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Cultural considerations of ECERS-3 in Sweden: a reflection on adaption

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ABSTRACT
Quality in early childhood education is an important topic in many countries. Research suggests that high-quality preschool provides many long-term benefits for young children and society. How to measure early childhood quality however can be problematic. One approach has been the use of the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS), an observational scale of the learning environment created in the United States of America. The scale has been used in over 30 countries and translated into different languages. This article discusses cultural issues in relation to the use of ECERS-3 in Swedish preschools. While many of the indicators are easily transferable, some need cultural consideration. These include understanding the Swedish child perspective as expressed in the preschool curriculum, Swedish preschool design and Swedish pedagogy around interaction and safety issues. The article suggests that an adaptation of the scale is needed to be implemented effectively in the Swedish preschool context.

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Introduction

Our intention in this article is to share our reflections about the use of ECERS-3 which, is one instrument, developed in a cultural context, and now being used in a Swedish context. We realize that the original scale created in the United States may have some items that are culturally different to Swedish understanding of preschool pedagogy. The guiding question is, what items in ECERS-3 are in need for cultural adaptations in a Swedish preschool context?

While most items were easily transferable to a Swedish context, some required greater reflection. In our reflection, we draw upon differences of the indoor and outdoor space, child perspective, supervision of children, understandings of risky and outdoor play and weather conditions. Our intention is to bridge the current difference between ECERS-3 and Swedish preschools to ensure the ECERS-3 can be a valid and reliable instrument. It should be stated that Swedish preschools abide by rules and regulation set by Swedish authorities. The article begins with an overview of the Swedish context before sharing reflections. Our reflections are presented as three themes: physical environment and room organization, interaction and supervision and learning activities and language development.

What is the Swedish preschool context?

The Swedish preschool context is in a period of dynamic change. For years, it has been ranked to have a high-quality standard with a strong focus on democracy and children’s rights. In recent years,
however, the has reported that the quality of Swedish preschools has declined, moving from first place within the OECD countries to third.

In Sweden, preschool has been a key factor in the development of society and has been a part of strengthening the political agenda (Hägglund & Pramling Samuelsson, 2009). The Swedish government spends 1.3% of GDP on preschools annually (European Commission, 2014). In 2015, there were more than 470,000 children enrolled in preschools, with almost 95% of children aged 4–5 years attending preschools (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016). Preschool, therefore, emerges as an important topic for society, especially parents, professionals and politicians who frequently debate the issues of preschool in the media.

Swedish preschools rank high in international comparisons, although these measurements are more generally about what society does for children and families (Williams, Sheridan, & Pramling Samuelsson, 2016). Indicators that are compared are parental insurance length, accessible places for all children in preschool, funding support from the government, subsidized fees for parents, scope of trained personnel in preschool (at least one adult per 15 children), at least 1% of GDP transferred to childcare and that child poverty is lower than 10% (Lien Foundation, 2012; UNICEF, 2008).

In Sweden, Persson (2015) has shown how increased educational awareness of a competent and well-educated staff in preschool has effects on children’s well-being and learning in the long term. Sheridan et al., 2009 also shows that the preschool quality can be enhanced if preschool teachers participate in a competence development programme that challenges them to change their ways of thinking and understanding. High quality in preschool is characterized by teachers’ competence to relate to children in dialogue, create a sustainable shared thinking, develop child-focused strategies, clarify and communicate an object of knowledge, challenge children’s thinking while uniting play, care and education. It is primarily in interaction and communication, which are characterized by high sensitivity, responsiveness and dialogue that is predicting the development of children’s language, cognitive and social abilities in the long term (Persson, 2015; Sheridan, Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2009; Williams et al., 2016). Preschool teachers are highly skilled and their impact on children’s learning is increasingly emphasized. Swedish preschool teachers have a 3.5-year bachelor degree. Assistants have a certificate in nursery care from a 3-year upper secondary programme. Swedish research shows that preschool teachers’ competence and the quality of their communication and interaction creates different conditions for children’s learning of content in preschool (Sheridan, Williams, & Pramling Samuelsson, 2014). Examples of high-quality conditions for children’s learning are preschool teacher’s subject knowledge in different areas and their ability to communicate this through preschool didactics (Pramling & Pramling Samuelsson, 2011).

Most parents in Sweden today choose preschools for childcare and are generally satisfied with preschool quality. The National Agency parent survey (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013), where the parents of 124,000 children participated, revealed that 90% felt that the staff did a good job, that children were safe and that preschool pedagogy was good. However, angst has been reported on increasing group sizes within preschools, high stress among preschool teachers and increasing child stress (Sheridan et al., 2014; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016; Williams, Sheridan, Harju-Luukkainen, & Pramling Samuelsson, 2015; Williams et al., 2016). This has now been taken care of and a benchmark for group size has been given by the Swedish National Agency for Education (2016).

Research suggests that high-quality preschools, with well-educated teachers, have the potential to improve equity and equality for children from diverse backgrounds (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2010). Most effective for the individual, family and society are investments aimed at children between one and three years (Britto & Ulkuer, 2012). But, several studies show that the opposite has happened in Sweden today. Inequality has increased and the rights of children to a good and equal start in life are deteriorated Göteborg stad, 2014; Malmö stad, 2014). Despite that concern has been raised within the media and among the professionals, little research has been done on the actual factors that are contributing to decreasing quality.
How has the ECERS been used in the Swedish context?

The ECERS is an environmental rating scale used to measure the quality in early childhood settings that has been used for more than 30 years. The scale was originally created in 1980 (Harms & Clifford, 1980), before a revised version in 1998 (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998) and a third edition created in 2015 (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2014). To date, ECERS has been implemented in over 30 countries including Australia (Ishimine et al., 2010), England (Sylva et al., 2010), Norway (Sheridan et al., in press), Sweden, (Andersson, 1999; Kärrby, 1989; Sheridan et al., 2009). The first and second version of the scale has been translated into Arabic, Spanish, German, Hungarian, Norwegian, Chinese, Dutch, Greek, Icelandic, Italian, Portuguese and Swedish.

Today, changes in the Swedish society related to preschool, such as group size, inequality, lack of educated preschool teachers’ and political reforms concerning the preschool curriculum, make quality issues more important than ever. In Sweden, research on preschool quality with ECERS has been conducted since early 1990 (Andersson, 1999; Kärrby, 1989; Kärrby & Giota, 1994, 1995) and in relation to children’s learning and development (Sheridan et al., 2009). In these studies, a translated version of the original ECERS (Harms & Clifford, 1980) was used (Kärrby, 1989). When this translated version first was used in Swedish studies, the analysis revealed that some items were highly inter-correlated or showed low variability. As a result, the four gross motor items (17, 18, 19 and 20) were combined into one (17/20). Two items on fine motor activities (15 and 16) and two items on adults’ space (34 and 36) were also combined into one (15/16 and 34/36). One item was excluded (4). These problems were possibly due to the problems with the internal consistency of the subscales, particularly for the Personal care routines and Adult needs subscales.

However, as a consequence, 29 of the original 37 items were considered to be reliable and used in subsequent Swedish studies on preschool quality (e.g. Kärrby & Giota, 1994, 1995; Sheridan, Giota, Han, & Kwon, 2009; Sheridan, Pramling Samuelsson, & Johannson, 2009). In 2007, Kärrby’s translated version of ECERS was revised to better fit the Swedish preschool curriculum, with Swedish preschools scoring very high (scores of 5–7) in most of the indicators (Sheridan, 2007).

In particular, two cross-cultural studies have been conducted using the ‘Swedish version’ of the ECERS, one in 1997 and the other in 1999, both with regard to quality differences in Germany and Sweden (Sheridan & Schuster, 2001). The German adaptation of the ECERS used in these studies is a direct translation of the original scale (Harms & Clifford, 1980). However, in these studies, no inter-rated reliability differences were found between the Swedish and the German teams of observers, or on the item analyses of the German (Tietze, Schuster, & Rosbach, 1997), and Swedish translations of the original ECERS. They found, however, that two-thirds of the explained variance in the ECERS results were due to national differences and differences in preschool settings. The Andersson and Löfgren version (1994) is a direct translation of the original ECERS (Harms & Clifford, 1980). No statistical differences were found on the ECERS scores. The results showed that the overall scores of Kärrby’s (1989) version did not differ from the other translated versions of the ECERS (Sheridan, Giota, et al., 2009).

In Sweden, Sheridan et al. (2009) also studied 38 preschools and found three qualitatively different learning environments, namely Separating and Limiting environments, Child-Centred Negotiating environments and Challenging Learning environments. The variety of learning environments of low, good and high quality created different conditions for children’s well-being, learning and development. The results also highlighted tendencies towards a link between high quality in preschool and children’s learning of mathematics and communication showing that even children under three years of age, participating in the nine preschools of high quality, were more successful in communication and language and early mathematics tasks compared to the children in the low- and good-quality preschools.
What have other countries down with cultural adaption of ECERS?

Sweden is not the only country to experience cultural difference with ECERS. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) argue that the ECERS-R reflects knowledge of developmentally appropriate practice in ECEC that is based upon the United States context, with researchers, teachers and parents employing a specific cultural lens on interpreting quality for ECEC. Hu (2015) explored cultural differences with the ECERS-R in Chinese preschools. Differences emerged around space and furnishings in regard to room layout and the types of activities. Hu (2015) notes that it was difficult to find the use of sand/water tables in Chinese preschools and there was little awareness for creating spaces for privacy. The use of squat toilets also appeared problematic in the scale rating, with ECERS-R not having scoring criteria for such cultural differences.

Cultural differences were also found in a comparative study of South Korea and Sweden (Sheridan, Giota, et al., 2009). For example, South Korean preschools did not provide inclusive education and care (inclusion was an important part of the ECERS-R scale). In Sweden, the children also spent a lot of time outdoors; however, the activity could not be captured in the motor activities subscale. The authors suggest that findings from ECERS-R must be understood in terms of the socio-cultural contexts and the national pedagogical goals of the country.

This project

In light of this, a research team decided during 2016 to once again explore the quality in Swedish preschools, using the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS), well known around the world for measuring environmental quality within early childhood. Even if the two previous versions of the scale were translated into Swedish (ECERS and ECERS-R), the team decided to use the most up to date version of the scale (ECERS-3) that was created in 2015 in English. The research team know from experience of previous ECERS evaluations in a Swedish preschool context that some items are culturally different to a Swedish understanding and need to be adapted.

During 2016, the research team began a large study to collect ECERS-3 data in 153 Swedish preschools. ECERS was chosen primarily because of its ability to detect curricular quality, and its ability to function as a measure of comparative quality from a national, as well as an international perspective (Sheridan, 2001; Sheridan et al., 2009; Sylva et al., 2006; Tietze, Cryer, Barrio, Palacios, & Wetzel, 1996). An advantage is that the ECERS-3 builds on a child perspective that is central to the Swedish preschool curriculum as regard to the values, content, activities and development of competencies. Further, and of additional importance, is the fact that the evaluations of the conditions for learning, the pedagogical and didactical processes, and the experiences of the children focus on the environmental quality preschool as such, rather than on individual preschool teachers or children.

To help understand the ECERS-3, the research team undertook ECERS-3 training by inviting experts to Sweden to learn new understandings about ECERS-3. The training ensured that the Swedish research team understood and estimated the quality standards within each of the subscales and items.

Reflections about the cultural and contextual differences surrounding the Swedish context and ECERS-3 are presented below within each of themes. These reflective themes were chosen based on the findings from the study and because they created the most discussion in the group about cultural difference.

Reflection 1 on physical environment and room organization

This theme highlights differences in the physical environment and the room organization. To some extent, they differ from the description and criteria of ECERS-3. There is also a strong preschool culture in Sweden of everyday outdoor activities and dependence of weather conditions, which has an impact on ECERS-3 evaluation.
In Sweden, most preschools have several rooms to be used for specific activities. Depending on space and activity, they can be used by individual or a few children and by the whole child group. All rooms are used and the children are spread out throughout the day, being engaged in different activities, sometimes together with preschool teachers, sometimes playing by themselves. The amount of rooms and children’s possibilities to decide where to play and with whom is regarded as an important quality aspect in the Swedish preschool context. Room arrangement and design influence items 1 (indoor space), 2 (furnishings for care, play and learning) and 3 (room arrangement for play and learning). Since there are many rooms, supervision becomes a problem, especially with item 3.

The closeness and right to nature and children’s outdoor play is significant for Swedish preschool pedagogy and philosophy. Children are encouraged to play outside all year round and during various weather conditions such as snow, rain and sun, but not extreme weather. It is often seen as confident and challenging for children to run about and to climb smaller rock formations, trees, etc. These activities take place in natural settings where the ground is made of earth, grass and stone and during winter the earth is often frozen and very hard. These outdoor items are often rated as having a low quality in Sweden due to the criteria in the ECERS-3 (item 6 (space for gross motor play) and item 11 (safety practices)). High quality is related to outdoors play and gross motor activities are depending on a soft surface for high climbing, swinging, etc. Further, no hard material such as stones and toys are to be left close by and full supervision is required during these activities. These criteria can be hard to achieve in Swedish preschools due to weather conditions. In Sweden, there is also a different philosophy and pedagogy related to outdoor activities that the one that is described in ECERS-3. For example, high quality is related to children’s possibilities to play in nature as it is, without being too organized (item 28 – supervision of gross motor). Differences in pedagogy and philosophy are also related to diverse views on what kind of gross motor activities, play, equipment, etc. that can be considered as risky and dangerous or safe and challenges for children. Climbing a tree is for example regarded as a major hazard in ECERS-3, while in many Swedish preschools it is viewed as an appropriately challenging activity.

In most Swedish preschools, the preschool teachers are with the children while they play outside. They are often physically close to the youngest children (1–3 years of age), while the older children (4–5 years of age) can play by themselves in remote corners of the play yard (item 28). In some preschools, the older children can also go out and play by themselves for shorter periods of time, while the preschool teachers keep a look at them from the window. Even if the preschool teachers are outside, results from ECERS-3 evaluations show that there is lower interaction and communication between teacher and child during outdoors play and sometimes lack of supervision (item 12 (helping children expand vocabulary) and item 30 (staff–child interactions)) (Sheridan et al., 2009; Sheridan, Williams, Garvis, & Mellgren, in press). Swedish pedagogy may therefore contribute to a lower rating.

Weather (with a focus on winter) emerged as an important consideration within the adaption of the ECERS-3 scale to the Swedish context. For example, in Sweden children need many winter clothes to be able to go out and play in the snow and ice. Often clothing garments (especially snow suits) will touch each other in the cubbies as they are too big for individual cupboards (item 2). Children will also have snow boots, gloves and other winter clothes that are placed in a clothes drying cupboard when they come in from the cold (item 2).

Transition times also appeared problematic in winter (item 33 – transition and waiting times). It was difficult for a teacher to transition the entire group of children from space to another when the children need to get dressed in winter clothes and then undressed when they come in. This can take up to 20 minutes or more. Also, allowing children to learn to dress themselves for winter takes even more time, especially with the many zips, buttons, clips and Velcro attachments children learn to master. Swedish preschool teachers provide children with opportunities to become independent with dress; however, this again exceeds the suggested 3-minute transition time for high-quality transitions.
Snow also created a different type of play for children outside. Often children will play with snow, building, constructing and exploring. Sometimes, snow is used as a substitute for sand play (item 22 – nature/science). Heavy snowfall can also be problematic for exploring play equipment outside. Snow may cover all of the equipment, making it impossible for the children to use (item 7 – gross motor equipment). In these cases, teachers often created an exclusion zone around the playground equipment as it was risky to the children. Certain physical movements (such as climbing) were also excluded as children were confined to activities that could be done safely on snow and within the confines of a snow suit (item 28 – supervision of gross motor). Children may still dig, build, run, slide and throw snow. The use of outside toys was reduced with children mainly playing with snow (item 7 – gross motor equipment).

In autumn, the ground in Sweden may be frozen. While outside play equipment is still available for children, the sand and soft coverings under the equipment may be frozen, leading to below the recommended impact zones for falls. It is impossible to keep the sand unfrozen in these areas (item 6 – space for gross motor play).

Sand in a Swedish context is also considered an outside activity. Preschools do not place sand pits inside and do not expect children to bring sand inside. In winter and sometimes during autumn, the sand outside may be frozen, making sand play impossible (item 22).

**Reflection 2. Interaction and supervision**

In ECERS-3 as well as in Swedish preschool pedagogy and policy, interaction and supervision of children are fundamental quality aspects.

The Swedish view on quality supervision comprises several aspects such as safety, guidance, learning, trust and togetherness. While the concept of interaction is integrated in the Swedish culture and preschool context, the concept of supervision is seldom used and often attached with a negative understanding. Depending on activity and intension, concepts like guiding, scaffolding and overseeing are used with similar meanings as supervision has in ECERS-3. An important aspect of supervision in ECERS-3 is to protect children’s safety (items 3, 10 and 28). Another aspect is to guide and support children in their learning and development. It means that preschool teachers need to be close to children physically, emotionally and cognitively in order to communicate and share objects of learning (Jonsson, 2013). A third aspect is the balance between safety and supporting children’s development of independence and to know when and which a child can play by themselves during shorter times of the day. When children play by themselves, there is no interaction, communication and learning between teacher and child, which could be indicators of low quality (item 30 – staff–child interaction).

Swedish preschools are often designed with several rooms aimed for different activities, which make continuous monitoring and supervision of children within eyesight problematic (item 3). In Swedish preschool pedagogy, there is no legal requirement for continual supervision of all children. Instead, independence and responsibility of the child are supported. Teachers are building a trust between them and each child, giving each child enhanced responsibility and freedom depending on their abilities and age. This can be problematic for item 3 in the ECERS that requires the teacher to supervise the children. Due to the Swedish room arrangements, it is hard for preschool teachers to simultaneously have a good overview of all children. To supervise as intended in ECERS-3, they need to circulate between rooms and keep track on each child’s involvement throughout the preschool day. This approach can be in conflict with their intentions to teach, guide and engage in individual children’s learning and/or taking part in small group activities. As a consequence, this item is always rated as having a low quality.

In high-quality preschools, Swedish teachers are aware of the delicate balance of when to mediate or not, when to guide and teach and when to let the child try themselves (Sheridan et al., 2009). The preschool teachers plan for children to play by themselves and are aware of what children are involved and which children may not be involved in interactions. If children have received few possibilities for interactions outside, the preschool teacher will compensate by spending more time with
the child later in the day interacting and communicating. Unfortunately, this style of pedagogy cannot be observed in a three-hour ECERS observation, where lower scores may be reported for teachers not interacting with all children (indicator 30).

In summary, while safety, supervision, interaction, communication and engagement are considered important in relation to high quality in ECERS-3 and in the Swedish preschool context, the actual understanding of these concepts differs. In the Swedish context, interactions are considered highly important. The requirements for high-level interactions and communication in ECERS would be considered minimum requirements within the Swedish preschool curriculum, which has a strong focus on teacher–child and peer interactions (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). Swedish preschool teachers have a strong understanding of child participation, democracy and listening to children’s voices (Åberg & Lenz Taguchi, 2005; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2013; Johansson, 2009). Differences also emerge around safety with outdoor risky play encouraged in a Swedish context to support child development and independence.

**Reflection 3. Learning activities and language development**

The subscales for learning activities and language development gather core quality aspects in the preschool tradition such as music, art, block building and book reading. The subscale of learning activities also includes quality aspects such as mathematics, science and technology.

While it is important that children have exposure to a range of different learning areas, sometimes these were problematic to evaluate with ECERS-3 in the Swedish context due to different reasons, such as the absence of instruments in music, a limited number of books and/or few factual books and the lack of teacher competence in areas for example science and technology.

Children’s daily music experiences were hard to measure in relation to the criteria in ECERS-3 (item 19 – music and movement). In Swedish preschools, music experiences are rather focused on vocal and rhythmic development through singing and body movement. Singing is common and often used during circle time, during outside play and as an informal activity throughout the day. However, access to musical instruments is limited. Instruments are usually not considered a tool or toy for Swedish children, where instead more of a focus placed on vocal music. This meant that many Swedish preschools could not score highly in this item.

Children’s access to a variety of books was observed. Fantasy books dominated Swedish preschools, while factual books were more limited and often placed high on shelves and used for units of work. The timing of book reading was also problematic (item 14 – staff use of books). Traditionally, in Swedish preschools, book reading occurs after lunch. As most Swedish preschool children are enrolled for the entire day, they are able to experience book reading, just not during the observation time of three hours in the morning. Booking reading in a Swedish context is also used to promote calmness and togetherness, rather than a language development activity. The restriction of three hours compared to all-day observations can be problematic for the rating of single items, such as book reading. However, as few items are affected, its’ importance on the overall rating is seen as small.

Within the item nature and science (item 22), many Swedish preschools scored low. This is interesting for reflection, considering the demands for nature and science in ECERS-3 is lower than in the Swedish preschool curriculum. In the curriculum, more scientific concepts are demanded than what is represented in the scale at the good and excellent level. This means that the Swedish preschool curriculum has more expectations for science learning than what was represented in this item. The Swedish preschool curriculum calls for chemical reactions and basic physics. The curriculum makes strong connections with nature and the environment, with children often engaged in learning activities with the natural environment (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011).

Even though there is a significant variation in quality between preschools (Sheridan et al., 2009), little variation occurs in the overall framework and context for preschools in Sweden. All preschools follow the same curriculum and policy guidelines giving them the same content and structure. The
preschool teacher education follows overall guidelines, educating the profession in a similar way, independent of which university provides the education.

**Conclusion**

This paper shares the reflections of a Swedish research team’s experiences of using ECERS-3 and interest in adapting this scale to a Swedish preschool philosophy, curriculum, pedagogy and context. The reflections are based on experiences from a large-scale data collection using ECERS-3 in 153 Swedish preschools, related to previous research and long experience of using and adapting ECERS (1980) to a Swedish preschool context. In this article, we have shared our viewpoints about the transferability of ECERS-3 items to the Swedish context and provide some suggestions for cultural consideration in relation to three themes: physical environment and room organization, interaction and supervision and learning activities and language development.

In Sweden, most children are in preschool a full day. The ECERS-3 evaluation only embraces three hours, providing uncertainty of what is going on the rest of the day. The first version of ECERS (Harms & Clifford, 1980; Sheridan, 2007) was used for full-day evaluations of the preschool quality in Sweden. Even if the time for observation is much shorter in ECERS-3, the analyses of the evaluations show stable quality patterns for Swedish preschool, clearly highlighting the strength and weaknesses (Sheridan et al., in press).

Adaptations need to be made with care, considering cultural issues as well as quality aspects that are based on research and proven experience in preschool. Translations and adaptations of rating scales such as ECERS, from one context to another, involve several critical aspects and considerations (Tietze et al., 1996). For example, on the one hand, if the scale’s underlying philosophy, theoretical frame, content, child perspective, etc., are too far from the context in which, it is being used, the evaluation cannot be considered as valid. To a large extent, the philosophy, structure and content of the scale have to be in line with a country’s overall goals and intentions with preschool. On the other hand, if the adaptation is too contextualized to a specific country, the scale loses its comparative function and with other countries.

The reflections combined with statistical analyses will guide us in the next stage, in which, we hope to translate and adapt the scale into the Swedish preschool context. We are currently working with different companies and organizations to seek permission and endorsement. The translated scale can incorporate Swedish and European Union policy, as well as provide culturally specific language to the scale. The potential for such a scale to support quality development in Sweden is strong and provides many opportunities for improving and enhancing early childhood environmental quality. ECERS is a well-used evaluation scale of preschool quality. Its’ strength is confirmed by years of use in many different countries and cultures, generating valuable knowledge for the field of early childhood research and creating worldwide networks and collaborations.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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