

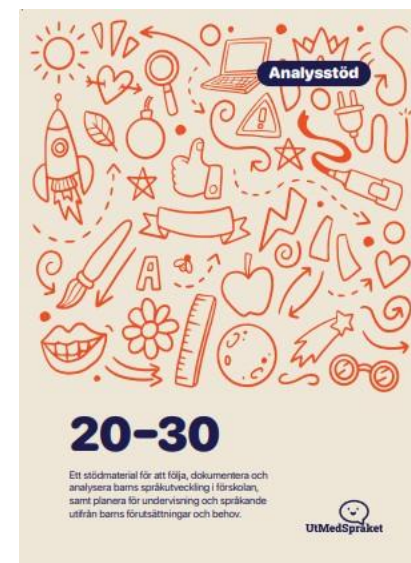
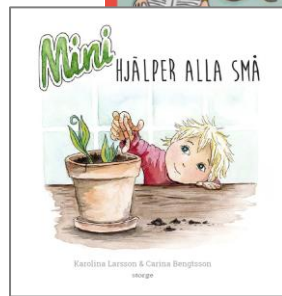
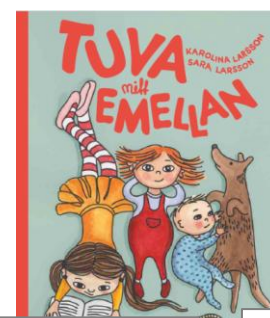
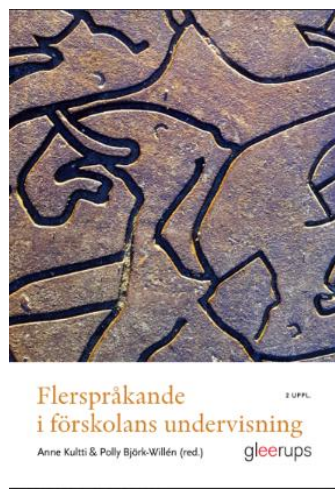
More than words

– Interaction, play and learning in the language environments of preschool

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Different preschools - different conditions for children's language development

- Aims to shed light on the conditions for language-promoting and multilingual practices in preschools with varying proportions of multilingual children.
- All studies reveal differences in the language environments of the participating preschools, as well as unequal conditions and prerequisites for children's language development in preschool.



Att leda språkutvecklande och
flerspråkigt arbete i förskolan
- en huvudmans arbete med att skapa förutsättningar
för alla barns språkutveckling

Förskolan som arena för barns språkutveckling

Rapport 1

Karolina Larsson & Polly Björk-Willén



Språkutvecklande och flerspråkigt
arbete i förskolan

Förskolan som arena för barns språkutveckling

Rapport 2

Karolina Larsson & Polly Björk-Willén



1.



2.



3.



4.



Preschools' language environments and how they contribute to children's language development, as well as the conditions and prerequisites for children's language development in preschool.



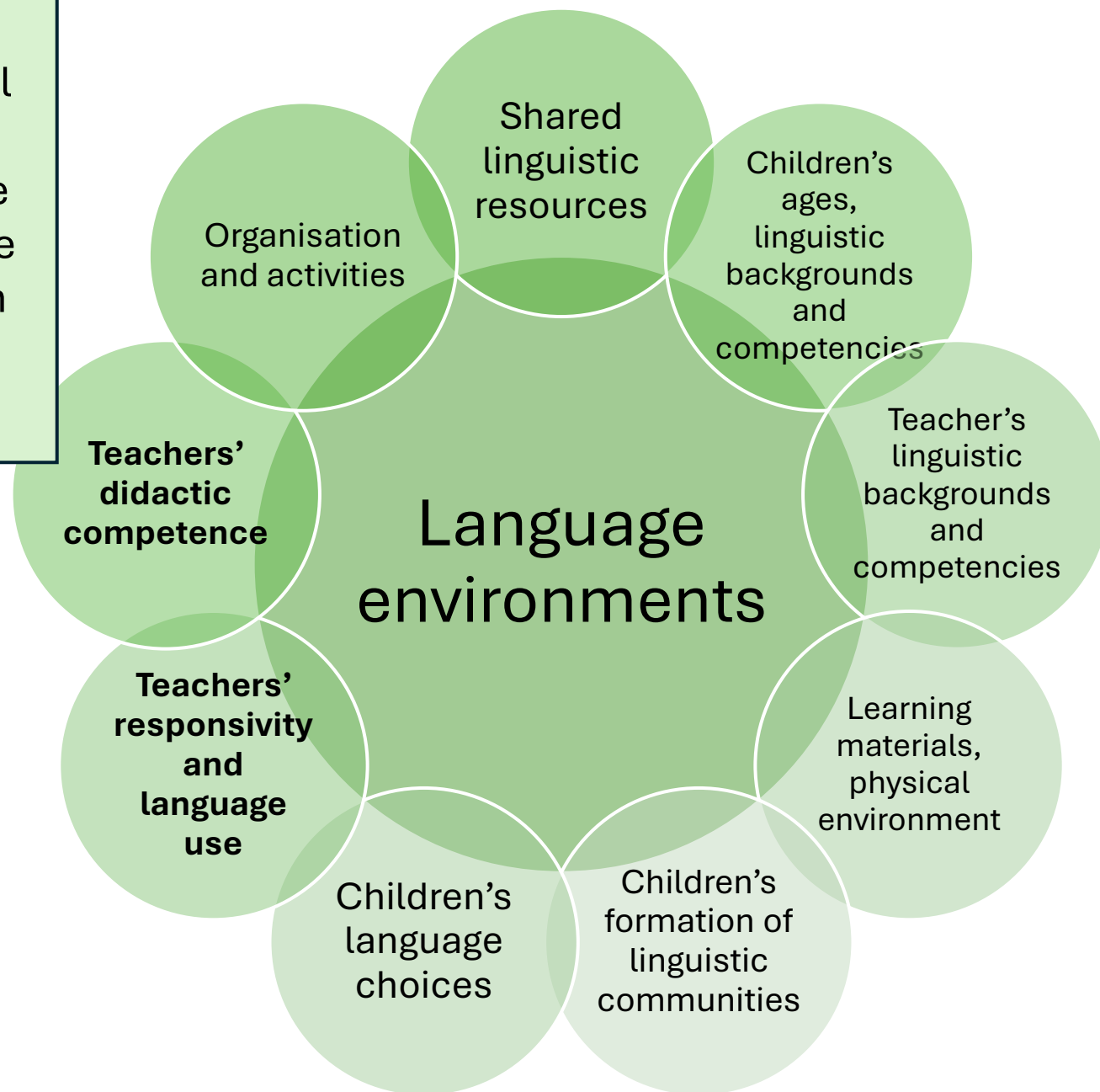
Interaction and language use in monolingual and multilingual preschool language environments

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The sum of the verbal and embodied interaction, language choices and language practices in a certain context.



Children grow into the intellectual life around them by actively participating in their social and cultural environment.

(Vygotskij 1978)

Children's experiences of positive and stimulating social interaction is the key factor to a rich language development, reading and writing skills, as well as their social abilities.

(Yoshikawa et al., 2013)

Not only do we provide children with opportunities for conversation and conversational habits that determine the size of their vocabulary and their level of language proficiency;

We also provide the conversational climate, the tone of conversation, and the discursive context from which they will speak.

(Johnston, 2012)

Each conversation helps shape the child's identity, as each exchange "becomes an autobiographical fragment."

(Davies & Harre, 1999)

Teaching a language is an intrinsically radical act. Is it possible to teach language so that people stop killing each other?

(Mary Rose O'Reilly)

More than words...

Children needs spoken and written language abilities to become part of the democratic society.

The development of rich language and literacy skills promotes mental health and well-being as well as reading development and chances of employment later in life.

(Gustafsson et al., 2010; Isaksson et al., 2017; O'Connor et al., 2018; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Scarborough, 2001; Herkner et al., 2021; Eriksson & Rooth, 2022).

But recent reports reveal widespread variations in the quality of preschool language education in Sweden and many other countries.

Language is crucial
for school success.

Speech and
language problems
increase the risk of
"school failure."

Also negatively
affects mathematics
learning.

Social and emotional
competence is
negatively affected.

The risk of behavioral
problems and
mental illness
increases.

(Pace et al., 2019; Boyle, 2011; ICAN, 2006; Roulstone, Law, Rush, Clegg, &
Peters, 2011;
Menting, van Lier, & Koot, 2010)

- Preschool can give children a good start in life... *(Burger, 2010)*
- ... if it is of good quality. *(Yoshikawa, Weiland, Brooks-Gunn, Burchinal, Espinosa, Gormley, Ludwig, Magnuson, Phillips & Zaslow, 2013; Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta, & Mashburn, 2010)*
- High-quality preschools can compensate for challenging conditions in the home or neighborhood, and can balance out children's living conditions. *(Persson, 2017; 2020)*

Lexical diversity in peer play talk (Doctoral thesis, study 3)

- The variation in linguistic exposure that children receive during peer play talk, in diverse language environments.
- The total number of words (lexical productivity) and the number of unique words (lexical diversity) + the number of decontextualized turns.
- Mixed-method

Monolingual language environment: 2 children, 3-4 years old.

1	Child 1:	We can build two roads later on, together. We can build two cars later.
3	Child 2:	Okay then, let's do that. .
4	Child 1:	But I'll make a turn.
5	Child 2:	But I... But I...
6	Child 1:	No, we will make a parking space, where one can fill up gas.
7	Child 2:	Yes let's do that!
8	Child 1:	Yes yes that's fun.
9	Child 2:	A washing machine. Here is a washing machine. We build like this, a large.
11	Child 1:	Crane. Here comes a crane. Grapple claw.

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Multilingual language environment: Two children, 5-6 years old.

1	Child 3:	Fall fall. Come on. Take down. Take it just down.
2	Child 4:	Hey hey be careful with that.
3	Child 3:	Oh!
4	Child 4:	Hey hey wait!
5	Child 3:	Oh!
6	Child 4:	Yes yes.
7	Child 3:	I'm a gummybear. ((Singing in English))
8	Child 4:	More.
9	Child 3:	I'm a gummybear. ((Singing in English))
10	Child 4:	Yeah! Wah!
11	Child 3:	Oh!
12	Child 4:	Oops.

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10	Child 4:	Yeah! Wah!
11	Child 3:	Oh!
12	Child 4:	Oops.

Before we take a coffee break...



Karolina Larsson, PhD
Lund University



Polly Björk Willén, Professor emerita
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Lovisa Elm, PhD
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Would you like to participate in a study about how sign-supported speech is used in Nordic preschools?



<https://survey.liu.se/survey/14263>

What does this mean?

The importance of shared linguistic resources.
The need of compensatory work to break a downward spiral.



The importance of teachers participation in play.

Why is this important?

- **Vocabulary is an important proxy for language development** (Rydland, Grøver & Lawrence, 2014; Dickinson, McCabe, Anastasopoulos, Peisner-Feinberg & Poe, 2003)
- **Amount of input setting off language trajectories** (Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff et. al. 2012; Hoff, 2003; Thordardottir, 2011; Oller & Eilers, 2007; Paradis & Genesee, 1996)

Every play theme has its
specialized vocabulary.

1	Henry:	Build more.
2	Teacher:	Do you want to build higher? A tall tower?
3	Henry:	Build tower Henry build
4	Te	ld otos
5	Ar	
6	He	
7	Te	le at the base, and narrower at the top. Should we take the large blocks first and build a wide base?
8	Henry & Anna:	((Pick up large blocks and begin to build.))

Build, higher, tall, tower, Eiffel tower, Turning Torso, wide, stable, base, narrower at the top, large, blocks

To organize for "deep and sustained play"...

How do you do that?

Academic language instruction should be a natural part of preschool language teaching

- Children need rich opportunities to get engaged in linguistically and cognitively challenging conversations. Such conversations are often decontextualized (away from here and now, dealing with events in the past, the future or the imagined) and include abstract concepts. *(Grøver Aukrust & Rydland, 2011; Schuth, Köhne & Weinert, 2025; Massey, Pence, Justice & Bowles, 2008; Björk-Willén, Pramling & Simonsson, 2018)*
- There is a need to improve language teaching in preschool. *(Koskinen, 2026; Larsson, 2025)*
- Increased quality of language teaching can lead to greater equality in preschool and contribute to better opportunities for children later in life. *(Palla & Vallberg Roth, 2018)*

Contextualised
language:

Here and now

Needs to be supported
by contextual cues,
like pointing or
demonstrating

High-frequency words



Decontextualised
language:

There and then

Can be understood and
expressed merely by
linguistic means –
without contextual
cues

Low-frequency words

Pellegini, 1985; Kyratzis, 2014

Reasoning as part of academic language teaching

- Describe, categorize, compare
- To think out loud, together
- Explain something, cause and effect
- Express a wish, desire, or dream, and describe the reason why.
- Argue one's case

- Now I'm curious — can you tell me more?

- What was your thinking – how did you arrive at that conclusion?

- What thoughts came to mind?

- What happened next?

- Could you explain that again? I didn't quite understand.

From Språka, leka, läsa (Larsson, ahead of print)

Sarah: What's that? (Points at lamp in ceiling.)

Hillevi: It's a lamp

Sarah: Is that?

Hillevi: That's also a lamp. That's a ceiling lamp (points), and that's a table lamp. Both of them can light up. (Pause) Can you turn the lights off?

Sarah: (nods)

Hillevi: There is a button here. Can it turn off the ceiling light?

Sarah: (Turns off ceiling light)

Hillevi: Look, here's a button too. Are you going to press it?

Sarah: (Turns off table lamp.)

Hillevi: Now you've turned off both lights. First, they were on, and then you turned them off.

Mental verbs

- All verbs describing internal mental processes — that is, things we cannot observe directly. This includes, for example:
- Think, feel, believe, want, remember, hope...
- Thoughts, feelings, volition, and perception (e.g., “seeing” and “hearing”) can all be expressed using mental verbs.

Cognitive verbs

- A subgroup of mental verbs consists of cognitive verbs. They specifically relate to thinking and knowledge—cognition.

Examples:

- think, know, understand, realize, learn, remember, ponder, recall, decide, plan, evaluate, compare, predict, assess, remember
- Cognitive verbs indicate that the child is engaged in thinking and learning — some kind of intellectual activity is taking place.

Teacher:	Which one is the heaviest? (shows the picture of a tent and a house)
Child:	(points at the house)
Teacher:	<u>How did you know?</u> That this one is the heaviest?
Child:	(points once again)
Teacher:	There is the answer. But if we think like this. <u>Which one is the heaviest? What have we got here?</u>
Child:	An house.
Teacher:	A house. And <u>what have we got here?</u>
Child:	Tenne
Teacher:	Tent. <u>Do you think we can carry a tent?</u>
Children:	Yes!
Teacher:	<u>But can I carry a house?</u>
Children:	No
Teacher:	So then you could compare a little bit, which one is the heaviest.

- Length of utterances of language input and cognitive challenge in linguistic input (such as hypotheses, why-questions or words that challenge children to shift focus from concrete situations to more abstract conditions or concepts are important for vocabulary growth.

(Hoff & Naigles, 2002; Mövisch, Konrad-Ristau & Weinert, 2022; Mövisch, Konrad-Ristau & Weinert, 2022)

- Another important aspect of linguistic input is discourse. When words appear within diverse and complex discourse contexts, children's understanding of word meaning might be supported.

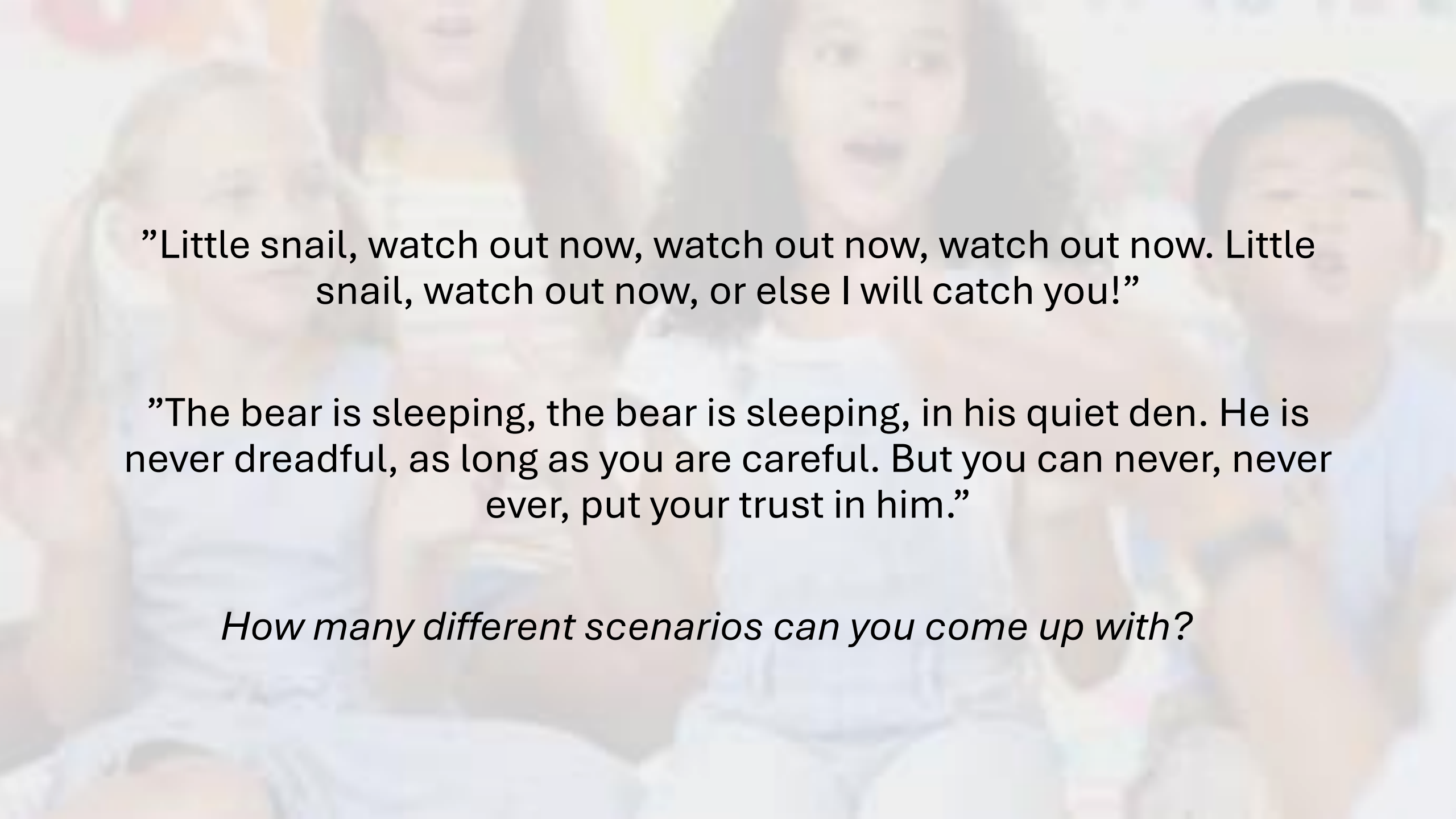
(Aukrust, 2007)

Reasoning about the lyrics of children's songs

- Lyrics in children's songs can be used as literary resources
- Exploring the content of the lyrics since many traditional songs are hard to understand.

”We sing a lot in our preschool, both modern and classic songs like Lilla snigel [*Little snail*] and Björnen sover [*The bear is sleeping*]. All children who have attended our preschool for some time have heard these songs. But it is not obvious what these songs are about. In fact, that is not always obvious for us teachers either. And we do not always involve the children in a reasoning about, or an interpretation of, the characters and the plot of the songs. In that way, the songs invite us to reason, think and interpret. They raise questions that have no right answers.”

Tommie (from Språka, leka, läsa - Larsson, ahead of print)

A blurred background image of a group of children in a classroom. They are wearing light blue shirts and appear to be looking towards the camera. The image is out of focus, serving as a backdrop for the text.

”Little snail, watch out now, watch out now, watch out now. Little snail, watch out now, or else I will catch you!”

”The bear is sleeping, the bear is sleeping, in his quiet den. He is never dreadful, as long as you are careful. But you can never, never ever, put your trust in him.”

How many different scenarios can you come up with?

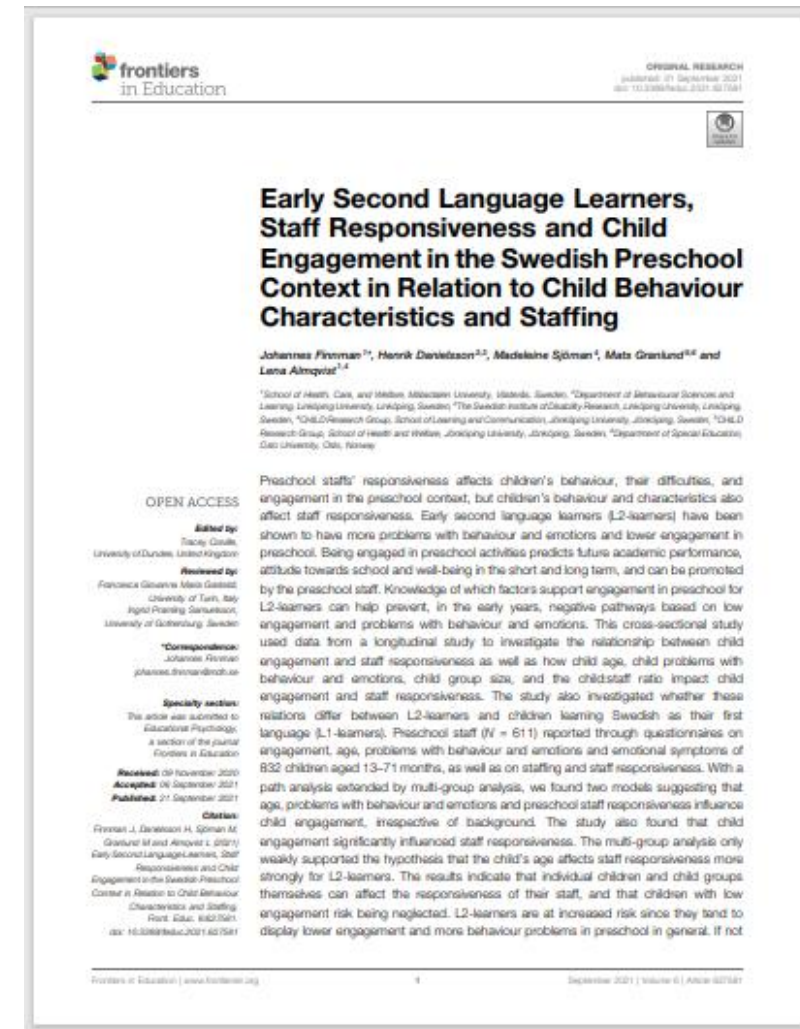
Responsivity

- To listen actively, be attentive to children's initiatives and contributions, and respond verbally or non-verbally
- To maintain a topic for successive turns
- To encourage children to communicate and participate
- To use open and genuine questions
- To use a rich and nuanced language that challenges and stretches children's language beyond what they already know.
- To support children's interaction by all possible means (i.e. eye contact, smiles, expansions and reformulations).

Responsivity and children's engagement

- Bi-directionality
- Upward and downward spirals

(Finnman, Danielsson, Sjöman, Granlund and Almkvist, 2021)



Ali: **One two. One. Zero, one two three four five.**

Abbe: **Stop!**

Ali: **Five. Well, I have to find ...** (Picks cars.)

Leroy: Ali, kolla den! (Håller fram och visar en leksaksbil.)
Ali, look at this.

Ali: Är den din?
Is that yours?

Leroy: Ja.
Yes.

(4 seconds silence)

Ali: (Puts the cars back in the box.) **Come on!** (Leaves the table.)

Abbe: (Leaves cars and follows Ali.)

From Larsson, Björk-Willén, Haraldsson & Hansson, 2023

Bilal: (Takes Lego stick.) What e this? (Looks at Ali.)

Ali: (Looks at Bilal. Remains quiet.)

Abbe: This is a stick.

Bilal: (Takes Lego tree.) E this?

Abbe: This is a tree.

Ali: I saw another tree.

Bilal: Wi-o-wi-o-wi-o.

Ali: Now we have two trees.

What we talked about – and why it is important!

- We can be aware of inequalities and strive for compensatory measures. Residential segregation and socioeconomic disparities create different linguistic environments that affect children's opportunities for language development. *(Papakosma, 2025; Larsson, 2025)*
- Highly complex language environments requires greater adaptation and differentiation of language teaching. *(Larsson, aop)*
- Speech is the most important tool in the professional practice of educators. Through speech, we intervene in activities and experiences, helping children interpret their learning, their lives, their surroundings, and themselves. *(Johnston, 2013)*
- Many children are better supported through intentional academic language instruction rather than traditional implicit language stimulation. *(Koskinen, 2026)*

Sticks and stones may break my bones. But words could
never hurt me.

And this I knew was surely true, and truth could not desert
me

But now I know it is not so, I've changed tha latter part;
For sticks and stones may break the bones
But words can break the heart

Sticks and stones may break the bones, but leave the spírit
whole

But símple words can break the heart
Or sílence crush the soul

Herb Warren



Would you like to stay informed?



<https://survey.liu.se/survey/14275>

Thank you for listening!

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