

Linda Baston-Pitt and Tracy Seed introduce readers to a multi-award winning group of pre-schools in Sweden, which is driven by empathetic communication



# The heart of the matter



## pre-school education in Sweden

**O**n a sunny morning in Stockholm, we arrive at the airport and look for Annika Sparrdal Mantilla, our host and the director of the Ängbybarnens group of pre-schools, who helped us organise the trip after many years of discussion.

We were excited at the prospect of finding out for ourselves about pre-school education in Sweden, and we anticipated being inspired by the unique practices at Ängbybarnens, which is known both for its involvement in a European peace-education project and the inspiration it has drawn from Reggio Emilia practice.

### Some background

In Sweden, all families are entitled to a highly funded central government subsidy of around £1,000 a month for each child at pre-school from age one until they start school at seven. This level of funding means that staff are well paid and many graduate teachers are employed in the settings.

### Educating the heart

It was Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, who said: "Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all." Ängbybarnens is committed to turning this wise teaching into reality. Central to their practice is empathetic communication, a needs-based approach to learning, inspired

by the concept and practice of nonviolent communication established by Dr Marshall Rosenberg<sup>1</sup>.

So, what is empathetic communication? In the school booklet that is given to every parent and member of staff it is made clear: 'We focus on listening to the children's experiences rather than our own judgments.'

- So...
- they focus on building relationships, assuming that children want to co-operate: when the children are asked to do something, they are always told why so that the request has meaning for them
  - they practise appreciation, which involves describing what they see children do, how they feel and how this action contributes to their own wellbeing and to others
  - they practise being fully present: listening and developing their awareness to tune into their own needs and at the same time attune to the needs of the children
  - they set clear boundaries so that children do not harm themselves, others or property. Staff are strong in their leadership, telling children to stop without allocating blame or judging. Rather, they connect empathically, always showing understanding and offering support to find alternative solutions that will meet the children's needs.

Adults and children in Swedish pre-schools are guided by the Swedish motto for pre-school practice: freedom with responsibility.

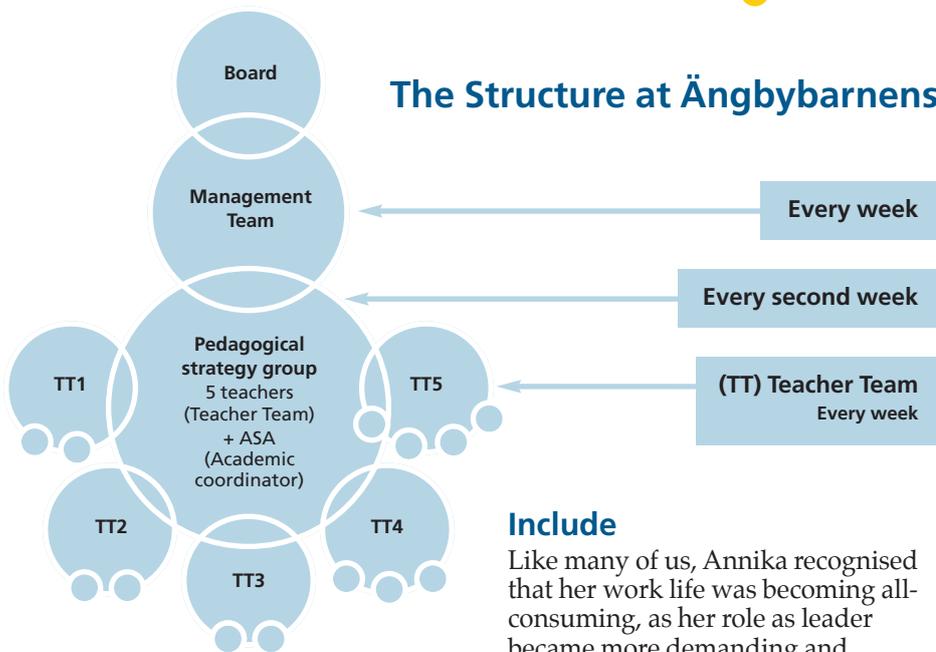
Equality, inclusiveness and democracy are high values that are clearly evident in the settings. And freedom means that children play outside in all weathers.

Here at Ängbybarnens, the nursery day is free-flowing with choice and flexibility built into the routine: they choose where to play and even when to have lunch (there are three sittings). Projects are initiated by the children, driven by their interests.

The principles that are applied to the professionals' practice with children also apply to their own work as a team and with the parents. They meet regularly for planning and for deep reflection, sometimes using video footage to examine exactly which interactions with children in specific situations resulted in a quality connection. The culture within the setting is one of continuous learning and improvement.

### Self-governing and sustainable

Ängbybarnens is deeply influenced by sociocracy, which was developed in the Netherlands by Gerard Endenberg as a consent-based management structure. So, their structure is non-hierarchical: instead of roles based on power and authority, the key processes of the



## The Structure at Ängbybarnens

organisation are identified, and individuals are assigned to process groups, known as circles, where proposals are generated, actions are planned and practice is evaluated. Decisions are made through unanimous consent.

Thus, skill in empathic communication is vital if members are to express their views with an awareness of the motivation underlying any proposals they are considering.

In other words, what looks like free-flowing settings with little structure is highly sophisticated and self-managing with practices evolving organically through collaborative meetings, where they monitor, review, evaluate and plan.

### Shared leadership

It's difficult to understand fully from our visit how the whole system works, but what we were all struck with was the huge sense of calm and the recognition of the enormous value of listening and acknowledging everyone's needs – parents', children's and staff's. This is what is central to their practice.

Something that we will take back is Annika's new mantra:

- include
- simplify
- focus.

These three words resonated on many levels, and, after much debate and discussion with Annika and her team, they began to make so much sense.

### Include

Like many of us, Annika recognised that her work life was becoming all-consuming, as her role as leader became more demanding and complex. Through the practice of empathetic communication, she reflected on her own personal wellbeing and the importance of fulfilling her own needs - spending more time with her family, allocating time to step out and reflect and so on.

By including the team and considering the process, she was able to share the responsibility and experiences by empowering individuals to lead in their areas of expertise. Annika became a resource, a facilitator, advising and supporting when she felt it was necessary. A great example of this was how the early years teachers and atelieristas (or trained art teachers) organised and led the workshops for our visit. The team share power and are able to build on their own strengths, grow in confidence and flourish.

### Simplify

We know within education there is nothing more certain than change. As we grow and evolve, so does the amount of information we have to absorb, with the result that we can easily become lost in the busyness of everyday life.

It was clear that each nursery within the Ängbybarnens group valued excellence in practice and worked towards a common aim. But maintaining consistency across the group hasn't always been easy, Annika said, as they have needed to redefine and clarify their purpose and values, and communicate these in ways that could be more easily understood by both the team and parents.

With the help of Annika's sister, Katarina, a marketing expert, they worked with the team to review the website, producing a new brochure and materials that communicate clearly what it is that they are offering. They also have systems for sharing the children's day in real time with parents via a private Instagram group.

### Focus

By including not only the team, but also external support, Annika has been able to focus on other areas of the business, including her passion for sharing practice with professionals from other countries. She tells us that she continues to develop herself, becoming more self-aware.

Conscious of how rigidity can lead to inflexibility and domination leadership, she works to stay in the flow of creativity with her team. She describes her own journey in this role as liberating, awakening positive feelings that had been suppressed.

We are particularly excited by what we experienced during this trip, because we are both passionate about working in ways that support everyone to succeed and flourish. We look forward to another visit next year! ■

1. For more information, see *Nonviolent Communication*, Marshall Rosenberg (Puddledancer Press, 2003).

- Tracy Seed is an early years consultant, focusing on authentic communication and conflict resolution through leadership; education and parenting; training and coaching.

**E:** [tracy@tracyseed.com](mailto:tracy@tracyseed.com)  
**W:** [tracyseed.com](http://tracyseed.com)

- Linda Baston-Pitt, who is one of this year's NMT Nursery Top 20, is managing director of the Old School House Nursery, director of EduVivre Training, and contributes to projects on education, research and health and wellbeing.

**E:** [linda@oshdn.co.uk](mailto:linda@oshdn.co.uk)  
**Twitter:** @LindaEarlyYears

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