Preschool teachers in Sweden are currently coping with growing curricular demands to engage in a more formal instruction, and to further develop education for sustainable development (ESD). A consequence of this is that teachers feel pressure to organize activities for very young children that privilege “knowing that” over “knowing how,” and to do so in the service of an interdisciplinary project – ESD – that can be challenging to organize in early childhood. As teachers adapt to these new challenges they negotiate tensions consequential to preschool children’s learning and development. The pressure to reorient to disciplinary learning can detract from arrangements of activities involving pretend and exploratory play. This is because the learning outcomes of these activities can be unpredictable and difficult to define. However, these activities are also associated with the kinds of outcomes (e.g. creativity, innovation, empathy, counterfactual thinking) and ethics (e.g. cultures of collaborative learning) of concern in ESD.

In this paper we consider how preschool teachers in Sweden are negotiating the demands of engaging in more formal instruction and ESD, while cultivating local idiocultures that support children’s pretend and exploratory play. Our examination is based on case studies of teacher teams in three preschools that participated in a series of regional government-sponsored workshops organized to support teachers’ efforts to design their preschools’ outdoor spaces as sustainable, multifunctional environments. The case studies were based on field observations at the participating preschools and teacher interviews conducted prior to, during, and following the said workshops.

Drawing on cultural-historical concepts of disruptive and productive tensions, we characterize how the participating teachers conceived of pretend play, exploration, teaching, and sustainability in relation to children’s engagement in preschool activities. We focus in particular on how teachers considered examples of activities in which the interaction of children and the material environment afforded pretend and exploratory play; how the teachers and children made sense of their activities through pretense and exploration; and if/how the teachers remediated these activities in ways intended to make the children’s learning visible. How and for whom this learning becomes visible is a central question of concern for us.

*Keywords: preschool education, education for sustainable development, pretend play, exploratory play*