Sandström, M., Lundqvist, J., & Axelsson, A. (2019). Parents' ideal type approaches to early education pathways: life stories from Sweden. *International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education, 11*(1), 64-79. DOI: 10.20489/intjecse.585453
Research Article-Received: 12.04.2017 Accepted: 12.06.2019

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Parents' Ideal Type Approaches to Early Education Pathways: Life Stories from Sweden*

Abstract

In this study, parents told their story about their children; their children's preschool and preschool class; their children's educational transitions; and their own cooperation with staff. The views of parents (N=27) were collected by way of life story interviews. The bioecological model for human development was adopted as a theoretical, conceptual and analytical frame. A qualitative bioecological content analysis and a quantitative content analysis were performed. More than half of the children were described as typical in terms of development, while a few were described as being gifted and talented by their parents, and about a third had special educational needs. More preschools than preschool classes were considered to be high in quality, and more preschool-home collaboration than preschool class-home collaboration was felt to be high in quality. The following ideal type approaches of the parents emerged: (1) involved and concerned parents; (2) involved but unconcerned parents; and (3) uninvolved and unconcerned parents. The number of involved and concerned parents increased from preschool to preschool class. This study has relevance for preschool and preschool class teachers, special educators, policy-makers and researchers in inclusive and special education.

Keywords: parents' views, bioecological content analysis; preschool, life story; transitions, ideal types

Introduction

It is well known and goes without saying that children's education and transitions at the time of their early education are important for both their immediate and long-term well-being and development. Achanfuo Yeboah (2002) has examined the literature on transition to school and found that starting school is traumatic for most children. This transition may also be challenging for the parents; for example, Shields (2009) found that parent-teacher relationships became more distant and less reciprocal when children start primary school. Sweden has its own solution when it comes to the challenge of transition from preschool to first grade: After preschool and before first grade, almost all children (96%) attend a *preschool class* for one year (Swedish Code of Statutes, 2010:800; Swedish National Agency for Education [SNAE], 2015). By that time, children have reached the age of five or six. Most of the children (83%, SNAE, 2015) will have attended preschool several years before preschool class and become used to that. The preschool class is often described as being a bridge between preschool and compulsory first grade. It can also be seen as an in-between class (Lago, 2014). The preschool class is unique to the Swedish education system, but it has similarities with a kindergarten, recep-

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* The study was presented at the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER), August 22-25, 2017. The study will be included in a thesis (Axelsson, forthcoming).

tion class or other school forms implemented the year before children start first-grade class: All these school forms constitute a basis for first grade.

In this article, twenty-seven parents from the Swedish context tell their story about their children's time in preschool and preschool class, and also about the transition between the two school forms, with the aim of shedding light on the parents' experiences. Three of these stories are presented in more detail by Axelsson, Lundqvist and Sandström (2017).

Preschool and preschool class in Sweden

Preschool forms the first step in a child's education in Sweden, while the second step is *preschool class* (Swedish Code of Statutes, 2010:800). The aim with preschool and preschool class is to complement home activities and to offer all children – including those in need of support – the opportunity to play, learn and develop, while cooperating closely with parents (SNAE, 2011a, 2011b). In Sweden, preschool classes are physically located in schools and children are in this sense "starting school" when they start preschool class. In Sweden, there are no alternative early-education school forms; as such, young children with disabilities and special educational needs attend regular preschool and preschool class. The Swedish school law (Swedish Code of Statutes, 2010:800) points at the importance of both offering support and also stimulating children who find learning easy. As such, staff may need to adapt learning environments, offer special support and cooperate with school welfare teams and habilitation. One further task that preschool and preschool class staff have is to cooperate with each other in order to ensure continuation and progression in terms of such matters as learning and support provisions (SNAE, 2011a, 2011b). After consent from parents, the staff can exchange knowledge and experiences about children facing transitions and about previous educational activities and routines. Children with disabilities and special educational needs shall be given special attention during the period of transition from preschool to preschool class (SNAE, 2011a, 2011b).

Sweden is regarded as a country with a high-quality school system (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2001; Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2009) for children aged one to five years; however, some recently conducted research and inspections suggest elements that may well need improvement in Swedish preschool settings. Structured observations of preschool quality have shown that there are preschools in Sweden that need to improve their inclusion practices, safety practices and staff-child interactions (Lundqvist, Allodi Westling, & Siljehag, 2016). Inspections of preschools (Swedish School Inspectorate, 2016) have shown that there are preschools that need to improve their education in order to ensure the learning and development of all children. There is little research on the quality of preschool class in Sweden, but a recent national inspection of this school form has shown that there are staff in preschool classes who need to be more attentive to the national goals related to preschool class and to providing all children with an adequate level of intellectual stimulation in preschool class (Swedish School Inspectorate, 2015:3).

Transition from preschool to preschool class

A move from preschool to preschool class can be described as an educational transition between two school forms. This period of transition involves great changes for children (Ackesjö, 2014; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lundqvist, 2016). They change both their learning environment and their teacher, and sometimes also their classmates. This may create both excitement and concern for the children (Ackesjö, 2014). The likelihood is that their parents experience the same feelings: that is to say, it is not only the children who find the transition challenging. Parents need to become more focused on academics at home (Lau, 2014), and they need to get to know their child's new learning environment, teachers and peers, and this may both require involvement and cause them concern (Griebel & Niesel, 2009; Hatcher, Nuner, & Paulsel, 2012; McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGennaro, & Wildenger, 2007; Shields, 2009). Furthermore, parents of children who are disabled and in need of support may well be more anxious than other parents (McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGennaro Reed, & Wildenger, 2010; Wildenger Welchons & McIntyre, 2015) and more involved in transitions and related activities: for example, staff-parent meetings and visits to the new learning environment (Wildenger Welchons & McIntyre,

2015). Their worries may relate to whether or not their child will be able to keep up with the teacher's instructions and ask for help, or whether or not their child will get the help and support s/he needs. Their worries may also relate to whether or not the child will be able to make new friends or get along with the teachers and other staff members. Moreover, they may worry that their child is not mature enough for the school situation, and that behavioural problems will arise and affect the transition. Therefore, a transition can be understood to be a critical stage in the life of both parent and child (Ekström, Garpelin, & Kallberg, 2008); further, it can be described as a milestone (Wildenger Welchons & McIntyre, 2015), as a social process (Ackesjö, 2014), and as the passing through of three phases: (1) separation from one learning environment; (2) displacement between two learning environments; and (3) incorporation into a new learning environment (Garpelin, 2014; van Gennep, 1960).

Parents of gifted children may also worry, be it for other reasons. Their worry may concern the fact that they have made the observation that their child is gifted but have failed to make the teacher aware of this; what is more, it has been shown that these parents are not seen as credible in this regard (Gross, 1999). Their worry may also concern a lack of adequate intellectual stimulation in new learning environments (Axelsson, Lundqvist, & Sandström, 2017). Grant (2013) identified important areas for the adaptation of gifted children to the new environment as being (1) experiences of the learning environment, (2) experiences of relationships, and (3) communication between learning environments. Grant also found that educators lack knowledge when it comes to gifted young children and are therefore not well prepared in terms of supporting them satisfactorily in the transition. Grant identified advanced cognitive ability in the seven children who were part of her study that involved different IQ tests. However, the famous researcher on giftedness Annmarie Roeper has found out that giftedness involves emotional complexity – quantitative tools cannot measure this. She realized that this emotional complexity makes the gifted child vulnerable (Beneventi, 2016) and therefore elaborated the method of QA (Qualitative Assessment) for identifying giftedness in children. Research on gifted and talented children – that is, children who have remarkable skills and who learn easily (Mönks & Ypenberg, 2009; Persson, 2010; Stålnacke, 2014) – is limited in Sweden (Persson, 2010; Stålnacke, 2014). These children do not always thrive in early compulsory education, and they do not always get the intellectual stimulation and support they need to develop in accordance with their potential (Persson, 2010). The lack of such studies could relate to difficulties in identifying such children in the Swedish education system and to the fact that Sweden does not have a tradition of talking about children as being gifted (and talented) in preschool and school.

The use of different preparatory training, transition activities and mediators of the transition process from preschool to preschool-class can make educational transitions easier and safer, both for the child and for his/her parent (Ackesjö, 2014; Ahtola et al., 2016; Alatalo, Meier, & Frank, 2016; Griebel & Niesel, 2009; Lundqvist & Sandström, 2018). Some examples of mediators of the transition process from preschool to preschool-class are visits to future learning environments (e.g. a child visits his or her future learning environment and meets its staff), joint events for parents (e.g. staff in preschool class informs parents to children in preschool about activities and routines taken place in preschool class), individual meetings with new staff members (e.g. a preschool class teacher, parent and child in preschool meet and talk about activities and routines in preschool class) and meetings with special needs educators (e.g. parents to a child with special educational needs in preschool meet a special needs educator to get additional information about the transition to preschool class and differences between preschool and preschool class in order to decrease their concern). Ahtola et al. (2016) wrote that familiarization with school was considered very important by parents participating in their study.

In terms of the Swedish context, research on the path of children from preschool to preschool class that involves parents is needed since we know little about how parents in Sweden experience this early education period (Ackesjö, 2014; Lago, 2014). Lago (2014) points out that such research would also further increase knowledge about early education transitions.

Aims of the study and research questions

The aim of this study is to shed light on how parents of children describe their children and experience their children's learning environments (preschool and preschool class), their cooperation with staff in preschool and preschool class, and the children's transition between preschool and preschool class. The research questions are as follows: What are the children's characteristics and abilities, according to their parents? What are the parents' experiences when it comes to their children's learning environments, the interplay between home and the learning environment, and the children's transition from preschool to preschool class? Is it possible to discern different ideal type approaches on the part of parents to children's early education pathways? If so, what are these?

Method

This study relates to a research project about children's learning journeys from preschool to school, which, in the context of Sweden, began in 2012 and ended in 2017. The overall aim of the research project was to increase the understanding of young children's early education and care. This study presents a description and analysis of 27 parental perspectives (n=22 mothers; n=5 fathers) on parenthood and early learning journeys obtained from the research project. There were 14 boys and 14 girls (one of the parents participating had twins). Twenty-three out of the twenty-eight children started preschool before the age of two. Two out of the twenty-eight children started preschool at age two or three. Three parents did not provide information on this matter. The parents' socio-economic levels were comparable; no parents from a suburb or a poor region participated. The parents lived in seven different Swedish municipalities. The data material was collected by the three authors during the spring of 2016 as they worked with the project. The parents were selected by way of convenience sample. We contacted a great number of preschool classes in central and eastern Sweden, asking for parents who would be willing to be interviewed. We strived to ensure the enrolment of parents whose experiences were diverse and also contacted special educators at a number of schools in central and eastern Sweden, asking for parents (who had a child with a disability and special educational needs) who were willing to participate. No segregated preschool or preschool class is represented in the sample. Among the parents who participated in the study, some live in urban settings and some in rural settings.

The sample corresponds roughly to the population in Sweden in the sense that parents with diverse experiences send their children to inclusive preschool and preschool class. As can be seen in Table 2, the percentages calculated in this study (about a third) also correspond roughly to statistics in the population in terms of special educational needs: Approximations that have been made suggest that the percentages can range from 17% up to 35% (Lillvist & Granlund, 2010; Lundqvist, Allodi Westling, & Siljehag, 2015). Approximately 5% of the children are estimated to be gifted and talented (Stålnacke, 2014).

Retrospective interviews

The perspectives of parents were collected through the use of retrospective interviews, and inspiration was obtained from the life history research approach (Bertaux, 1981; Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Jepson Wigg, 2015; Perez Prieto, 2006). The length of the interviews ranged from approximately 50 to 90 minutes. These were recorded and transcribed (10-23 pages each). In the interviews, the parents were encouraged to talk about being a parent and about their child, their child's preschool and preschool class, their collaboration with staff members in preschool and preschool class, and the transition from preschool to preschool class. Of the 27 interviews conducted, 23 were with parents whose children attended preschool class at the time of the interview; four interviews were conducted with parents of children who had special educational needs and a disability and who had started school. The guiding principles as set by the Swedish Research Council (2011) have been carefully followed in this study.

Analysis

There are four steps to the retrospective life-story interviews:

In step one, a qualitative bioecological content analysis was performed using a matrix developed by the authors (Lundqvist, Sandström, & Axelsson, 2016). This bioecological analysis technique and matrix make use of central concepts from the bioecological model for human development

developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998). During the readings of each interview transcript, the central contents identified were written in the matrix and at the same time categorized as relating to the biosystem (e.g. parental descriptions of child characteristics), the microsystem (e.g. parental descriptions of preschools and preschool classes), the mesosystem (e.g. parental collaboration with staff members in preschools and preschool classes), the exosystem (e.g. parental descriptions of their work and distribution of resources in the municipalities), the macrosystem (e.g. parental descriptions of laws and regulations) and the chronosystem (e.g. parental descriptions of changes over time that could relate to the biosystem and the other systems that are ecologically oriented). This means that all the relevant contents in each and every interview that could be related to the systems were coded and transferred into the matrix. The foci of analysis were the biosystem, microsystem and mesosystem since the parents were asked to describe and tell about their children; their children's preschool and preschool class; their children's educational transitions; and their own cooperation with staff. During the analysis, the authors wrote parents' concerns in the matrix and noted turning points and significant others. At the beginning of this step in the analysis, three interviews were discussed and categorized by the three authors together; after that, the remaining 24 interviews were categorized individually by the three authors.

In step two, the first and second authors made an evaluation – as based on the information categorized in the matrix – as to whether or not the parent in question described their child as having special educational needs, as being typical in terms of development (typically developing children) *or* as being gifted and talented in preschool and in preschool class, respectively. These two authors also made an evaluation, based on the information categorized in the matrix, as to whether or not the parent in question described their child's preschool and preschool class to be low in quality, partly low and partly high in quality (i.e. in-between low or high quality) *or* high in quality. The notion of special educational needs, typically developing children, and gifted and talented – as well as the assumptions regarding quality in preschools and preschool classes – are described in Table 1. Moreover, the first and second authors judged, based on the information categorized in the matrix, whether or not the parents described their collaboration with staff members in their children's preschools and preschool classes as being low in quality, partly low and partly high in quality *or* high in quality (Table 1). Furthermore, they determined, based on the information categorized in the matrix, whether or not the parent in question seemed to consider the transition from preschool to preschool class to be low, partly low and partly high *or* high in quality (Table 1).

In step three, three ideal type approaches among the parents were singled out, based on the information obtained, as reported above. An *ideal type* is described by Weber and Swedberg (1999) as being an analytical construct serving as a measuring-rod to determine the extent to which behaviours are similar to or differ from a defined measure. An ideal type can be constructed for emphasizing specific traits in a social unit so that it becomes a "pure" type; therefore, there is no valuation in an ideal type. During the first analysis, the three authors noted that the parents seemed more or less *involved* in their children's early school years as well as more or less *concerned* during these years. Thus, three ideal type approaches were singled out. These were the following: (1) the involved and concerned parents; (2) the involved but unconcerned parents; and (3) the uninvolved and unconcerned parents. The assessment of involved/uninvolved/concerned/unconcerned is described in Table 1.

After that (step four), calculations in terms of frequencies and percentages were made on the above mentioned aspects of data: (1) The total number of parents describing their children as having special educational needs/being of typical development/being gifted and talented in preschool and preschool class; (2) the total number of parents who seemed to consider their children's preschools and preschool classes to be low in quality/partly low and partly high in quality/high in quality; (3) the total number of parents describing their collaboration with staff members in their children's preschools and preschool classes as being low in quality/ partly low and partly high in quality/high in quality; (4) the total number of parents who seemed to consider the transition from preschool to

preschool class to be low in quality/partly low and partly high in quality/high in quality; and (5) the total number of parents in the ideal type approaches. Therefore, each parental description (N=27) was coded in nine different ways, and a total of 243 ratings were made by the first and second authors during step two and three of data analysis. The inter-rater reliability between the first and second author coding the data was estimated on a randomized sample of data from 26% of the participants. Using the formula number of agreements divided by the total number of opportunity assessments, 61 ratings out of 63 were judged equally by the two judges – i.e. the inter-rater reliability was 97%. The data from the remaining 74% of the participants were analysed by the first and second author separately. The third author coded a selected sample of data from 41% of the participants and compared her ratings with the ratings conducted by the second author. Thereafter, a few (n=4) ratings were changed. Quotations from the interviews are incorporated in the results in order to increase the trustworthiness of the analyses.

Table 1.
Definitions of the key concepts adopted in the study

Concept	Definitions
Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)	The children who had a disability and/or who were described by their parents as being in need of extra help and attention from adults in early education in order for them to be able to participate and learn.
Typically Developing Children, (TDC)	The children who did not have a need for extra help and attention to participate and learn, and who were not described by their parents as being gifted and talented.
Gifted and Talented Children, (GTC)	The children who were described as being very able by their parents and who were also considered to learn very easily in comparison to siblings and same-age peers. The parents also described how these children did not get the intellectual stimulation they needed, had a good memory, and were intense/sensitive/emotionally complex.
A low-quality preschool and preschool class	There were several features that were not beneficial in the low-quality preschools and preschool classes, and the overall opinion of the parents was that the educational activities, daily routines and play situations that took place did not enhance or facilitate the well-being or social and academic development of their children.
A partly low- and partly high-quality preschool and preschool class	In the partly low- and partly high-quality preschools and preschool classes, some of the educational activities, daily routines and play situations were regarded as not being beneficial, whereas others were regarded as being positive and beneficial.
A high-quality preschool and preschool class	In the high-quality preschools and preschool classes, those features that were not beneficial were described as being very few, and the parents were, on the whole, positive about the educational activities, daily routines and play situations that took place.
Low-quality collaboration	Low-quality collaboration refers to parents' experiences of ineffective and unpleasant collaboration, and a lack of adequate collaboration.
Partly low- and partly high- quality collaboration	Partly low- and partly high-quality refers to blended feelings in terms of collaboration; for example, a parent might feel cooperation with some staff members to be effective and pleasant, and ineffective and unpleasant with others.
High-quality collaboration	High-quality collaboration refers to parents' experiences of effective and pleasant collaboration.
A low-quality and/or troublesome transition	A low-quality and troublesome transition was found to be a concern for parents in terms of such matters as safety in the new learning environment and the child's school readiness; further, the transition was not described as easy for the child.
A partly low- and partly high-quality transition	A transition that was at times challenging and concerning. The parental description reflects mixed feelings about the child's transition.
A high-quality transition	A high-quality transition was described as easy and did not raise many concerns. In these transitions, both parents and children experienced a sense of well-being and happiness, and they were calm and well prepared for changes in activities and relationships.
Involvement/ no active involvement	Engagement refers to descriptions of active involvement and commitment. Accordingly, being uninvolved refers to low levels of involvement and commitment.
Concerned/unconcerned	Concerned refer to descriptions of worries, dissatisfaction and discomfort, and being unconcerned means feeling satisfied and happy with regards to such matters as a child's educational pathway and safety.

Results

In the interviews, the parents talked about their children's early education pathways from preschool to preschool class. They described their children's, development, giftedness and talents, and need for support provisions during these years. They also described their children's preschool and preschool class learning environments and their cooperation with the staff members in these learning environments. Furthermore, they talked about their children's transition from preschool to preschool class. In keeping with the bioecological model and its concepts, the result description and analysis of the children are linked to the biosystem; the description and analysis of the preschools and preschool classes to the microsystem; and the description and analysis of the staff-parent collaboration and transitions (from preschool to preschool class) to the mesosystem.

Biosystem – Characteristics of the Children

In Table 2, the total number of parents who describe their children as having special educational needs, being of typical development *or* being gifted and talented in preschool and preschool class are presented.

As shown in Table 2, more than half of the children were described as typically developing in preschool (n=15; 56%) as well as in preschool class (n=16; 59%), and four of the children (n=4; 15%) were described as gifted and talented during preschool and preschool class. Twenty-nine percent of the children had special educational needs in preschool (n=8), according to the parents. One of the children described as having special educational needs during preschool was not described as having such needs in preschool class; this development has been thoroughly described in Axelsson, Lundqvist and Sandström (2017), and this was found to be due to an extensive social network and the mother's determined and perceptive fight for her son's positive development. In preschool class, the total number of children described as having special educational needs was seven (26%).

The children who were described as gifted and talented were seen as being very able and they learned easily, according to the parents. They had, in comparison to peers of the same age and siblings, a strong desire to learn, strong interests, a good memory and a sense of compassion. They were also described as being creative, clever, expressive with words, and ethically and morally sensible. They were also described as being more skilled than peers of the same age and siblings. One of the parents said, amongst other things, that his son was "very intellectual and able", and another parent said that her daughter was "very empathetic" and that she "began to speak at a very early age". These children tended to surprise the parents as well as some staff members with their notable and early developed skills. The children with special educational needs had motor, learning, speech and communication difficulties, and/or behavioural difficulties. Some of the parents (n=4; 15%) of these children said that their children had a certain disability diagnosis (e.g. intellectual disability and autism).

Microsystem – Preschools and Preschool Classes

The parents described their children's preschools and preschool classes to be *low* in quality, *partly low and partly high* in quality or *high* in quality (Table 3).

Table 3 shows that there were more preschools (n=17; 63%) than preschool classes (n=7; 26%) that were considered to be high in quality, and there were more preschool classes (n=4; 15%) than preschools (n=1; 4%) that were described as being low in quality. Sixteen preschool classes (59%), in comparison to nine preschools (33%), were considered partly low and partly high in quality. The learning environments of the children with special educational needs were commonly considered to be partly low and partly high in quality.

Table 2.
Parents' descriptions of their child in preschool and preschool class

Microsystem	**Parents of children with SEN** Frequencies (percent)	**Parents of TDC** Frequencies (percent)	**Parents of GTC** Frequencies (percent)
Preschool	8 (29)	15 (56)	4 (15)
Preschool class	7 (26)	16 (59)	4 (15)

Table 3.
Estimated level of quality

Microsystem and estimated level of quality	**Parents of children with SEN** Frequencies (percent)	**Parents of TDC** Frequencies (percent)	**Parents of GTC** Frequencies (percent)
Preschool			
Low in quality	1 (4)		
Partly low and partly high in quality	5 (18)	2 (7.5)	2 (7.5)
High in quality	2 (7.5)	13 (48)	2 (7.5)
Preschool class			
Low in quality	2 (7)	1 (4)	1 (4)
Partly low and partly high in quality	4 (15)	11 (40)	1 (4)
High in quality	1 (4)	4 (15)	2 (7)

In a low-quality environment, the educational activities, daily routines and/or play activities were not seen to be beneficial by parents. Those parents talked about inadequate instructions (e.g. staff-initiated educational activities that were unstimulating for their children), a negative social atmosphere (e.g. greetings that were not warm and staff using sarcasm with young children) and inadequate safety practices (e.g. a lack of supervision during outdoor play). One of the parents described a low-quality preschool class in the following way: "The teacher made me shiver. |…| Her first hour with the class was a disaster. She was constantly sarcastic. |…| I got a stomach pain and felt a sense of anxiety". This parent also said the following: "He [her son] sat outside the classroom crying every day. He did not want to be in the classroom. In fact, no one wanted to be in that classroom."

In a partly low-quality and partly high-quality environment, some of the educational activities, daily routines and/or play activities that took place were seen to be beneficial, whereas others were not. In a high-quality environment, the educational activities, daily routines and/or play activities were seen to be beneficial, while the negative features hindering parental well-being as well as the child's well-being, learning and development were very few. Parents who described a high-quality preschool and preschool class talked about skilled staff (e.g. good structure, good leader, and stimulating educational activities), a positive social atmosphere (e.g. warm and respectful staff, and pleasant interactions between children) and provision of adequate support to children with special educational needs (e.g. visual support, speech and language therapy). One of the parents described a high-quality preschool in the following way: "His preschool was great. They [the staff] were very skilled at seeing each individual and they highlighted the children's competences. |…| They listened to the children's interests and based their educational activities on these interests. |…| They were very skilled."

Mesosystem – Collaboration and transitions
According to the parents, their collaboration with staff members in the children's preschools and preschool classes could be *low* in quality, *partly low and partly high* in quality or *high* in quality (Table 4).

Table 4 demonstrates that there was more preschool-home collaboration (n=15; 56%) than preschool class-home collaboration (n=11; 41%) that was felt to be high in quality. There were sixteen cases of preschool class-home collaboration (59%), in comparison to a total number of 11 cases of preschool-home collaboration (40%), that were felt by parents to be partly low and partly high in quality. The parents of the children with special educational needs commonly felt their collaboration with staff members to be partly low and partly high in quality. This was also the case with the parents of typically developing children in preschool class. Just as with the other parents, the parents of the gifted and talented children were more satisfied with the collaboration in preschool than preschool class.

Table 4.
Collaboration and estimated level of quality

Mesosystem - Collaboration and estimated level of quality	**Parents of children with SEN** Frequencies (percent)	**Parents of TDC** Frequencies (percent)	**Parents of GTC** Frequencies (percent)
Preschool-home collaboration			
Low in quality	1 (4)		
Partly low and partly high in quality	6 (22)	4 (15)	1 (4)
High in quality	1 (4)	11 (40)	3 (11)
Preschool class-home collaboration			
Low in quality	1 (4)		1 (4)
Partly low and partly high in quality	5 (18)	10 (37)	1 (4)
High in quality	1 (4)	6 (22)	2 (7)

Note. Parents (N=27). The characteristics of SEN, TDC and GTC as well as of low-, partly low- and partly high-, and high-quality collaboration are described in Table 1.

In cases of low-quality collaboration, the meetings were few and ineffective and were not documented, and, for example, the atmosphere was not warm and respectful. One parent said: "We [me and my son] were often yelled at during departures". In contrast, high-quality collaboration was characterized in the following ways by the parents: staff listens carefully to them; staff speaks warmly to them; staff regularly shares child-related information with them; and staff invites them to take part in planning and evaluating education and care, as well as in making decisions on such matters as support provisions and transitions.

Table 5 presents the total number of parents considering the transition from preschool to preschool class to be *low* in quality, *partly low and partly high* in quality or *high* in quality, and the differences between parents of children with special educational needs, children termed typically developing and children termed gifted and talented.

As shown in Table 5, a total of eight transitions (30%) were described as low in quality and troublesome, and a total of seven transitions as partly low and partly high in quality (26%). One parent said that her daughter felt "anxious and cried the day before school started", and one parent chose to postpone the transition to the next school form since she considered the gap to be too big for her daughter. Parents who described the transition as low in quality and troublesome did not only tell about anxious children and a postponed start, but also about new teachers who did not fully understand their children's needs of support and extra stimulation, and knowledge requirements after preschool. Twelve of the parents (44%) considered the transitions to be high in quality, that is, smooth, easy and well-prepared. These parents talked about appreciating the visits to new learning environments; about preschool-class teachers visiting preschools; about effective collaboration between parents, preschool staff and preschool-class staff; and about children who were looking forward to starting preschool class. One parent said: "All along, he said: It will be fun to start preschool class. |…| He looked forward to beginning preschool class; that was good |…|. The teacher is skilled and she acknowledges him [during transition activities]". Table 5 also shows that half of the parents of the gifted and talented children (50%), that 43% of the parents of children with special educational needs and that 11% the parents of the typically developing children considered the transition to be low in quality.

Ideal type approaches and experiences of the parents

The following ideal type approaches based on the parents' descriptions emerged from the analysis of the interviews: (1) the *involved and concerned* parents; (2) the *involved but unconcerned* parents; and (3) the *uninvolved and unconcerned* parents. Therefore, not one of the participating parents was seen to be *uninvolved but concerned*. Involvement here refers to active engagement and commitment, and concern refers to worries, dissatisfaction and discomfort. Therefore, being uninvolved refers to low levels of active engagement and commitment, and being unconcerned means feeling satisfied and happy. Table 6 presents the ideal type approaches and experiences of the parents of the children with special educational needs, the typically developing children, and the gifted and talented children during preschool and preschool class.

Table 5.
Transition from preschool to preschool class and estimated level of quality

Mesosystem - Transition from preschool to preschool class and estimated level of quality	**Parents of children with SEN** Frequencies (percent; percent within SEN group)	**Parents of TDC** Frequencies (percent; percent within TDC group)	**Parents of GTC** Frequencies (percent; percent within GTC group)
Low in quality and/or troublesome	3 (11; 43)	3 (11; 19)	2 (7.5; 50)
Partly low and partly high in quality	2 (7.5; 28.5)	5 (18; 31)	
High in quality	2 (7.5; 28.5)	8 (30; 50)	2 (7.5; 50)

Note. Parents (N=27). The characteristics of SEN, TDC and GTC as well as of low-, partly low- and partly high-, and high-quality transitions are described in Table 1. The parent of the child who required support in preschool but not in preschool class was included in the TDC group in this table.

Table 6 shows that the parents of the children with special educational needs and the parents of the gifted and talented children all seemed involved in their children's early education pathways and learning journeys from preschool to preschool class. A small number of parents (n=4; 15%) of the typically developing children did not seem involved. A majority of the parents of the children with special educational needs also seemed concerned during these years, but there were also other parents who gave the impression of being concerned. Those parents described, for example, inadequate supervision during outdoor play in preschool, unfenced preschool class play areas, too few staff members, a lack of necessary support provisions, unwelcomed staff changes, negative peer interactions, disrespect, a lack of adequately stimulating staff-initiated educational activities and noisy environments. There were more parents who appeared involved and concerned in terms of preschool class (n=15; 56%) than in terms of preschool (n=10; 37%).

In Figure 1, the parents' ideal type approaches in preschool and preschool class are shown. Figure 1 shows that the number of involved and concerned parents increases from preschool to preschool class from 37% (n=10) to 56% (n=15). Involved but unconcerned correspondingly decreases from 48% (n=13) in preschool to 30% (n=8) in preschool class.

Fifteen percent (n=4) of the parents of TDC maintain an uninvolved and unconcerned approach. One parent of a child with special educational needs who seemed both involved and concerned described how she regularly talked to staff about her son's needs and difficulties so as to prevent problems and solve any that had already emerged. Another parent of a child with special educational needs who seemed involved but not concerned described how she and her husband attended several meetings with staff members and how they repeatedly informed staff and others about their child's history so as to increase understanding of their child's needs and capabilities. They also helped the staff on such matters as support provision and communication with their child, and hurried to preschool and preschool class when needed – for example, when their child was inconsolable and needed to rest at home. This parent had ample knowledge on disability diagnoses and support provisions (e.g. visual support, alternative communication systems and activity simplifications) and implemented such strategies at home. There were some features in her child's learning environments that she, as a mother, was not fully satisfied with, but these circumstances appeared not to worry her. In the interview, she seemed calm, stress-free, optimistic and in control of the situation. A parent who was regarded as being uninvolved and unconcerned on such matters as early years education did not talk much about the child's early education and instead seemed to prefer to talk about the child's interests and sporting activities.

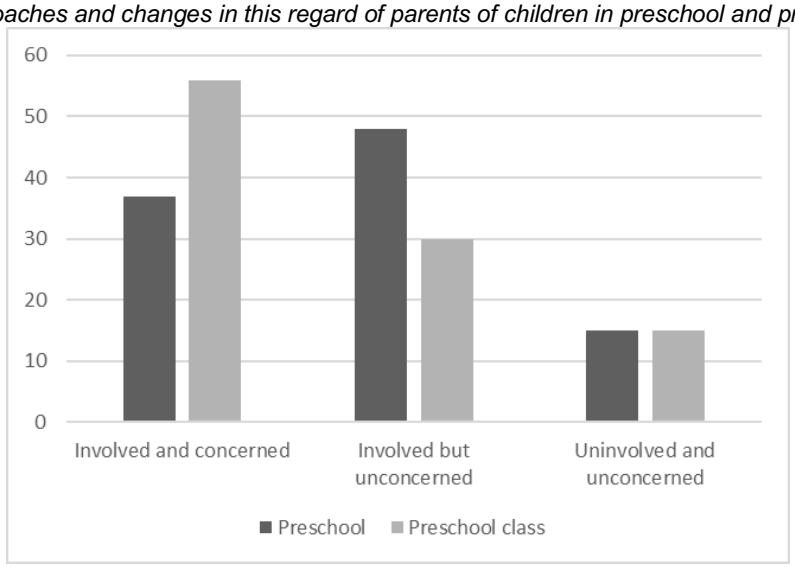
Furthermore, parents of gifted and talented children were involved and concerned. Their concern was that the child did not get enough intellectual stimulation in early education. One mother described how her son could read, but how the preschool staff did not seem to care and did not challenge him. She further described how her son was observant and could learn anything but how he was not encouraged. She also explained how she was worried since her son had started to hang around with older boys in the school playground in preschool class; she had even heard these boys talk about smoking and sex. She described how her son, who was nearly seven years old, had started to act like a teenager.

Table 6.
Ideal type parental approaches based on experiences during preschool and preschool class

Ideal type parental approaches and experiences during preschool and preschool class	**Parents of children with SEN** Frequencies (percent)	**Parents of TDC** Frequencies (percent)	**Parents of GTC** Frequencies (percent)
Preschool			
Involved and concerned	5 (18)	4 (15)	1 (4)
Involved but unconcerned	3 (11)	7 (26)	3 (11)
Uninvolved and unconcerned		4 (15)	
Preschool class			
Involved and concerned	6 (22)	7 (26)	2 (7,5)
Involved but unconcerned	1 (4)	5 (18)	2 (7,5)
Uninvolved and unconcerned		4 (15)	

Note. Parents, (N=27). The characteristics of SEN, TDC and GTC as well as of involved, uninvolved, concerned and unconcerned are described in Table 1.

Figure 1.
Ideal type approaches and changes in this regard of parents of children in preschool and preschool class.



Note. Parents, (N=27). The Y-axis shows the percentages (%) of parents. The X-axis shows the three ideal type approaches.

Discussion

Biosystem – support needs, gifts and talents

The aim of this study was to shed light on how a number of parents describe their children. Going by the parents' descriptions, all the children fit into one of these three categories: typically developing, in need of support, or gifted and talented. However, the parents seldom used such formal descriptions; instead, they described their children in an informal way. This suggests that important information on such matters as support needs or need for extra intellectual stimulation can be embedded in informal parental descriptions. It was the authors who decided to describe the children with formal labels such as typically developing, with support needs *or* gifted and talented, using previous definitions of children with support needs (Swedish Code of Statutes, 2010:800) and traits of giftedness (Beneventi, 2016; Grant, 2013; Mönks & Ypenberg, 2009; Persson, 2010; Stålnacke, 2014). For example, when the parents described their children as being gifted, their descriptions accorded with the criteria for giftedness (e.g. learn easily, do not receive the intellectual stimulation they need, have a good memory, are intense/sensitive/emotionally complex). Since this study is about parents' opinions and the experiences of their children, we have not tested or assessed the children's support needs/typical development/giftedness.

The percentage (15%) of children considered gifted and talented is higher than what has been previously estimated (5%; Stålnacke, 2014). One explanation for this

discrepancy could be that the information was obtained from parents. Parents love their children and may well say things like: He is "remarkably skilled". "She learns easily in comparison to same-age peers". "He is very intellectual and able". Another reason for this difference could be that not all gifted and talented children in this population in Sweden have been identified, which could be explained by the tradition in Sweden of not identifying children as such. Therefore, the number of gifted and talented children could be higher than what has been estimated previously. A third explanation may be the fact that more parents than expected of gifted and talented children may have volunteered to take part in this study: the reason for this may be either that these parents liked to talk about their (successful) children or that these parents wanted to shed light on the fact that the preschool class does not pay enough attention to these children.

In this study, the long-term need for support was much more common than the temporary need: Only one child went from being described as a child with special educational needs in preschool to a typically developing child in preschool class. This means that children with special educational needs during preschool probably also have such needs in preschool class.

Microsystem – their children's learning environments

The aim of this study was also to investigate and analyse how parents describe their children's learning environments (preschool and preschool class). In this study, the parents commonly had positive experiences in terms of preschool. No parents of typically developing children or gifted and talented children described the preschool as low in quality, for example. This is an indication that staff and preschool activities seem to cater better for those children and their parents in early education than for those children with special educational needs and their parents. Only two of the eight parents of children with special educational needs described the preschool as being high in quality. It is not possible to determine by means of the results of this study whether this is something that goes beyond this study, but a previous study (Lundqvist, Allodi Westling, & Siljehag, 2016) and an inspection (School Inspectorate, 2016) have reported that there are preschools that need to improve their work on such matters as inclusion of children with special educational needs as well as teaching. This may explain the ratings of low-quality or partly low- and partly high-quality on the part of parents of children with special educational needs in this study.

In this study, there were more preschools than preschool classes that were felt to be high in quality, and several parents (20 out of 27) did not seem to view the preschool class as a well-functioning, high-quality school form and bridge between preschool and school. The reason for this was described to be, for example, inadequate instructions, a negative social atmosphere and inadequate safety practices. Sweden is reputed to have preschools that are of high quality (Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2009), but what about its preschool class? The School Inspectorate has described some problems and areas for improvement in preschool class (School Inspectorate, 2015:3). The preschool class has not been particularly well-studied in terms of levels of quality, but this study shows that this could be a relevant topic for future research: Is the preschool class, which is intended to function as an important school form and a bridge between preschool and compulsory school, good enough?

Mesosystem collaboration and transitions

A further aim of this study was to describe mesosystem collaboration and transitions. There were more descriptions of high-quality preschool-home collaboration than there were descriptions of high-quality preschool class-home collaboration. This part of the results suggests that staff members in preschool have a better relation with and collaborate better with parents than staff members in preschool class. Staff in preschool class may need to improve their collaboration with parents, and this may also decrease the number of parents being negative towards preschool class and concerned during the time their child is in preschool class. They may also need to explain to parents that the time for proximal and reciprocal staff-home collaboration often decreases after preschool when children grow older and become more autonomous, and when class size increases and staff-child ratios decrease. To conclude, this result indicates that further studies are needed that focus on improving both transi-

tion activities between preschool and preschool class as well as preschool class activities.

Half of the parents (2 out of 4; 50%) of the children described as gifted and 43% of the parents of children with special educational needs (3 out of 7) were dissatisfied with the children's transition from preschool to preschool class, whereas most of the parents (13 out of 16; 81%) of children described as typically developing were satisfied/partly satisfied. This means that the parents of gifted children and of children with special educational needs felt – to a much higher degree than the parents of typically developing children – that their own needs and those of their children were not acknowledged in the transition from preschool to preschool class.

According to national curricula (SNAE, 2011a, 2011b), children with special educational needs are to be given special attention during the time of transition, but this study shows that children who learn easily and are knowledgeable (as well as their parents) may also need such special attention. Similar results have been put forth by Grant (2013) that propose important transition activities for gifted children. The implementation of well-functioning preparatory training and activities, and what these are, for children with special educational needs/giftedness is a relevant topic for future research since such training and activities can be helpful and may make transition easier (Ackesjö, 2014; Ahtola et al., 2016; Alataloet al., 2016; Griebel & Niesel, 2009). One consequence for gifted school children whose needs are not observed is that they do not get the attention and stimulation they need, as pointed out by Beneventi (2016) and Grant (2013). In this study, there were examples of such children being described as emotionally complex, which has been identified as a risk factor (Beneventi, 2016).

Parents' engagement and concerns during their children's early education pathways

Finally, the aim of this study was to discern (if possible) ideal type approaches to children's early education pathways. First of all, most parents were very much involved. This is an indication that early education pathways and the transition from preschool to preschool class are critical for parents. However, there were also parents who appeared to be uninvolved and unconcerned. This ideal type approach was stable from preschool to preschool class, so obviously there are also parents for whom the early school years and transition from preschool to preschool class are not critical. Yet, it is interesting that this ideal type approach was only represented by parents of typically developing children – this is a sign indicating that staff in preschool and preschool class may cater best for typically developing children. Yet, it could also be a sign that uninvolved and unconcerned parents do not identify their children as being in need of support or as being gifted – this is a sign that staff in preschool and preschool class need to be aware of the need for support/giftedness in children whose parents have not observed this.

The number of involved and concerned parents increased from preschool to preschool class, and the number of involved but unconcerned parents decreased. This could be interpreted in at least six ways: First, the transition to preschool class is a critical event that in itself causes parents to be involved and concerned. This has already been well-proven (Griebel & Niesel, 2009; Gross, 1999; Lau, 2014; McIntyre et al., 2007; McIntyre et al., 2010; Shields, 2009; Wildenger Welchons & McIntyre, 2015). Second, the preschool class activities were not viewed by the parents of this study to be as high in quality as the preschool activities. Third, there may exist a perception among parents that preschool class is equivalent to school – hence their concern about expectations not being fulfilled in terms of being a parent to a school child. Fourth, there may exist a perception among parents that preschool class is equivalent to preschool, implying that parents expect care in preschool class for their children to be as it was in preschool. It is known from previous research (Shields, 2009) that it is challenging for both the children and their parents to accept that staff-home collaboration cannot be as intense and individual in preschool class as it is in preschool. A fifth possible explanation may be that the parents were not interviewed when their children attended preschool; the negative memories from preschool might have faded. Yet another possible explanation – the sixth – may be that at the time of the interview, the parents chose to talk about the difficult episodes in preschool class, since the preschool class was an ongoing experience. The parents of the children with special educational needs

seemed involved and often concerned during preschool and preschool class. Only one of them seemed involved but unconcerned in both preschool and preschool class.

To sum up, the most important conclusions from this study are that the transition between preschool and preschool class needs to be further investigated by way of a larger study that focuses on transition activities and in particular on children in need of support, or gifted and talented children. Another relevant task for future research is to validate or develop the tendencies and approaches reported about in this study in other Swedish contexts and elsewhere, and with a larger number of parents.

Limitations and relevance of study

The number of participating parents describing their children's time in preschool and preschool class as well as the transition between the two school forms is limited, and the results should be seen as examples of parental descriptions and experiences from the Swedish context. This study has relevance for early childhood practitioners: for example, for preschool teachers, preschool class teachers, special educators and others who work in early education and care, as well as for parents, educators of student teachers who instruct on such matters as family-school relationships, (special) education researchers and policymakers.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude to those parents who took part in the study.

Authors' contributions

MS, JL and AA planned the study, collected the data and performed the analysis. MS and JL wrote the paper and AA contributed to the revision of the paper.

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