

Entrepreneurial Learning in Education

Preschool as a Take-Off for the Entrepreneurial Self

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Abstract

Recently the phenomenon of entrepreneurship by political aspirations has entered the school setting. This is a world-wide development affecting education in practice and theory. In 2009 the Swedish Government launched a strategy stating that entrepreneurship should run like a common thread through the educational system. Since childhood is considered the ideal stage to influence attitudes towards entrepreneurship, and preschool constitutes the beginning of this publicly imposed “red thread”, this setting is of particular interest. In school practice the concept of entrepreneurship is translated into entrepreneurial learning. In this study we seek to investigate what characterises entrepreneurial learning in a preschool context according to preschool teachers by conducting both critical incident questionnaires and an in-depth interview using stimulated recall method. The empirical results suggest that entrepreneurial learning has developed the preschool teachers’ educational discussions and has affected the children’s entrepreneurial skills. Further, when analysing the material as to what supports and hinders a positive entrepreneurial learning situation, four main themes emerged: ongoing reflection, active participation, a meaningful learning situation and a tolerant atmosphere.

Keywords: entrepreneurial learning, entrepreneurship, preschool, learning, early childhood education, entrepreneurship education, entrepreneurial self

1. Introduction

The school environment is in continuous change. New aspects and issues are added to the curricula, and these are to be learnt and addressed in child education e.g. matters of sustainability, social inequality, diversity, gender and democracy. And now we have a new arrival on the scene – entrepreneurship – which is introduced into the school setting. With its contextual relation to education it puts entrepreneurial learning in the limelight.

This article positions itself within the ongoing discussion on entrepreneurship as a societal phenomenon affecting our everyday life (e.g. Steyaert & Hjorth, 2003; Steyaert & Katz, 2004), contributing in particular to the discussion on the phenomenon of entrepreneurial learning within the preschool context. In this paper we see entrepreneurial learning as a learning and teaching approach as do Otterborg (2011) and Falk Lundqvist, Hallberg, Leffler and Svedberg (2014), an approach which is used by preschool teachers to help children develop entrepreneurial skills, for individual, civic and business purposes.

Entrepreneurship is a hot topic in society at large. With its influence on economic expansion and job creation, politics seems to have found the ultimate solution to the economic and social challenges facing countries. There are therefore no boundaries for where the economic politics of enterprising turn up (Du Gay, 2004). From its origin in economics (Landström, Harirchi, & Åström, 2012) with connotations such as business, start-ups and growth (Gibb, 2002), entrepreneurship and enterprising have spread over time into new spheres and have recently, by political aspirations, entered the school setting (Berglund, Johannisson, & Schwartz, 2012). This is a world-wide development and many countries such as the UK, China, the USA and Finland seek to promote entrepreneurship and an enterprising approach by influencing the school system through policy and curriculum. (Gibb, 1993; Komulainen, Naskali, Korhonen & Keskitalo-Foley, 2011; Seikkula-Leino, 2011). Support for this development is to be found in the European Union's (2007) framework of eight competences for lifelong learning whereof entrepreneurship is one, and in an OECD report from 1989 (OECD, 1989) advocating the necessity for young people to develop entrepreneurial skills, thus becoming employable through knowledge and practice in entrepreneurship. They also recommend changes in the education curricula to achieve this. Following this notion the Swedish Government (Government Offices of Sweden, 2009) launched a strategy in 2009 for entrepreneurship in education whereby entrepreneurship should run like a common thread through education with the aim of making self-employment just as natural as being employed, and also of emphasising the role of schools in supporting young people to develop entrepreneurial skills. For preschool this new direction was formulated in the national curriculum for preschool from 2010, declaring that children's "*curiosity, enterprising and interests should be encouraged*" (Skolverket, 2010, p. 6, authors' transl.¹)

Introduced into a preschool context there are new challenges and questions that need to be addressed. Academics have shown that rhetoric in school has changed from entrepreneurship to enterprising or entrepreneurial learning (Leffler, 2006; Korhonen, Komulainen, & Rätty,

¹ The reference to the Swedish national curriculum is chosen due to its more explicit expression of the Swedish word 'företagsamhet' which means enterprising. In the corresponding English version the chosen word when translated is initiatives which the authors do not find to have the equivalent meaning.

2012; Axelsson, 2013) because of the reluctance of teachers to acknowledge entrepreneurship owing to its businesslike connotations. This seems to be related to the traditional idea of the entrepreneur as a greedy individualistic hero, driven by her own ambition and striving for financial gain. If accepting the accentuated need for enterprising people everywhere and in every part of society (Berglund et al. 2012) this perhaps suggests a need for a changed or at least widened view of the entrepreneur (-ial being) that opens up for alternative motifs such as world improvement, personal fulfilment and collective actions. Research on enterprise learning is considered as being in its early stages (Leffler, 2014), and therefore the concepts of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial learning in a school setting are not fully explored or explicitly defined within research. The prevailing definitions flourishing in school are mainly set by public authorities. Within the preschool context it is therefore not clear what kind of entrepreneur (-ial being) one should aim for, and what kind of entrepreneurial competences are necessary to practise. Neither should we neglect the fact that the question of whether the mass creation of entrepreneurial selves, to borrow the concept of Rose (1992) and Peters (2001), within the educational system is a desirable or necessary future development; the ball is set in motion. So how does the preschool environment cope with this?

There has been extensive research on entrepreneurship education at university level, yet much less from the early stages of education (Gorman, Hanlon & King, 1997). Accordingly the important role of the compulsory school has been neglected (Fuchs, Werner & Wallau, 2008). Further, childhood and adolescence are thought to be the most appropriate age groups for acquiring positive attitudes towards entrepreneurship (Peterman & Kennedy, 2003), and young children in preschools, according to a study by Lindström (2013), can adopt an entrepreneurial approach. Entrepreneurial learning is an emerging field within early childhood education. All in all, this reveals a need for discussing entrepreneurial learning at the very beginning, in a preschool context, a need which is supported by academics who request further research on entrepreneurship and enterprise education in various contexts (e.g. Leffler, 2006; Mueller, 2012; Fayolle, 2013). In addition, the study by Lindström (2013) mentioned above was self-critical in that the responding preschool teachers gave altogether only positive answers, which paves the way for a study adding both negatively and positively critical incidents of entrepreneurial learning to the picture. Furthermore there is a gap in knowledge in what teachers actually do when they work with enterprising and entrepreneurial learning activities (Fayolle, 2013), which is relevant to the aim of this paper. Thus, the aim of this paper is to build on these requests, providing a deeper understanding of entrepreneurial learning in the preschool context, thereby also adding to the ongoing discussion amongst scholars about entrepreneurship in new societal contexts. In addition, since preschool is at the very beginning of this publicly imposed common thread and constitutes the take-off for the development of the entrepreneurial self, this setting is of special interest. Our research question posed here is thus “What is supporting and obstructing entrepreneurial learning in preschool according to preschool teachers?” With our contribution we hope to shed some light on the content and concept of entrepreneurial learning framed in a preschool context. Our theoretical framework draws upon research on entrepreneurship, enterprise education, learning, early childhood education as well as knowledge about the concept of the entrepreneurial self.

2. Theoretical Framework

To begin with, there is the ongoing debate as to whether entrepreneurship can be taught at all (Fiet 2001) but Carrier (2005) for one says this question is obsolete - there is no 'if'; instead it is about what and how it shall be taught. Drucker (1998) also thinks it is learnable and states that there is no entrepreneurial personality; instead entrepreneurs come in different shapes and colours and entrepreneurship (and innovation) like any discipline can be successfully achieved and taught by hard work. Raposo and Do Paço (2011) agree with Drucker and add that people become entrepreneurs through experience of life. Viewing entrepreneurship as a process (Shane & Venkataraman, 2001; Stevenson & Jarillo, 1990) seems to be the common approach today. Kuratko (2005, p. 578) states that individuals can develop an '*entrepreneurial perspective*' which can be used in business as well as in non-profit contexts.

When discussing entrepreneurship in an educational setting the term entrepreneurship is divided into two discourses (Leffler, 2014): one *entrepreneurship* discourse which concerns business and enterprise, and another *enterprising* discourse, which is aimed at personal development and enhancing entrepreneurial skills i.e. children's ability to be initiating, opportunity seeking, responsible, participative, self-confident and creative. The tension between these entrepreneurship and enterprise perspectives can be traced in previous research, which shows that teachers are ambiguous in teaching entrepreneurship/external entrepreneurship with a business focus, and rather prefer the enterprising/internal entrepreneurship approach. (Leffler, 2006; Backström-Widjeskog, 2008; Korhonen et al., 2012).

According to Jones and Iredale (2010) enterprise education can be applied in any subject and in any phase of education. Seikula-Leino (2011) on the other hand argues that enterprise education is particularly appropriate for younger pupils. Introducing enterprising and entrepreneurship education in school could affect children's views on entrepreneurship, and childhood and adolescence is considered the ideal stage to educate and develop a positive attitude towards it (Peterman & Kennedy, 2003; Heilbrunn, 2010). This is supported by Lindström (2013) whose study on preschool children shows that they can develop an entrepreneurial approach at this age. Human beings are entrepreneurial and creative by birth (Sexton & Landström, 2000; Johannisson, 2010) and Johannisson's belief is also that the task of schools is to challenge and develop these natural entrepreneurial abilities instead of what is sometimes the situation of today where education 'educates out of creativity' (Robinson, 2006). Therefore we would make use of the fact that entrepreneurship education gains by starting off as early as possible (Raposo & Do Paço, 2011).

Education in enterprise is considered to increase *entrepreneurial skills* (Henry, Hill, & Leitch, 2005). These can help people develop an entrepreneurial approach, which is useful irrespective of what future working life they choose, self-employment or employed. There is, however, no common view of which skills to focus on (Kirby, 2004) but there is research in economics suggesting that entrepreneurial skills imply the ability to discover and make use of opportunities (Timmons, Muzyka, Stevenson & Bygrave, 1987), becoming the bearer of a mechanism of change (Schumpeter, 1934), innovation and marketing skills (Lerner & Almor,

2002), risk-taking that handles uncertainty (Knight, 1921) and alertness (Kirzner, 1973). Surlmont (2007) includes creativity and teamwork in what he labels strategic competences. Gibb (2002) alternatively uses the term entrepreneurial capabilities, which is certain behaviours, skills and attributes that younger children develop. The enterprising skills are problem-solving, creativity, persuasiveness, planning, negotiating and decision-taking. The entrepreneurial attributes are self-confidence, autonomy, achievement orientation, versatility, dynamism and resourcefulness. Turning to educational research, Otterborg (2011) suggests that in *entrepreneurial learning* the skills, abilities and attitudes to train are to become initiating, creative and daring as well as to be able to recognise opportunities, break patterns, act independently but also develop an ability to cooperate.

Focusing further on the concept of entrepreneurial learning, there is extensive research on entrepreneurial learning in a business context with a focus on how entrepreneurs, often business owners in their small and medium-sized companies, learn (Deakins & Freel, 1998; Minniti & Bygrave, 2001; Cope, 2005; Politis, 2005; Rae, 2005). Recently the term entrepreneurial learning has spread and gained ground in the school setting but research references to entrepreneurial learning in a school context are fewer. Entrepreneurial learning should not be seen as a fixed education; instead its essence could be traced to different theoretical conceptions. Apart from subject knowledge, entrepreneurial learning aims at creating a holistic approach and coherence (Falk Lundqvist et al., 2014). Some theoretical relations can be found to social constructivism (Seikkula-Leino, 2011) as well as Vygotsky (1978) in that learning is an ongoing process where children learn through a social process, in interaction with others. Further traces can be found in Kolb's (1984) understanding of experiential learning and Dewey's (1916) thoughts on letting pupils "experience being experienced", nowadays addressed as 'learning by doing'. Other connections are found in John Hattie's (2009) concept of 'visible learning', and the emphasis on the important role of teachers in teaching and in meeting the pupils' real-life world. In addition Arnot's (2006) thoughts on citizenship, describing present-day children brought up in a self-culture, where they are centres of their own world, and where their lives are art forms to be created, are related. Today, Swedish early childhood education is mostly influenced by a sociocultural perspective with a child-centred orientation that considers children as competent and active. In Sweden early childhood education is unique in its combination of learning and play, care and fostering fundamental values. The most noticeable quality of the Swedish preschools is that democracy is the foundation for all activities. Freedom, integrity, equity and solidarity are principles built into care and education, with learning and development going hand in hand. The purpose is to give children the opportunity to take part in decision making, and to take responsibility for their own actions and the environment. Children are described as individuals with competence that should be the starting point for everyday activities in the early childhood settings.

The notion that schoolchildren are supposed to become entrepreneurial and enterprising can also be linked to the somewhat critical discussion on the creation of the *entrepreneurial self* (Rose, 1992; Peters, 2001). This is a view of the enterprising citizen which emerged under neo-liberalistic leadership such as that of Thatcher and Reagan but today has been

incorporated into other political beliefs as well. The idea of an entrepreneurial self builds on a (political) belief of the need to create entrepreneurial citizens necessary to future society. Rose (1992) describes these citizens as people who by personal development flourish into individuals with energy and initiative, who look upon their lives as a project, making a venture of it. Entrepreneurial selves are not seen in political rhetoric as '*subjects with duties and obligations*' (Rose, 1992, p. 142), rather as individuals with rights and freedoms that wisely and responsibly make choices. In a culture of freedom they have the opportunity to maximise choices, happiness and self-fulfilment, thereby focusing on realising their potential and dreams. To do so they need to develop entrepreneurial skills such as becoming active, creative, responsible, communicative and opportunity-seeking. Equipped with these competencies they will contribute to the rise of a successful nation, in terms of prosperity and growth. Becoming an entrepreneurial self is presented as obtainable for all (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2008) but Du Gay (1995) points out the risk of marginalisation and exclusion of people actually not able to, or reluctant to, behave in this entrepreneurial way. Through this the responsibility of being employable and committed to life-long learning is partly transferred to the individual (Vandenbroeck, 2007). The discussion of the entrepreneurial self has links to what kind of society we would like to live in and of the individual's responsibility versus the government's.

3. Method

3.1 The Swedish Preschool Context

Early childhood education is a part of the education system in Sweden. The Ministry of Education and Science is responsible for the educational system from preschool to university. Swedish preschools are available for children aged one–five years. In 2012, 84% of all children in the age group 1–5 attended preschool. In 2003, universal preschool was introduced for four- and five-year-olds. Preschool class is a particular school form for six-year-old children. Compulsory schooling begins at the age of seven. In 2012/2013, some (95 %) of the six-year-olds had been enrolled in preschool class and 1.3 % in a compulsory school (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2014). There are two staff categories in Swedish preschools: preschool teachers with a university degree and day care attendants with a vocational qualification at the postsecondary level, of whom 4 % are men. Over half of all preschool staff hold university degrees in early childhood education. Both the Education Act and the revised curriculum for preschool (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010) strengthen and clarify the preschool teacher's role (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2014). The Swedish National Curriculum for the Preschool determines the curriculum for all early childhood settings in Sweden. The curriculum should be seen as a framework and guidelines that give direction to the work of early childhood settings. One significant aspect of the Swedish National Curriculum is that goals are to 'strive for' rather than 'goals to achieve' (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010).

3.2 Participants

Qualitative inquiry focuses both in depth and on a small sample. In this study five Swedish preschool teachers participated. The participants were recruited from an in-service education

course held by Mälardalen University in 2011 on behalf of The Swedish National Agency for Education. One of the authors of this paper was involved in the course; the other researchers had no connection to the respondents. The course's target group was teachers that wanted to learn more about entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial learning. The course aimed at creating a forum for discussing attitudes and perspectives as well as providing tools for developing preschool culture and structures towards a more entrepreneurial approach. The course is characterised by reflection and interaction between theoretical perspectives and the practice in which preschool teachers operate. However, taking part in this research study was not a part of the course; instead it was carried out afterwards.

The five preschool participants all worked at the same Swedish preschool which hosts 17 children of between three and six years old. The preschool is an independent preschool with a parent cooperative basically. It is located on the outskirts of a town in a quiet area near the forest and the countryside. The preschool staff had earlier worked with entrepreneurial learning in their preschool. All participants were women and had worked in preschool for between 13 and 30 years.

All of the respondents answered a critical-incident questionnaire and one of the five also participated in a more in-depth interview by using a stimulated recall method including interview in iterations and video recording.

3.3 Procedure

Data were collected in two ways: firstly in the form of critical incident questionnaires. Typically, this means that informants are asked to depict a significant experience (successful or less successful) of a phenomenon – i.e. a critical incident. The aim was to shed light on what a person did, why he/she did it and the outcome of his/her actions (Flanagan, 1954; Hansson, 1995; Rubin & Rubin 2004). Our respondents were asked to describe an incident regarding entrepreneurial learning in their work which they felt was successful and less successful respectively.

The reason for having chosen the critical incidents questionnaire from a qualitative approach is that the preschool teachers have the opportunity to describe their experiences of entrepreneurial learning in their own written words. The preschool teachers also have the opportunity to reflect on the phenomenon by describing it from their experiences.

In recent years the method has been used to study the preschool teachers' experiences of other key concepts as a tool in their educational activities such as learning and participation (Johansson & Sandberg, 2010), diversity (Stier, Tryggvason, Sandström & Sandberg, 2012) and gender (Sandström, Stier & Sandberg, 2013).

The methodology of "critical incidents" means that the person(s) is/are given time to think and describe the incident in detail. The questions contain both positive and negative examples. Hughes (2007) describes a number of advantages: (i) the method is suitable for the research to a context-rich perspective on the activities and their significance; (ii) can also make it possible to identify key research issues, and (iii) develop a knowledge base. The latter (iii) clarifies context, strategy and results. In our study this is relevant since research on

entrepreneurial learning in a preschool context is in its early stages, where the knowledge base is limited, the concept is context-rich and it helps us clarify early results of working with entrepreneurial learning.

Secondly, data were also collected from an in-depth interview. To challenge and stimulate thinking and acting around entrepreneurial learning in preschool we used the stimulated recall method (Calderhead, 1996; Haglund, 2003). The approach is intended to capture what preschool teachers actually do in their practical educational work in preschool and how they talk about, in this case, entrepreneurial learning. We started with an interview before video observation, where the preschool teacher was interviewed about, for example, her definition of entrepreneurial learning, the aim, and how she worked with entrepreneurial learning. Then we observed the preschool teacher through video recordings at lunchtime. After the observation, we did a second interview where the preschool teacher was asked to give comments on the recording situation, on the content and what happens in this situation. According to the preschool teacher, the interviews and video observation were carried out on an ordinary working day. The interviews were audiotaped and each of the interviews was fully transcribed.

3.4 Analysis

After the data were collected, the description of the critical incidents and in-depth interview was analysed qualitatively in an attempt to explore the preschool teachers' understanding of, and practical approaches to, entrepreneurial learning in the preschool. The qualitative analysis was carried out based on a latent content analysis approach (Graneheim & Lundman, 2003). The analysis began with a read-through of the material. During the initial phase the answers were read repeatedly in order to gain an overall impression. After this general analysis, the main analysis was undertaken with the initial aim of identifying general perceptions of entrepreneurial learning, i.e., what was common to all the participants. Based on the analysis, we formulated four empirical themes: ongoing reflection, active participation, meaningful learning situations and a tolerant atmosphere. The results are presented in the findings section below.

4. Findings

In this section we present the empirical findings according to the four empirical themes mentioned above. Both successful and less successful entrepreneurial learning situations and what characterises them are presented within each theme. The purpose of the quotations included in the results section is to clarify interpretation; they are carefully translated by the authors.

4.1 Ongoing Reflection

Being attentive, patient, listening to the children and asking questions were described as important for a successful entrepreneurial learning situation which also made the preschool teachers reflect more on the children's learning. Less successful entrepreneurial learning situations appeared when acting without reflection, when they acted as they always did before. One example was an old routine that every child must go outside and play after breakfast and

lunch. Instead of forcing every child to do everything simultaneously they now let the children finish what they were doing at their own pace, and as an alternative the preschool teachers changed working methods, one staying inside with some children and another teacher going out with the others.

The preschool teachers describe that the work with entrepreneurial learning has affected their teaching and working methods. The preschool teachers say they discovered the value of peer learning. They started to discuss and reflect individually and together on what, how, and why they did as they did in different learning situations and on their approach to the children and to one another. In addition they discussed methods of how to develop a more creative and entrepreneurial method of teaching and how to enhance children's entrepreneurial competences. Discussions were intense and conflicts occurred. "It wasn't easy and sometimes we had disagreements about it", declares one preschool teacher.

Some respondents acknowledged that old habits were hard to change. "Sometimes it was I as a teacher who hindered innovative thinking, and it was difficult not to fall back into old habit routines". One preschool teacher tried to overcome this by using a traffic light as a metaphor to increase her reflective thinking. When deciding what to do and how to do it – she thinks about the red light. This means to stop and reflect on why she wants to do or act that way. If it is only in her own interests, the light is amber, but if it was in the children's interests, and a well-reasoned decision, the light is green.

4.2 Active Participation

The preschool teachers describe the positive entrepreneurial learning situations as characterised by the children being active and participating. The main element is that the child is more in charge instead of being a passive consumer of the previously prepared learning situations developed by the preschool teachers. The preschool teachers have not decided on the best way to do things or in which order the things are to be executed, but instead they ask questions about what the children want to do, how they want to do it, and then follow and support the development as it evolves. The incidents described were often trial-and-error contexts where children could make choices, test and rethink their ideas on their own and find solutions, but with encouragement from the preschool teachers. The learning situations were based on a co-operative and co-creative manner, and one of the preschool teachers expressed the view that the preschool teachers in these situations were more "co-explorers" than leaders.

Some illustrated situations are from everyday situations during meals where children assist in laying the table or cleaning up afterwards. Here, one example of exercising decision-making was choosing where to sit. Another example of achieving active participation is passing the butter and letting the child butter its own sandwich instead of doing it for her. A change in the outdoor activities was the introduction of "Adventurous Tuesday", where the children are in charge of where to go and what to do. Sometimes the excursion ends up nearby in the playground and sometimes the walk takes them much further. The preschool teachers claim to see results such as children becoming more active and proud, asking more questions and expressing more what they want to learn. As one preschool teacher puts it when describing

how a positive entrepreneurial learning situation ends: “A happy girl who has been noticed.”

Negative entrepreneurial learning contexts were characterised by preschool teachers taking over and determining what will happen. Children were not allowed to express their own ideas. The preschool teachers were helicopter (cosseting) adults: served their lunch and fed them, not letting the children practise doing it themselves, even decided in what order to eat it (first eat your yoghurt, and then you’ll get a sandwich), and helped dress them. The results from this were children’s passivity and lack of motivation. These negative situations occurred in connection with stress, lack of time or patience.

4.3 Meaningful Learning Situations

Positive entrepreneurial learning situations, according to the preschool staff, seem closely related to meaningfulness. The positive incidents start off from the child’s curiosity and personal interests, which create meaning. One of the preschool teachers says that the difference from other (conventional) learning is that previously they used to plan everything in detail, sometimes a whole year in advance. But with entrepreneurial learning they now question this and instead the learning has its point of departure in every child, in her conception of the world and daily speculations, which creates meaningfulness. The preschool teachers’ role is then described as being a support in the learning process, creating the prerequisites for learning. An important factor expressed in the material was therefore to listen to the children, and be perceptive. If not, on the other hand, this leads to a negative entrepreneurial learning situation according to some of the preschool teachers. Then the situations were described as stressful, inflexible with non-involvement of the children’s ideas and enthusiasm, which led to restless and bored children.

One example from a respondent illustrates a successful situation which was understood as fun, meaningful and which increased motivation: “One day on a walk in the forest a child found a pine cone and discovered that someone had eaten on it. A discussion started about what animal it could be. The group brought the cone to the preschool and searched in books and on the Internet to find out what animal it could be; everyone helped one another and finally they agreed that it had to be a squirrel. Thereafter they sang a song about a squirrel and looked at pictures they had found. The next time they were in the forest all the children remembered the cone and that squirrels like to eat them.” The preschool teacher said that she let the curiosity of the children be the start of this project. It was something that they thought was interesting at the time and she was the co-explorer. She asked questions and the children found the answers. They could also add their knowledge from other subjects such as natural science, maths, music and language.

4.4 Tolerant Atmosphere

A tolerant atmosphere was expressed as being important both for the sake of the children and for the preschool teachers themselves. The feeling of openness, trial-error-trial-again mentality and that it is alright to make mistakes appears to be important. But this takes time, so entrepreneurial learning situations must not be stressed. Letting the children introduce ideas and solve problems by finding their own answers helped to strengthen the children’s

self-confidence. This self-esteem then created a positive spiral, making a platform for daring to try new things and asking more questions. The atmosphere, according to one preschool teacher, helps you to feel “yes, I can!”, or as another preschool teacher puts it: “You must see failure as learning examples”.

Entrepreneurial learning, according to the respondents, has also influenced themselves. They too feel more open to try new things, to discuss these learning situations with peers and feel that it is alright not to know it all. Confidence is thought to decrease if you become disappointed for not succeeding at once. But seeing it as learning where failure is part of the process has helped. Moreover, by showing the children this they become good role models. The head of the preschool says entrepreneurial learning is about attitudes. “...you can work in a shack with nothing, if you have the right kind of adults around you who think entrepreneurially”. Of course material is important, she adds, but “We have the best material in the world, we have the children!”

5. Discussion

The aim of this paper is to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of entrepreneurial learning in the preschool context. As stated previously in the paper, preschool teachers tend to associate themselves with the enterprise discourse rather than the entrepreneurship discourse. (Backström-Widjeskog, 2008; Korhonen et al., 2012; Leffler, 2014). The preschool in focus here is no different. Perhaps influenced by the personnel’s participation in the ongoing in-service course in entrepreneurial learning, the preschool teachers acknowledge their work in the light of this. Accordingly our research question underpinned the search for what supports and obstructs entrepreneurial learning in a preschool setting according to preschool teachers. Our findings suggest that some of the concepts and reasoning regarding entrepreneurial learning are equal to or overlap much of the relevant early childhood education research. However, our empirical results show that when introducing entrepreneurial learning in the preschool the preschool teachers claim that action took place and they felt that it affected their teaching and their daily operative work as educators. The preschool staff described the concept of entrepreneurial learning as something positive. Working with entrepreneurial learning in a preschool context means an approach to learning comprising ongoing reflection, active participation, meaningful learning situations and a tolerant atmosphere but with a certain aim, to exercise and develop the children’s entrepreneurial skills. In our understanding this is how these findings are interrelated and connected to the concept of entrepreneurial learning.

Firstly, when analysing the material on critical incidents as to what supports and hinders entrepreneurial learning, four main themes emerged. These four themes mould the content of working with entrepreneurial learning. A positive entrepreneurial learning situation needs to support an ongoing reflection i.e. that both preschool teachers and children can think and reason about the learning situation and what happens. This equals for example the classical work of Schön (1983) on the reflective practitioner who has raised consciousness about the importance of actively thinking and evaluating one’s actions in a professional setting. It also consists of active participation in which they explore knowledge together. Children do not get

fixed explanations, but instead find their own solutions by asking questions and by trial-and-error with support from their preschool teachers. This strengthens their motivation and develops a sense of pride in the children. A link to educational theories such as learning by doing (Dewey, 1916) and learning through social interaction between teacher and child (Vygotsky, 1978) can be detected, even though we suggest it is rather a co-creation of knowledge. Entrepreneurs learn by experiencing life (Dewey, 1916; Raposo & Do Paço, 2011); likewise in entrepreneurial learning a child in preschool learns from its everyday active experience. Moreover entrepreneurial learning occurs in meaningful learning situations. This is in line with Hattie's (2009) thoughts of starting off from the children's own life-world and sense-making. Our empirical data show that by doing this, children's curiosity is allowed to lead the way, which increases motivation. It also paves the way for a holistic perspective as from the previously mentioned example with the pine cone, where different aspects and subjects formed a coherent context. However, this has implications for the teachers' possibilities of planning ahead and there are natural limitations to acting on every interest at any given time. The fourth theme is a tolerant atmosphere. This means giving time and having patience, letting the children try on their own and make mistakes, daring to ask questions, seeing failure as learning examples, cheering and sharing success and through this approach building up their self-esteem. In relation to early childhood education it could be argued that each of these four words or themes separately is not new. However, the preschool teachers claim themselves that this combination constitutes a new concept which is helpful both to explain and develop their profession – entrepreneurial learning.

In addition, when elevating the analysis from the more specific features of entrepreneurial learning in the daily preschool work, our research show two more results. They indicate effects for both the preschool staff themselves as well on the children.

To begin with, we found that the preschool teachers describe how the work with developing entrepreneurial learning has affected their work as educators. They describe themselves as more professional and daring, reflecting about how they work and why they do things in a certain way, thereby making way for discussions, a questioning attitude, peer-learning and a more positive mindset for change. These components seem to lay a foundation for sustainable preschool development. This, we argue, is of importance since the necessity of enterprising people everywhere in society with entrepreneurial attitudes who see change as the natural state (Johannisson, 2010; Berglund et al., 2012) is not solely of relevance to children and pupils. Teachers are considered as one of the most important influential factors in teaching practice and children's interest at school (Hattie, 2009; Hagar, 2013) and therefore they are a key component in affecting children's attitudes and the development of entrepreneurial learning.

Secondly, in our empirical findings we found that preschool teachers are describing incidents that practise entrepreneurial skills. The discussion about entrepreneurial skills was vital. Within the four themes they describe which entrepreneurial skills the children are practising such as decision-making, enterprising, cooperative and creative. This is in line with the intentions in the Swedish Government's strategy (Government Offices of Sweden, 2009), which mentions recognition of the opportunities offered by entrepreneurial skills in taking initiatives, putting ideas into action, problem-solving, planning one's work and cooperation, as well as what they

label general skills, which are project- and risk-management, inspiring people to be creative and taking responsibility to achieve a goal. According to the strategy, the foundation for an entrepreneurial approach starts at an early age, and therefore suggests that preschool focuses on curiosity, creativity, self-confidence and the ability to take decisions. We acknowledge the idea that entrepreneurial learning can be taught and learnt and as Drucker (1998) points out, there is no given entrepreneurial personality. The empirical findings show that when the preschool staff describe a positive entrepreneurial learning incident the children are practising taking initiatives, being active, creative, questioning, communicative, enterprising, problem-solving and decision-making. Correspondingly, the preschool teachers describe the children as becoming motivated and self-confident. This we think strengthens research suggesting that childhood is an ideal phase to start fostering an entrepreneurial approach (Peterman & Kennedy, 2003; Heilbrunn, 2010; Lindström, 2013). Moreover, since as much as 84% of the children in Sweden attend preschool and 95 of the six-years-olds are enrolled in the preschool classes (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2014), the opportunity to learn and develop entrepreneurial competences will be accessible to almost every child at an early age and as such also has the possibility to make it equal.

However, the idea of a common thread implies that there is a beginning and an end. Here we suggest that there is still work to be done in studying how the linkages or “synapses” are to be connected and function in order to develop a progression or at least a chain between the various stages of school and in this context we suggest that preschool could be seen as the take-off of exploring and developing the entrepreneurial self. That notwithstanding, lastly we would like to position ourselves as a critical friend. The apparent shift in focus in rhetoric from society’s need not only of entrepreneurs starting companies but entrepreneurial beings everywhere in society has by governmental decisions forced this development to start in the school setting and this development has emerged rather quickly. As previously mentioned, the ball is already set in motion. This new image, we argue, can be traced to the ideas of the entrepreneurial self (Rose, 1992; Peters, 2001; Ainsworth & Hardy, 2008; Vandebroek, 2007). Even if this theory is somewhat critical, they seem to channel the idea, in line with the thoughts on entrepreneurial learning, that every individual has innate entrepreneurial capacities ready to be released and made use of by becoming project managers in their lives to follow and fulfil their dreams. Both the concept of the entrepreneurial self and entrepreneurial learning emphasise active, participative citizens who are able to make rational and responsible choices in their entrepreneurial development. These connotations are intrinsically positive and hard to be against. Additionally it puts a lot of pressure on the individual to accomplish success.

In spite of the interesting results of our study we feel there are many more questions left unanswered which are beyond the scope of this article. These may constitute possibilities for future research. For example, when it comes to entrepreneurial learning in the school setting hopes are high both in relation to the individual and the national gains. However, is mass creation of entrepreneurial beings the answer to our prayers? And what are the implications on a personal and/or organisational level when introducing it? Questions might also be raised whether preschool teachers, when imposed to this new task, possess the necessary

professional skills or experience. And since preschool is the take-off of this publicly imposed common thread it puts a lot of responsibility on the preschool teachers both in matters of knowledge, methods and attitudes. Are they equipped for it?

This study contributes to a deepened understanding of entrepreneurship in a preschool context. We have tried to shed some light on the concept and content of entrepreneurial learning and by doing this to add to the body of knowledge of entrepreneurship in new societal contexts as well as entrepreneurship education. The study is deliberately limited to the preschool setting, since there is a lack of studies focusing on entrepreneurship education on this level of education (Gorman et al., 1997; Fuchs et al., 2008). Additionally, preschool constitutes the take-off for the evolution of the entrepreneurial self, and childhood has been considered to be the most appropriate age group to acquire positive attitudes towards entrepreneurship and to adopt an entrepreneurial approach (Peterman & Kennedy, 2003; Lindström, 2013).

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