin Well you know what. Kurdish is not like, it is not like... Kurdish is written like Arabic, with the same letters, that is how it is and that will take you so many years to learn. Swedish is easier and more important to know in school.

All of the examples point to the importance of knowing how to read and write in Swedish in order to be an active member of society. By starting pre-school class the children feel a responsibility for learning how to read and write or, as Shirin put it, becoming faster at it.

## 6.6 Preschool's important task as an institution in society

In view of the rapidly growing global culture, education is becoming increasingly important in our daily lives. Educational institutions have a powerful influence on deciding who is of cultural worth and define what learning is, which can lead to children being excluded [Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, & Walsh \(2004\)](#); [Säljö \(2000\)](#). Language attitudes in society will affect how language is approached and used in pre-schools. According to [Cummins \(2000\)](#) and [Baker \(2007\)](#), teachers can either reinforce these attitudes or deconstruct them. As the findings of the study show, Swedish is the institutional majority language and necessary to speak in order to understand others. In a setting like pre-school where many children come together, the majority language becomes the common language and is used to communicate with others. Having said this, we still need to reflect about children's statements regarding feelings of shyness about using their mother tongue in pre-school. This indicates that children perceive their mother tongue as having a lower status and reinforcing the Swedish language as the valuable and 'right' one ([Bourdieu, 1991](#); [Haglund, 2002](#); [Rhedding-Jones, 2001](#)). Those with skills in their mother tongue do not always get the opportunity to express their knowledge and are silenced when the majority language is viewed as the 'right' language ([Rhedding-Jones, 2001](#)).

## 6.7 Being a member of society

When it came to speaking the Swedish language, many of the children declared that it was important to be an active member of society. Reading and writing skills were spoken of as key tools for an educational future and active participation in Swedish society. For these reasons, it was crucial for the children to develop their reading and writing skills in Swedish. [Cannella and Viruru \(2001\)](#) mention that the 'right' language is the one spread in schools, and [Bourdieu \(1991\)](#) compares languages with currencies in a market where the more valued ones give you greater access to the educational system, and later on the labour market. It is remarkable how these young children were so aware of what the 'right' language was and how they associated it with societal success. [Baker \(2007\)](#) considers the consequences of language shift as a threat to multilingual societies. If children perceive the majority language as the more powerful and preferred one, they might favour it instead of their first language.

On the one hand, the Swedish curricula ([Ministry of Education and Research in Sweden, 2006](#)), the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ([1989](#)) and other documents empower the children by stating their right to be active citizens where their voices should be heard. On the other hand, children are constrained from influencing their lives in several ways. When multilingualism is not reflected upon or valued in the pre-school, and the mother tongue's importance is not appreciated by children, it might lead them away from their right to be active citizens. Subsequently, it might have a negative impact on their future, life-learning process, as individuals and as members of society. What raises a concern is not only the fact that the children believe that developing reading and writing skills in Swedish is the only way to actively participate in Swedish society, but also that many of them already see themselves as not being active and participating citizens.

## 6.8 Reaching the goals by supporting and involving children

By encouraging children to speak Swedish or by not supporting the mother tongue in pre-school, the children are given the impression that their mother tongue is less valuable. The focus needs to be shifted from what children lack and should develop in their second language acquisition to how we can help children to preserve and develop their first language. To attain the goals in the pre-school curriculum, teachers need to support children’s learning and get involved when it comes to the development of their mother tongue. The importance of awareness will decide what pedagogy should be used. A change will only be possible when we are aware of what we are doing and understand why we do what we do. According to developmental pedagogy, teachers should encourage discussions about a phenomenon and make children talk about their various understandings of it (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2003). Teachers need to focus on a content and support children’s different ways of learning by using the variation in children’s ideas as a starting point. Teachers need to create situations where children have to face differences, listen to how others perceive various phenomena, and question what we take for granted. Language and communication should be the act and object of learning (see Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2003).

## 6.9 Concluding remarks

If we take language away from children, we might exclude them from being active citizens (Viruru, 2001). The results of the study indicate that an important task we are facing is to understand the consequences of encouraging multilingual children to only speak the official language. In the EASE project, the focus has been on ensuring inclusion of multilingual children. To make this possible, we need to understand the child’s perspective (see chapter 4 by Pramling Johansson), respect the rights of the child, and empower children to become autonomous learners.

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