



## Tensions in the Swedish Fritidshem Mathematics Curriculum: a Policy Enactment Perspective

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# TENSIONS IN THE SWEDISH FRITIDSHEM MATHEMATICS CURRICULUM: A POLICY ENACTMENT PERSPECTIVE

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*In 2016 the Swedish fritidshem got its own curriculum where mathematics is formally introduced. The space where students can experience informal forms of mathematics in activities derived out of their own interest risks being slowly transformed into a schoolified form of mathematics, steered by teachers and striving for learning effectiveness. A policy enactment perspective was used to investigate the material, interpretive and discursive dimensions of the enactment process. Based on document analysis, observations and interviews in two cases, tensions between two different and competing discourses were identified: one driven by student's interests and one driven by teacher's mathematical agenda. The meaning of fritidshem math will configure in the tensions about what counts as desirable forms of mathematical activity in practice.*

## INTRODUCTION

*Fritidshem* — literally translated “freetime home”— is a special type of institutional offer for children in school age, for activity after the end of the school day, based on play and socialization. The character of this offer has changed through time and different policy documents have tended to make this institution come closer and closer to school. In 2009, for example, the National Agency of Education changed the name of the *activity* at the *fritidshem* to be called *education* (Prop. 2009/10:165). In 2016, a new curriculum for both preschool and the *fritidshem* was issued where specific subjects were introduced. One political argument for this change is that all institutional offers to young people in Sweden should support their school development in order to achieve the ambition of improving the overall quality of education and pupils' achievement in Sweden, monitored nationally through tests and internationally through comparative studies of school achievement such as PISA (Regeringskansliet, 2016). In the curricula, mathematics expressed in terms of problem-solving in everyday life is explicitly mentioned as one of the new knowledge areas that is to be made visible in *fritidshem* education.

Nowadays it has become naturalized to think that children have to start earlier dealing with various formalized forms of knowledge such as mathematics in order to increase their learning capacity. It has also become natural to think that all spaces of life should support the core activity of children, which is performing well in school. This is what research in *extended education* has highlighted (Holmberg, 2018). But, who would dare to question the political intention of making mathematics visible and explicit in *fritidshem*? Notwithstanding its apparent goodness, a critical investigation of this change in policy calls for problematizing since changes in the governing of children's life and free time are being made for the sake of better mathematics. As part of this, the concept of *schoolification*, the process of becoming like school, in this case the

tendency of the activity and content in *fritidshem* turning similar to the ones in school, needs to be discussed.

The new curriculum poses two interconnected challenges to the people involved in *fritidshem*. First, is a schoolification of *fritidshem* desirable? Second, what could be the meaning of *fritidshem* mathematics? These are important issues to debate because the strong narrative of the necessity of high performance in school mathematics to develop Sweden in the future overshadows the value of free spaces for children to socialize, play and be creative in, and at the same time engage in informal mathematical activity. Furthermore, since school mathematics has a very strong logic and tradition, such logic can be easily imposed on *fritidshem* mathematics, making the latter just an artificial version of the former. What is at stake is the possibility of the emergence of forms of informal mathematical activity within the frame of a *fritidshem* where student's interests and free space can be a grounding principle.

The tension between these challenges is part of the everyday life of the people working at *fritidshem*. In this paper, we delve into the tension with the intention of exploring how people at *fritidshem* enact the new curriculum directed to the area of mathematics. This is important because the meaning that *fritidshem* mathematics will get in practice will emerge out of the policy enactment process of this new area for mathematics education in Sweden.

## **RESEARCHING CURRICULUM CHANGE AS POLICY ENACTMENT**

We conceive of the new curriculum as an educational policy that poses problems that must be solved in the context of the people and institutions that enact them (Ball, 2000). A change in the official curriculum put forward by a governmental agency and what teachers have to do to “implement” it can be understood in terms of policy enactment. “Enactment” refers to the understandings and interpretations of the policy document that unfold in practice (Braun, Maguire & Ball, 2012). Ball et al. (2012) challenge the idea of policy implementation as a linear “top-down” process. They criticize the assumption that educational institutions have to respond to policy demands and other expectations, as if the people in school were not part of the process itself: “Teachers, and an increasingly diverse cast of ‘other adults’ working in and around schools, not to mention students, are written out of the policy process or rendered simply as ciphers who ‘implement’” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 10). Instead, they conceive putting a policy document into practice as an active process where people appropriate and reconfigure the meaning of policies in the context of their institutional practices. This requires translation and interpretation within the ongoing process of education. As a result, new configurations of practice will emerge, not as right or wrong “implementations”, but as the result of what people actually can do given the characteristic of their institutional arrangements. In this sense, policy enactment theory allows to understand how people perform curriculum and to research moving away from a deficit perspective of failure in implementing the curriculum. This is an important issue for mathematics education research. Policy enactment theory interweaves three aspects of the policy process: the material, the interpretive and the discursive (Ball et al., 2012). These aspects are all

relevant in putting policy into action. The *material aspect* refers to physical contexts and the way different artefacts emerge and are used to materialize the new curriculum. They are described as “instruments and effects of discourse” (Ball 2015, s. 307). The material aspects are researched by paying attention to the ways in which different resources and artefacts are used to construct and express meaning. The *interpretive aspect* covers the different ways of communicating, articulating and understanding the policy to make sense of it (Ball et al., 2012). This is researched by attending to how the actors and voices involved elaborate ideas of the curricular change, documented in different sources such as the teacher’s words and the policy document changes. The *discursive aspect* highlights how the process of meaning making relates to a history and a context. Discursive strategies are about events, productions and social processes (Ball, 2015). The discursive aspect is researched by paying attention to the positioning of the actors such as students and teachers in texts and practices.

When studying policy enactment, Ball et al., (2012) suggest a method of process-oriented interaction between empirical data and theoretical framework focusing on the material, interpretative and discursive aspects. The first author in this paper, Anna Wallin, carried out a case study in two *fritidshem*, where she is supporting *fritidshem* teachers, school teachers and staff in developing *fritidshem* mathematics. The case studies consisted of eleven participant observations, where teachers and staff were followed in their interaction with students; and semi-structured interviews with five practitioners; teachers, staff and a headmaster, regarding their interpretation of the new curriculum and how they translate these ideas into their practice. The observations and interviews were video-recorded, transcribed and analysed to identify how teachers, staff and headmaster express about *fritidshem* mathematics, and how material, interpretative and discursive elements play out in their enactment. Furthermore, an analysis of the curriculum and other related documents has been carried out. Additional interviews with two recognized teachers who have been active in shaping *fritidshem* have been conducted as a way to highlight generative insights emerging from the cases. The material, discursive and interpretive aspects of policy enactment (Ball et al., 2012) traced in the interviews and observations are seen in the light of each other in the results.

## **THE TENDENCY TOWARDS SCHOOLIFICATION**

The new curriculum of *fritidshem* appeared as part of historical changes. The initial purpose of *fritidshem* was fostering working class students and helping guardians with childcare (Rohlin, 2001). Nowadays, *fritidshem* is available to all students up to the age of 13, under the circumstance that the student’s guardians are employed. The *fritidshem* is subject to a fee of maximum 800 SEK per month (Skolverket, 2012). More than 80% of Swedish younger students attend the *fritidshem* (Skolverket, 2017). From being institutions administered by the authorities of social affairs, in 1990 the *fritidshem* were set under the same management as elementary schools, so that almost each school would have its *fritidshem* section (Rohlin, 2001). Besides saving money, the change in the 1990s was supposed to generate collaboration and integration

between school and *fritidshem* (Hippinen, 2011). In the 2000s, the earlier focus on socialization and childcare has been replaced by a focus on educational and learning aspects, with the aim of explicitly complementing the elementary school by enabling students to develop knowledge (Rohlin, 2013; Hippinen, 2011). Such changes are visible in the language use at *fritidshem*: today, the academically educated staff in *fritidshem* are called *teachers* (directed to education at *fritidshem*), and the time students spend there is called *education*; while the earlier expression used for educated staff was *pedagogue* and the students participated in *activities*.

Since 2016, the *fritidshem* has moved closer to school with the promulgation of the curriculum. The core content is divided in four different subject areas: 1) language and communications, 2) creative and aesthetic forms of expression, 3) games, physical activities and outside activities, and 4) nature and society. The latter highlights “Mathematics as a tool to describe everyday situations and solving everyday problems” (Skolverket, 2016 a, p. 25). This formulation of mathematics has similarities to the one directed to mathematics of elementary school, for years 1-3 and 4-6, promoting students to develop “strategies for mathematical problem solving in everyday situations, and to mathematical formulation of questions based on everyday situations” (Skolverket, 2011, p. 62). The *fritidshem* curriculum also highlights that its role is not to emphasize assessments but to complement the education provided in elementary school (Skolverket, 2016b). In the commentary material to the *fritidshem* curriculum, the National Agency of Education further explains intended directions for practice: “In the education, it is possible to capture the opportunities for learning that arise in everyday life, but also to develop situations that allow students to use mathematics” (Skolverket, 2016b, p. 22).

The envisioned connection between *fritidshem* and school became materialized in *artefacts* such as the matrix and the pedagogical planning. The matrix is an evaluation device that allows to establish goals and match them with activities to reach the goals. It became a common instrument in elementary school practice since the alignment of goals, activities and evaluations in levels of achievement that matrices usually express is central in the assessment of pupils’ academic skills. Kane (personal communication, 20180503) tells that the matrix is being adopted in *fritidshem*, but it has been used as an evaluation tool for the overall pedagogical activity, not individual students. The pedagogical plans, another artefact belonging to school, is being used to frame the students’ needs and interest as ways to design activities that enable them to develop in *fritidshem* education. Indeed, in one of the researched *fritidshem*, a matrix was introduced by the headmaster with the intention of helping staff working with the new curriculum. This matrix defined three possible levels of achievement in six different areas: language and communication, creativity, norms and values, sustainable lifestyles, the students’ responsibility and influence, and confidence in their own ability, nature and society, school and the outside world. For the practice of *fritidshem* to reach the highest level in the matrix, the staff should secure that “the activities are

well planned and evaluated through the pedagogical planning and the analysis contributes to constant quality enhancement” (example from the matrix).

The working of artefacts like this in the new context have a steering effect on *fritidshem* teachers and students. In this way, the *fritidshem* as a space for students play, free activity and creativity which embodied the value of gaining experience through engagement in activities outside the structured framework of school is somehow being slowly transformed. This generates tensions around what *fritidshem* teachers and staff should do and which meaning *fritidshem* mathematics could adopt. This tension is illustrated by one of the teachers who said: “When one discusses school, one always considers mathematics education. It is so obvious. It is so extremely much school!”. Teachers at *fritidshem* distance themselves from formal teaching (Hippinen, 2011). The strong tradition of school mathematics is based on formal teaching and is often justified in relation to an externally defined curriculum. So, mathematics in *fritidshem* stands in contrast with the school mathematics as it is embedded in activities and games derived from the student’s interests.

“Schoolification” as an international tendency to expand the logic of school to areas of children’s life that had remained outside traditional school has been discussed for early childhood education and preschool (Gunnarsdottir 2014; Lager, 2015; Lembrér, 2015). The notion of schoolification “highlights anxiety regarding preschool and the *fritidshem* becoming too similar to school in terms of content and character” (Lager, 2015 p. 18). Analyzing the curriculum, the commentary material, matrix and pedagogical plan through the lens of policy enactment theory, the tendency of schoolification emerged. Explicit attention to subject areas in the curriculum and school-oriented explanations were visible. Aims of the *fritidshem* curriculum states that: “The education of the *fritidshem* complements pre-school class and school in the implementation and fulfilment of the curriculum goals” (Skolverket, 2016b p. 5). Schoolification is prominent in mathematics, in comparison to, for example, art or physical training, because of the entrenched discourses of mathematics as a core school subject and its high status in society. As the *fritidshem* teacher said: mathematics “is so extremely much school!”. The tendency of schoolification appeared even more clearly in the analysis of the teachers’ practices, as we will see below.

## **TENSIONS IN FRITIDSHEM PRACTICE**

Two main tensions became evident in how teachers give meaning to *fritidshem* in the interviews within a tendency to schoolification, one in the relation to school norms and one in relation to mathematics.

### **School norms**

We have moved into an incredibly strong culture and that is school. It has been difficult, and it is still difficult for many *fritidshem* to claim and show the aim of their practice. We will adjust even though the year is 2017, 2018 is coming, and it has to be on the table much more, much further up in the hierarchy all the way up to the National Agency of Education and politics. (Interview with fritidshem-teacher, 20171215)

This statement, exemplifies the tension between *fritidshem* and school. The *fritidshem* was positioned as in need of development to gain recognition in the educational system. Evaluation as a way to improve activities was in focus in what teachers said. At the same time, the opportunities for interpreting, appropriating and evaluating the curriculum were perceived as limited: “The control has become larger and clearer through the steering document, but unfortunately work conditions have deteriorated”, said a teacher. Despite this, all the interviewed practitioners viewed the formulation of the curriculum in a positive way, since it may give them access to further qualifications and thus the possibility of improving the status of their profession in the education system. The commentary material supplied to the curriculum was perceived as more useful, containing nuances and suggestions more adaptable to the practice of *fritidshem*.

New uses of materials such as the matrix and pedagogical planning were produced as part of the enactment process. In one of the *fritidshem* it became particularly evident how the use of these artefacts generated tensions between *fritidshem* and the school norms. The headmaster expected teachers, directed to *fritidshem*, to do the pedagogical planning of their activities. However, “that is not going so well”, expressed the teachers. This tension became evident in the “production of visual materials” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 121), as mentioned before. “We have this matrix, it’s good to have something to check at; you need a map so you know where to go... But if we are going to measure, like the school, then it will be the wrong way for me”. Anxiety regarding the school norms, measuring like the school and what to do with the policy document were in focus. A teacher explained clearly that the new curriculum “needs to develop, but not becoming schoolified, absolutely not”. “I am afraid... hum... it will become school, because we have to start from the school norms”. One teacher had read some previous proposals of curriculum directed to the *fritidshem*, and the teacher described the present one as “less schoolified than the original proposal”. The concept of schoolification was mentioned and discussed in almost all interviews. The voices were varied. Some questioned “why is the school the one to decide”, while others expressed that the school and the *fritidshem* have become closer during the history, “the school is not either the same as 20 years ago”. Some teachers even opposed the notion: “I don’t like that word, schoolification... we are here for the children, to teach them...”. Issues regarding what will happen to the students’ “free time” and the student’s own ideas if the discourse of *fritidshem* will attune to school were highlighted.

## **Mathematics**

Artefacts and contexts were discussed in the interviews when talking about the meaning of *fritidshem* mathematics. Important ideas were using concepts, encouraging students to play games, and participating and developing in activities. All the *fritidshem* teachers, staff and headmaster framed the role of the material aspects in relation to the mathematical areas in the curriculum and the importance of involvement of students and their interests: “We never use the math books”, “We never say, now we will work

with math, so now should we play this game”. All of the interviewed practitioners emphasized the role of students’ interests and the importance of meaningful activities in the practice of *fritidshem*. Situated and informal teaching were in focus, to engage the student in activities and “to make them curious”. The headmaster clarified that the purpose of *fritidshem* is to put the students, their needs and interest in the foreground. Concerns were framed about the way the curriculum separated the discourse of *fritidshem* into subject areas. The description of *fritidshem* as a space where students “have the opportunity to make subjects fit together” was at stake. One teacher clarified that the subject-divided-discourse was not suitable for the practice of *fritidshem*: “there is a risk that practitioners will make a check-list out of it, to make it look like school”. The same teacher problematized “if we want, we can see math in everything, but we should not limit ourselves to destroy baking with math”. The teacher also framed that the educators positions the role of mathematics as if it is something merely good: “Why should we always talk about baking and mathematics... running in the corridor is also mathematics”. The concern of directing the children’s attention explicitly to the mathematics was to be questioned: “It will become some kind of moral mathematics”. Mathematics was described as a well-known area in discussions, activities and games. The role of mathematics in the discourse of *fritidshem* was framed in a positive way under the circumstances that the mathematics had come out of the student’s interests, emerged out of the situated activity and not appeared as the subject area of mathematics in school. The tension of, to which extent mathematics should become visible was evident and got expressed in the relationships between teachers and students. A teacher was telling an episode to make the point: “the students were playing with clay and thought it was very exciting. Then a teacher came and said ‘it’s actually math we’re dealing with’. Then everyone dropped it and left, because the math is so tensional”. The discussions about mathematics also concern the change in the *fritidshem* teachers’ profession: “We need to be conscious about what we already do, to get the focus in the curriculum and to become stronger as profession”. The fact that mathematics is introduced in the curriculum of *fritidshem* is a historical event, which needs to be enacted and discussed in practice.

## **STUDENT OR TEACHER-DRIVEN ACTIVITIES?**

Here we go closer to the enactment of *fritidshem* teachers and staff in doing *fritidshem* mathematics. To analyse the role of contexts, interactions and to investigate how student and teachers were using artefacts in practice, the material, interpretative and discursive aspects of policy enactment were used. The observations in the two *fritidshem* were limited to investigate the activities: “Sara’s Café” and “Our city”. Students, school teacher, *fritidshem* teachers and staff were active in interactions and in activities. Two mathematical discourses appeared when the observations were analyzed through the aspects. In the 11 observations, five situations are analysed as mathematical, out of the interpretations and material aspects. The discourses that emerged out of the analysis were articulated through the contexts, positions, interpretations and actions in the situations. It was possible to distinguish two



directions, one in which the student's mathematical interest was the core of the activity: *the student-driven discourse*, and one where the teachers' focus and direction led the mathematical activity: *the teacher-driven initiative*. Three of the mathematical situations were analysed as student-driven and two as driven by the teacher's initiative.

In the student-driven discourse, students are positioned as interested and in charge of the activity where problems that are tackled with mathematical tools emerge. The students advanced the mathematical perspective in interactions and in activities. For example, in the recurrent activity "Sara's Café", a society emerged. Offices, a bank, a veterinary and Sara's Café were arranged by the students. The students interacted and played. The teacher played a role as Sara and acted in the background of the activity, staging and problematizing situations. The mathematical actions and dialogues came out of the student's imaginations. The students took responsibility of the situated activity.

In the teacher's driven discourse, the teacher had a prominent role in processes, communications and actions. The school teachers and *fritidshem* staff were steered the activity and the students were following. The discourse emerged in the activity "Our city" where the *fritidshem* and the school were cooperating. The students received instructions on how to create a map to afterwards build a city based on it, with the intention of programming robots to navigate it. The students interacted mainly with the teacher and answered questions coming from the teacher. The students were active when they were prompted to do so, like measuring, when the teacher held the ruler.

## CONCLUSIONS

The importance of strengthening the profession of the practice of *fritidshem* was evident in the results. *Fritidshem* has been neglected for a long time (Rohlin, 2013). However, the results indicate that participants stand fast in their way to frame subjects in their practice. They continue to emphasize their perspective centred on activity. In that sense, artefacts such as the matrix and the pedagogic planning were used in other manners than in school. *Fritidshem* practitioners value the specific role of *fritidshem*. They are aware of the importance of their work to foreground and prioritize the beauty of an activity-based educational space through play and games. The tensions regarding school norms and mathematics intertwine with the teachers' desire of professional recognition. Is it at all possible for *fritidshem* to be accepted in the educational field when valuing a creative and informal discourse derived out of the student's interests? Will that kind of discourse be perceived as effective and useful for society? The tendency towards schoolification in *fritidshem* is the result of the school setting the norm, and of the increasing desire of regulating people's lives effectively through for instance policy document. In the cases studied, when the school and the *fritidshem* were in co-operation, the logic of school took a major part. The mathematics came out of the school teachers' ideas and a more schoolified discourse appeared, a *teacher-driven initiative*. Questions and the interaction was more targeted to the content. The strong logic of school mathematics and the absence of a consolidated *fritidshem* mathematical discourse made it possible for a teacher-driven discourse to control the situation. The

results also show that it is possible to articulate a discourse that stands in contrast to the teacher-driven initiative. In a *student-driven discourse*, the teachers of *fritidshem* are professionals who find ways and situations to engage the students in informal mathematical activities, departing from student's interests and needs. In this discourse the school norms were not present. When the student's interest involves mathematics and if the situation invites to problem solving with tools from mathematics, then the activities become rich situations for mathematical activity. In the student-driven discourse, mathematical interactions were evident in spontaneous and playful activities, derived from the students' interest. The teacher staged the game but did not steer the mathematics interactions or actions, the students did. The problem solving mathematical activity became a part of the game and the problem needed to be solved for the play to continue.

The enactment of the curriculum is a tension loaded territory. On the one hand, the new curriculum seems to be important to *fritidshem* teachers for obtaining more legitimacy and recognition in their practice. However, the results indicate that the direction in which *fritidshem* mathematics might be developed is a fragile field of tension between an informal, activity based and student-driven mathematics, and more teacher-driven, formalized and schoolified type of mathematics. In the midst of the tensions, practitioners express a strong desire to discuss the curriculum in forums, to support each other, and to generate situations with opportunities for mathematical activities adapted for the practice of *fritidshem*. Since mathematics is such a loaded area of the school curriculum, the entrance of the area in the *fritidshem* curriculum makes it even more important to discuss. "Math is so tensional". It is political and therefore mathematical aspects in the curriculum need to be enacted and interpreted among different networks, chains and actors. It is evident that the new curriculum document is nothing in itself. A curriculum needs people, teachers and students to survive: "Enactments are collective and collaborative, but not just simply in the warm fuzzy sense of teamwork..." (Ball et al., 2012, p. 3). This case study shows how policy enactment tools allow us researchers to engage in the meanings of *fritidshem* mathematics articulated in practice out of a policy enactment process. Through the aspects of policy enactment theory, we could grasp a mathematical discourse that was adapted to this new area for mathematics education in Sweden, the practice of *fritidshem*. A discourse, where the mathematics came out of the student's interests as an instrument to maintain a free space for playing, far away from society's desire of effectiveness and a forced learning capacity.

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