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# Plans for Altering Work: Fitting Kids into Car-Management Documents in a Swedish Preschool

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**Abstract:** The focus of this article is Lean management action-plan documents and the type of knowledge and values they project when used in Swedish public preschools. The Lean model, also called the Toyota model, originated in the car industry. Two key features of the model were eliminating waste and ensuring that there was a system for continuous improvements in the work processes to render them as efficient as possible. The article explores the absurdities of transplanting a scientific management model and planning from the car industry to preschool, where rigid planning is not conducive to flexibility or the urgent meeting of human needs.

**Keywords:** documentation, actorhood, organisation, action-plans, lean management model, preschool

**Résumé :** Cet article concerne les documents de plans d'action du modèle de gestion Lean Management et les types de valeurs et de savoirs qu'ils projettent quand ils sont utilisés dans les établissements préscolaires publics suédois. Lean, aussi connu sous le nom du modèle Toyota, provient de l'industrie automobile. Deux particularités de ce modèle sont l'élimination des déchets et la mise en place d'un système d'amélioration continue des processus afin d'en assurer l'efficacité. Cet article explore les absurdités dues au transfert d'un modèle de gestion et de planification scientifiques propre à l'industrie automobile au système préscolaire où la planification rigide ignore la flexibilité et ne répond pas aux besoins parfois urgents des personnes.

**Mots-clés :** documentation, agencité, organisation, plans d'action, modèle de gestion Lean, établissements préscolaires

The action plan is your security blanket. It's the one you can lean on if you become responsible for taking action. And you can also display it so it's visible what needs to be done and who's responsible. And it doesn't matter if it's not completely clear. Then people will have to ask.

These were the words of Karen, one of the consultants who led the coach-training course in which I participated with some 20 other participants: administrators, social workers, home-help workers, elderly care workers and preschool teachers. They had all expressed an interest in being part of a Swedish municipality's investment in using the Lean management model (Lean) to help turn the municipality into a Lean organisation. That day we were being taught how to use one of the Lean tools: the action-plan document.

Lean, also called the Toyota model, originated in the car industry. It was developed by Taiichi Ohno, Shigeo Shingo and Eiji Toyoda and evolved between the 1940s and 1970s. The model was picked up by Jim Womack, Daniel Jones and Daniel Roos in the United States, who became experts on Lean management, popularising it in their international best-selling book, *The Machine That Changed the World* (1990). Two key features of the model were eliminating waste that add nothing to the value of a vehicle and ensuring that there was a system for continuously detecting defects in the work processes to render them as efficient as possible (Womack et al. 1990, 99). To achieve these two goals, the employees met in so-called continuous improvement groups and used Lean tools such as value-stream mappings<sup>1</sup> to identify the processes and methods that were time wasters on the assembly line. The value-stream mappings were used to identify bottlenecks, for which the employees in the improvement group then wrote action plans for elimination. In the Lean coach-training course, we were taught how to use these techniques in the public-care sector, with particular focus on the use of the Lean action-plan document in Swedish public preschools. What makes this case particularly interesting is the fact

that it has to do with children. What can a management model from the car industry do for children?

This article demonstrates some of the problems inherent in trying to transplant scientific management and planning into settings like preschools, where rigid planning is not conducive to flexibility or the urgent meeting of human needs. It explores the absurdities of transplanting a model from the car industry to preschool and illustrates how this model came to be seen as a good idea for preschools. Particular focus is placed on the way formatted action-plan documents produce specific types of knowledge and values, the action that can be taken, how that action should be performed, and how the action-plan document sets the frame for possible action.

The modern organisation and the management models used to govern and manage it are built around a particular view of action and agency: not the older meaning of agency in organisations, by which bureaucrats followed instructions through a chain of command, but an agency that takes responsibility and takes charge toward a specified goal (Bromley and Meyer 2015). It is the kind of action that is built on means–ends relationships, in which purposeful action is assumed and individuals and organisations are expected to reach goals and to act toward anticipated futures. And writing action plans is one way of making purposeful, anticipatory action in the modern organisation. In fact, Bromley and Meyer (2015, 141) concur that having goals and plans is a key indicator that an entity has become a modern organisation. Thus, the action-plan document is a typical feature of the modern organisation.

The action-plan document is not unique to Lean, but appears in models for organising work in many different organisations. Whether one is studying policy-making in the European Union (Thevall 2006, 2012) or Swedish public preschools (Thevall 2015), action-plan documents are used to manage a particular kind of desired action with hopes of transforming the future by fulfilling goals. In this way, the action-plan document is part of a general trend of managing organisations with the help of generalised management knowledge and management models with universalistic claims. As Bromley and Meyer (2015) have noted, one can study the structure of the modern organisation without learning much about the type of work conducted in that organisation. Statistical reports, performance evaluations, outcome assessments and action plans (Bromley and Meyer 2015) saturate most organisations, whether a car factory or a preschool. This development of separating what is seen as management and governance of the organisation from the actual work conducted by the organisation has laid

the groundwork for introducing management models from the car industry into preschools.

In recent decades, the Swedish public sector has also become a laboratory for various private-sector management techniques and for the expansion of knowledge particular to management models (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall 2002). This trend is not unique to Sweden. Models such as Lean have moved through industry and spread like wildfire in public sectors in Sweden and other countries. The health care services were the first adopters of Lean, and this model has made its way into health care systems in Canada (Fine et al. 2009), Senegal (Kanamori et al. 2015), the UK (Proudlove et al. 2008) and Brazil (Tortorella et al. 2017), as well as Sweden (Hall 2008). Lean has moved into such diverse public-sector organisations as Canadian social services (Baines et al. 2014), Spanish local government (Suárez-Barraza et al. 2009) and Mexican public services (Suárez-Barraza and Ramis-Pujol 2010). This development is part of a corporatisation of the public sector, often referred to as “new public management.” The focus in this article is on the corporatisation of public preschools.

Ethnographically, I investigated how preschool staff in Swedish public preschools acted to fit the “improvements” (to use Lean-speak) in the organisation of their work into the action-plan documents developed by Lean. Because the Lean model is based on particular values emphasising efficiency in work processes in the name of the customer, staff members needed to find ways to fit their work activities into the labels and tools of the model. They needed to find a work process that could be understood as a flow, equivalent to an assembly line, or a work process in which children and parents could be conceptualised as customers. They did manage to fashion flows by viewing the activities taking place in the morning in the preschool yard, for example, as a flow with certain activities that needed to be in place at certain times moving along the “assembly line.” These activities are, in fact, the focus of this paper.

This research was part of a larger project<sup>2</sup> based on my participant observation in two fields: preschools and Lean meetings. During the autumn of 2013, I served as a full-time staff member – though the preschool teachers and parents were aware I was there as a researcher – in two preschools over a period of six weeks (four weeks in one preschool and two in another – approximately 240 hours of fieldwork). In the preschools, I cared for the children, I played with the children, I talked to the children, I stopped fights and arguments, and I laughed with them. I also took part in the teaching, assisting the teachers when doing pedagogical projects with the

children, and attempted to mimic the preschool teachers' and childcare assistants' way of weaving the pedagogical into the everyday, more or less successfully. The participant observation as a member of staff gave me a deeper understanding of the work practices, the jargon and the organisation of the preschool, but it was in the Lean meetings as well as other types of preschool meetings, such as the weekly meetings and the monthly workplace meetings, that the organisation of work in the preschool was discussed and negotiated. And since I was interested in discussions and negotiations around the planning and organisation process of preschool activities, the meetings were where I needed to be. Furthermore, it was in the Lean meetings that the discussions about how to become a Lean, effective organisation were formulated with the help of the Lean tools.

Between February 2012 and March 2014, I undertook approximately 70 hours of "meeting ethnography" (Sandler and Thedvall 2017) in a Swedish municipality, attending meetings pertaining to Lean. I have referred elsewhere to this type of meeting fieldwork as to "punctuate entries" (Thedvall 2013) – entries into different meetings in the municipality to understand communication, discussions, negotiations and decisions made around and about Lean. The Lean coach-training course, from which Karen was quoted at the beginning of this article, was a good place to start fieldwork because it allowed me to learn about the model and how it was to be transferred into the municipality. It made me aware of the Lean's "continuous improvement" group meetings as a good way to learn how the model was meant to work and the efforts the preschool teachers made when trying to use the model in their daily work activities. When I was doing meeting ethnography in meetings, I often took the role of the observer – except for the Lean coach-training course, in which I participated. When I was doing participant observation as a staff member in preschools, I participated in various Lean activities, but I also took part in other organisational activities, such as planning meetings and teachers' meetings. And when I entered these meetings and processes of organising preschool work, I inevitably came across documents. The action plans were one of the efforts documented.

### **Corporatising Swedish Preschools: Markets and Management Models**

Sweden is often associated with a strong state, strong unions, full employment, high social insurance entitlement levels, strong social services. and the public funding of hospitals, education and the care of the elderly. Social-democratic ambitions were historically articulated in the "Swedish model," in which social security was

seen as a precondition for economic development. Swedish society's acceptance of economic change – people forced to move to find work or to re-educate themselves when jobs disappeared – was thought to be based on employees' perceptions of enjoying some degree of social security. Childcare provided by the state was part of an endeavour for full employment and high levels of social services.

In recent years, the perception of childcare has changed from one of caregiving to one of caregiving with education. The first Curriculum for the Preschools was established in 1998. In 2010, the Education Act (SFS 2010, 800) was changed to place even greater emphasis on the pedagogical and educational mission of preschools. The act also stipulated that municipalities must offer preschool free of charge to children beginning at the age of three for 3 hours a day or 15 hours a week (525 hours a year). For children who spent more than three hours a day in preschool, as most children did, parents were assessed a fee for the remaining hours, up to a maximum tariff. This development signalled a view of preschools as schools, as places of education, which should be open to all children from the age of three. This perception was further emphasised by the Reggio-Emilia pedagogical philosophy, by which many, if not most, public preschools in Sweden were inspired. Reggio-Emilia highlighted the fact that children are in a constant state of learning, for which preschools should offer a searching, project-planning practice with experiments, interpretation and reflection; group learning is considered the highest form of individual learning (compare with Wurm 2005). Reggio-Emilia underscored the importance of taking advantage of children's will to create and examine in relation to the preschool environment (Wurm 2005).

The Swedish welfare state has not been immune to neoliberal politics and global market ideals. There have been changes over the past few decades. Full employment no longer appears to be a political goal, and mass unemployment has become a reality. Social insurance entitlement levels and services have been reduced and subjected to increasing sanctions. Market-based solutions have influenced Sweden's welfare-state politics and have gained a stronghold as an organising principle and ideal model for social life. The very meaning of social security has shifted towards a makeshift ideology (Garsten, Lindvert, and Thedvall 2015). Still, taxpayers fund social welfare systems, including preschools, even though the organisational landscape has changed – especially with the introduction of the child voucher in 1992. In the current system, each child holds a virtual tax-financed voucher that can be used at the public or

private preschool of the parents' choice. This approach has spawned several private initiatives providing child-care, from personnel-run cooperatives to large private corporations. It is a "free choice" preschool "market" that retains one of the recognisable features of the Swedish model: state subsidies. This article reports a study of municipally run preschools.

The idea of market-based solutions and free choice goes hand in hand with another trend that may make the idea of introducing Lean in Swedish public preschools more understandable. Even as market logic works as a guiding principle for welfare-state politics, it is also permeated by bureaucratic logic, whereby work practices should be as efficient as possible and tasks and people in the labour market are classified and their performance made measurable; this is understood by scholars as the bureaucratic heart of neoliberalism (Power 1997; Rose and Miller 1992; Shore and Wright 2000). A useful concept pertaining to these processes is the notion of management bureaucracy (Hall 2008), which Hall describes as a way of capturing the market and client ideals with the advancement of the audit society (Power 1997) and increased bureaucratisation.

In audit cultures (Shore and Wright 2000; Strathern 2000; Shore and Wright 2015), the organising of work practices in public organisations has been dominated by new public management (NPM) (Hood 1991; Sahlin-Andersson 2001; Shore and Wright 2000), Lean is one management model within new public management. Public organisations have also come to be seen as organisations in need of a management model that will render their human-interaction-based public services more efficient (Strang and Meyer 1994; Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 2000). The idea of using a management model from the car industry in preschools can be viewed in the light of these trends, and also in light of the model appearing to be transferable. It has a certain quality that makes it appear borderless and "uncultured," usable anywhere and everywhere (Røvik 2002). Management models are based on the idea that organisational structure can and should be abstracted from organisational work. A management model such as Lean can be understood using Latour's notion of the immutable mobile – a form that includes particular ideas, language, technologies and actors (actants) that can be abstracted and transported to serve the same purpose in another domain (Latour 1987, 236–237). In this sense, a management model is stabilised, and that stabilisation affects what it can do in the world. It is the stabilised form of the model that sets the focus on certain ideas, values and practices rather than others, a form in which adherents to the Lean model attempt to turn childcare into an assembly

line, with a positive focus on efficiency and a negative focus on deviations and waste.

Lean management is one of several policies and tools adopted by Swedish municipalities to govern and manage preschools. However, municipalities have a high degree of independence, so the choice to use Lean was not made by all the Swedish municipalities. What they could not choose was to refuse so-called systematic quality work. According to chapter 4 of School Law (SFS 2010), schools must perform systematic quality work, and because management models such as Lean promise continuous improvement, it made sense for them to adopt Lean. Some other municipalities used result-based management to manage the public welfare services, including preschools. In the municipality of interest in this article, management had developed a way of organising the Lean reform by employing a so-called development strategist to initiate and establish the reform over five years. She was in charge of organising the Lean work by ensuring that management and employees learned about Lean and its uses and by supporting the heads of units when making decisions about the need for applying a Lean tool and which tool would be helpful in making the necessary improvements. The development strategist's key task was to ensure that there were enough so-called Lean coaches in the organisation. If a head of a unit experienced a problem that the development strategist and head of unit agreed could be solved by a Lean tool, then Lean coaches, often in pairs, were sent to the unit to work with a group of unit employees in "improvement groups" to solve the problem. These Lean coaches had been educated by consultants and were set to turn the whole municipality Lean, including social services, elder care, home help and the focus of this article: preschools.

## Document/ation When Planning for Action

In a conference room in the preschool building, four preschool teachers working at the preschool I studied, two Lean coaches and two future Lean coaches met in a Lean "improvement group" meeting to do value-stream mapping of the preschool yard. The two future Lean coaches were also referred to as "shadows," because they were job-shadowing the Lean coaches to learn what it meant to be a Lean coach. There was an understood need to create several pedagogical play areas with clear activities, including a sand play area, a reading play area, a building play area and a painting play area. These play areas allowed parents to leave their children engaged in an activity rather than leaving them with a teacher. Although they had continually tried to arrange

this option, there had been a tendency among some of the teachers to gather in the yard talking with each other rather than playing and interacting with the children. Now, the preschool teachers, Amanda, Erica, Magda and Elsie, hoped that the plans they had worked on the day before would be realised once and for all. They had spent the previous day value-stream mapping. They used green, yellow and red Post-it Notes, modelled on traffic lights and representing good, in between and bad, respectively. The teachers' goal was to determine the flow of the morning and to find bottlenecks. Thus the colours green, yellow and red were valuable Lean tools for value-stream mappings and for evaluating adherence to the action plan. Red Post-it Notes denoted identified bottlenecks (bad), green stood for identified solutions (good), and yellow signified the flow units of an imaginary assembly line (in between).

The Lean ideology was built around a system for evaluating action plans every 30 days over a 90-day period. On three occasions, the group that had performed the value-stream mapping examined the action that had been taken in relation to the action plan. The monitoring-activities document for evaluation used green to indicate that an action had been completed, red that it had not, and yellow that it was on its way. I went to several of these monitoring-activities meetings used to evaluate action in relation to the plan, and more often than not they showed that the planned action turned out to be more complicated than expected or that it was not what they needed. Still, the monitoring-activities document introduced an ideal: the ultimate goal was green for completed, which heightened the pertinence of the content of the action-plan documents.

After some struggle with the Post-it Notes in finding a flow and flow units, the teachers identified lack of equipment in the yard; lack of distinct activities in the yard; teachers who did not appear to exhibit curiosity; staff members' lack of knowledge about the curriculum; no clear connection between outside activities and the teachers' mission as determined by the preschool curriculum; and several teachers dressed inappropriately and having to waste time going inside to change.

Preschool teachers in Sweden have a minimum of a bachelor's degree in early childhood education. The rest of the staff comprised childcare assistants and "unqualified" staff. Childcare assistants have a diploma in childcare from a senior high school, and the "unqualified" have neither of those, although they may be high school or university graduates in another field. Because Amanda, Erica, Magda and Elsie were university-graduated preschool teachers, they considered themselves to have greater responsibility for a pedagogical

and caring preschool than the other workers – a belief supported by the curriculum (Skolverket 2010). They were enthusiastic about the possible accomplishments of Lean. Although they had to struggle to fit their activities into the Lean model, they did not reflect on the possible problems with the model. Rather, they were hopeful that their plans would turn into action that generated functioning pedagogical play areas and engaged preschool teachers. Some of the problems – the bottlenecks – they had already found solutions for: clarifying that teachers needed to have the right clothes when they arrived in the yard, for instance. Some of the problems required written action plans.

Amanda examined the action plan – a grid-shaped flat chart with spaces for filling in activities and the actors responsible for those activities. Riles (2006, 20) has noted that the gaps in such forms contain "within themselves all the terms for analysis one would need to understand or complete them." The writer may not understand exactly what is needed, but the form – what Riles calls a "self-contextualized entity" – provides answers. The size of the gaps in the form provides information about the expected amount of text needed to explain what the writer should explain. The headings point to issues that must be taken into account and in doing so delimit the action that can be taken. Lean action-plan document layouts may look different, depending on how much effort has been put into the design. Some of them are more elaborate, with colours and company logos, whereas others, like the one pictured here, have more of a homemade look. But they all include the goals to be achieved, who is responsible for those goals, and the timeline, evaluation and follow-up of the plan. In this way, they play into the ideal of the modern organisation, which is expected to act to reach goals and to act toward anticipated futures (Bromley and Meyer 2015).

Don Brenneis (2006) speaks about the centrality of visual imagery in documents. The action plan documents include measurable goals so that results can be controlled and the responsible actors can be held accountable, and the action and the responsible actors are visibly written into the columns. The format of the action plan document determines the need to evaluate and follow up. It also anticipates the completion of the monitoring forms, assuming that action had been taken as planned. The action-plan and monitoring documents put goal setting, monitoring, evaluation and accountability centre stage.

In other words, the "graphic organisation" (Hull 2012) of the action-plan document places objectives, measurements and evaluations in focus. It is action that can be

Förbättringsområde \_\_\_\_\_  
 Datum \_\_\_\_\_

## Handlingsplan Aktiviteter

Vad vill vi uppnå? Mål	Hur ser det ut när vi nått målet? Mått & Kriterier för god kvalitet inom aktiviteten	Vad ska vi göra för att uppnå målet?	Tidplan	Hur och när ska vi kontrollera resultatet? Utvärderingsmetod
Vilka genomför aktiviteten & vilka kan vi behöva stöd från?			Vem är aktivitetsansvarig?	
Avstämning 30 dagar		Avstämning 60 dagar		Avstämning 90 dagar

Figure 1: The Action Plan

formulated within an 8 × 5 cm rectangle and that can be correlated with particular problems that are possible to formulate into an objective with measureable results. The “graphic ideology” (Hull 2012) – the ideology of the layout, of the documents – is supported by a “semiotic ideology” (Keane 2003) that equals organisational agency with planning for action through documentation.

The action-plan document given to the preschool teachers was printed on size A4 paper and included the following headings (my translation), from top to bottom and left to right. “What do we want to achieve? *Objective*”; “How will it be when we have reached the objective? *Measure and criteria for good quality within the activity*”; “What do we need to do to achieve the objective?”; “Time-plan”; “How and when will we control the result? *Evaluation method*”; “Who will carry out the activity and who will we need support from?”; “Who is responsible for the activity?”; and, at the bottom, “30-day follow-up,” “60-day follow-up” and “90-day follow-up.” In the Lean model, regular follow-ups made completion of the action-plan document even more important. It was the content of this document that would be monitored and evaluated: Had the preschool teachers successfully completed the plan?

The preschool teachers started with the first heading: “What do we want to achieve? *Objective*.” What

should go in the 8 × 5 cm rectangle headed “*Objective*”? Amanda said:<sup>3</sup>

I read what I wrote: “What do we want to achieve?” I wrote: “Co-learning,<sup>4</sup> curious teachers.” And then I wrote under the heading “How will it be when the objective is reached?” that we have many clear and varied activities for the children when they arrive at the preschool. And the activities should be connected to the curriculum and the “Preschool’s Perspective on Children.”<sup>5</sup> There should also be joy at work and engaged teachers.

Preschool teacher Erica wondered if it wouldn’t be better if they included the word “meaningful” – not just “clear and varied activities.” Magda agreed that a clarification was needed and suggested “explorable.” Amanda rewrote: “Meaningful and explorable.” Erica added that they needed to be able to change activities if the children were not interested. “The children need to be able to decide. Should we write ‘flexible’?” One of the Lean-coach shadows, also a preschool teacher, interrupted to say that even if they followed what the children were doing and changed the activity accordingly, the children would still stay at that particular play area. “Right?” Amanda agreed. Erica stated: “What we have said now, we need to tighten it. Shouldn’t it be roughly three objectives?” She continued: “I have thought about this.

Shouldn't one of the goals also be to make parents and children feel secure at the drop-offs?" Amanda added "secure and fun drop-offs." But Erica also pointed out: "We can't have too many objectives. It becomes too big. It also needs to be measurable. One objective that needs to be included is the curriculum and the 'Preschool's Perspective on Children.' And then secure parents and children. And co-learning teachers."

The Lean-coach shadow said that maybe they should have a separate action plan for the "Preschool's Perspective on Children," the epistemology<sup>6</sup> and the values.<sup>7</sup> The Lean coach, Miriam, agreed: "Yes, because you keep coming back to it all the time." Erica responded: "But then we will have six action plans." They had had clear instructions from the Lean coaches that they wouldn't be able to handle too many action plans, or they would become overwhelmed and end up with no action. The Lean-coach shadow replied that four of the plans were almost the same, referring to the fact that they were planning to have one action plan for what to do on each of the four play areas of the preschool yard. They discussed this issue for a while and decided to create one action plan regarding the "Preschool's Perspective on Children" and one action plan each for the four play areas in the preschool yard.

Amanda continued to hold the pen, writing the action plan, and said: "Okay, should we start writing the action plan for the play areas in the yard? Shall we call it 'play area one'?" Magda, another preschool teacher, nodded. Amanda continued: "Okay, then I write at the top under 'What do we want to achieve? *Objective:* 'Activities connected to the 'Preschool's Perspective on Children,' the curriculum.'" She then continued to write down what they had been talking about. She then asked:

How will it be when we reached the objective? And how will we carry out the activity? We need to discuss this in relation to the action plan regarding the "Preschool's Perspective on Children." They are connected. And how will it be when the objective is reached? It will be good pedagogical activities and a good pedagogical environment.

Erica concurred and said that it was important that they didn't forget the environment, referring to the fact that one of this year's improvement goals for the municipality's public preschools was to improve the pedagogical environment. At the time, the latest fashion in pedagogical thinking was to talk about the equipment, tools, and toys in the environment of preschools as pedagogical agents activating the children, much in the same way as I think of the action-plan documents as forming a certain way of thinking about improvements and action (compare with Latour 1987).

Amanda corrected herself, saying that "good" was such a strange word. She continued: "We want the children to find themselves in fun, playful play and activities." She turned to the others and said: "And what we want to achieve is engaged teachers who feel 'joy at work.' Isn't it?" Erica reminded them again that there should not be too many objectives: "Engaged preschool teachers is one objective," she said. She continued: "And then that the children have meaningful activities. And then secure and fun drop-offs." Magda said that she didn't like the word "secure" because it made her think of children sitting in teachers' laps. Elsie, another preschool teacher, said that maybe they could write "positive" instead. Amanda asked: "And to reach it, we need to have engaged teachers?" Magda responded that to reach it they had to have "engaged" and "co-learning teachers." They started to discuss what should go in which column. The group looked at the headings "How it will be when the goal is reached?" and "What do we want to achieve?" Should some of what they suggested to be in the former column be in the latter column instead? What should go under the former heading and what should go under the latter? In many ways, it could be the same thing in both columns. They struggled to make sense of what should go in which column. Magda concluded that the "objective" must be to have "co-learning and engaged teachers" and that "how it will be when the objective is reached" will be fun and positive drop-offs.

Amanda asked: "Okay, should we start with the other? If this is called 'Preschool Yard, Play Areas,' then perhaps the other one could be called 'Teacher's Values.'" Magda added: "And epistemology." Erica continued: "And we also have to include the pedagogical environment, but it doesn't have to be called that." Amanda added: "The pedagogical mission in relation to the pedagogical environment." Erica said: "What do we want to achieve? *Objective.* Well, we will have co-learning, curious teachers." Magda added "engaged." Amanda added "reflecting." They were back talking about co-learning, curious, engaged teachers. They discussed the next column in the document, "How will it be when the objective is achieved?" and finally agreed that they should put in this column what they had put in the first column, "What do we want to achieve?" They returned to that column, and Magda said that they wanted to achieve the goal of all teachers using and living by the policy documents.<sup>8</sup> Amanda added that the documents should be "alive in the organisation." Erica held the pen this time and said: "Good, I'll write: 'The policy documents are visible and alive in the organisation and in our pedagogical environment.'" Erica turned back to the objective: "How it will be when the objective is reached will be co-learning, engaged, reflecting teachers."

Magda said that she wanted to include something regarding “pedagogical documentation.” Elsie pointed out that they could put it in the evaluation column: “It’s in the pedagogical documentations that we will be able to see if the policy documents are visible and alive in the organisation.” Erica was not convinced that they would be able to evaluate whether the teachers were more engaged, co-learning or reflecting by looking at the pedagogical documentation. Magda thought that perhaps it would be possible to evaluate whether the teachers had more energy. Amanda tried to think of another solution: “Perhaps we can evaluate if it has become clearer that children choose and are engaged in many different sorts of activities.” Erica realised they needed to evaluate the status of the objective: “The policy documents are visible and alive in the organisation and in our pedagogical environment.” Erica said: “We need to look at the other column first, ‘What do we need to do to achieve the objective?’ before we can decide how to evaluate.” Erica continued and wrote: “We need to read and discuss the policy documents.” Then they turned back to the evaluation column: “How and when will we control the result? *Evaluation method.*” After some discussion, they decided that it may be possible to detect how to evaluate in the pedagogical documentation – and that the evaluations would need to be performed continuously.

The preschool teachers struggled to fit the alterations of their work practices into the action-plan document. The action that could be taken was formed by the graphic ideology (Hull 2012) of the document and even crammed into the form. The teachers tried to make sense of the differences between “What do we want to achieve? *Objective*” and “How will it be when we have reached the objective? *Measure and criteria for good quality within the activity.*” They finally ended up with “having curious enough teachers that are engaged and co-learning” (Action Plan 2) in the former column and “positive and fun drop-offs” (Action Plan 1) in the latter. The objective of the whole exercise then became to make sure the policy documents were visible and alive in the preschool. It then became easier to find a solution for the next column: “What do we need to do to achieve the objective?” They decided to read and discuss the preschool’s policy documents (Action Plan 2) and to ensure that the activities in the preschool yard were connected to the policy documents by discussing and writing an activity guide (Action Plan 1).

The correlation between the “objective” of having teachers embody the policy documents and “how will it be when we have reached the objective” of having curious

teachers and fun drop-offs was not clear-cut, though the latter objective was what the preschool teachers really wanted. There could have been action taken to secure curious teachers and fun drop-offs, but the action-plan documents steered the teachers toward finding an objective that had to have a solution, which was possible to evaluate according to the Lean model. The regular follow-ups made completion of the action-plan document central. The follow-ups would monitor and evaluate whether the preschool teachers had successfully completed the plan. In other words, the completion of goal-oriented and evaluative action plans took front seat, and the content of the plan was secondary.

### **Conclusion: Agency of Organisations by Documentation**

The focus of this article has been Lean action-plan documents and the type of knowledge and values they project. The act of adapting onto the graphic ideology of the action-plan document turned the preschool teachers’ focus to goal-oriented and evaluative action, while real-time meeting of children’s needs took a back seat – according to plan.

This type of agency had less to do with the action involved in solving a problem and more to do with the action involved in a group of employees completing a form. The proper completion of the document signalled action taken, and the action-plan documents became evidence of action. As Richard Harper (1998, 32) wrote in his book about the International Monetary Fund, “documents are a means for ensuring post hoc accountability, a means for justifying a decision, a method for creating an appearance of rationality and artefacts that are produced for ritualistic and symbolic purposes.” It was not merely that the writing of action plans became defined as action; the action that could be taken with the help of the Lean action-plan documents failed to speak to either pedagogy or the care of children. And it was not merely that the Lean action-plan documents did not speak to the preschool teachers’ work of caring for children who are happy, angry or sad or of teaching children how to write their names or deal with frustrations. Neither did the Lean action-plan documents speak to the organisation of pedagogical work in general. In fact, they were not meant to. The action-plan documents focused action in a means–end way, encouraging the reading and discussion of policy documents (Action Plan 2) and the writing of other documents, such as activity guides (Action Plan 1). But they had little to contribute to either pedagogy or care. The action-plan documents became the end goal in and of themselves, in the same



way that indicators became the end goal in and of themselves in Sally Engle Merry's study of global indicators for human rights (Merry 2011).

In this way, the Lean action-plan documents separated Lean action from the actual organisation of the preschool work of caring for and educating children, the idea behind management models being that this is possible. According to Lean proponents, mainly management consultants, the organisation of work can be separated from work activities. The model is an immutable mobile, understood to be easily abstracted and transported to another domain – from the car industry to preschool – without complication. The stabilised form of the model sets the focus on certain ideas, values and practices rather than others; the organisation must be adapted to the model, and the preschool teachers have to find a way to fit their activities into the model, rather than the other way around.

For the preschool teachers, the action-plan documents incorporated a future promise that they would be taking action according to plan. They hoped that taking action with the help of the action-plan documents would lead to better organisation of their work and better work practices. The preschool teachers did not have time to analyse and reflect upon the helpfulness of the Lean action-plan documents for what they wanted to achieve. They had other work to focus on. They were given an instrument, which they tried to use to the best of their abilities, hoping that it would contribute to a preschool they envisioned. While they were completing the columns, they were creating a sense of stability and discipline and enabling the continuance of the means–ends ideal of the modern organisation, in which purposeful action is taken for granted and individuals and organisations are expected to act to reach goals, and where the writing of an action plan is considered action.

With the Lean model treating preschools like any other organisation in need of management knowledge, the core of preschool work, caring for and teaching children, was clouded by car-management documents in the form of action plans. In fact, the action-plan documents themselves can be seen in Lean terms as bottlenecks in their focus on efficiency, goals and means–end action rather than on pedagogy and care.

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## Notes

- 1 To do a value-stream mapping is to identify flow units and cycle time in the production processes on an assembly line – imaginary or real – to detect and eliminate bottle-

necks. Flow units are the stations on the assembly line, and the cycle time is the time between the stations.

- 2 This research is part of the project “Managing Preschool the Lean way: An Industrial Management Model Enters Childcare,” funded by the Swedish Research Council. I am grateful to the funding agencies for their generous support.
- 3 Although I have few direct quotations from these meetings, I have written “Amanda said” (for example) and then continued as if it were a direct quote. I am confident that I have correctly written and understood the meaning of the statements.
- 4 In Swedish: *medförskande*.
- 5 In Swedish: *Förskolans barnsyn*.
- 6 In Swedish: *Kunskapssyn*. In the Lean management model, this concept is more policy oriented than epistemology necessarily needs to be.
- 7 In Swedish: *Värdegrund*, also a popular policy concept.
- 8 Referring to the preschool curriculum and the “Preschool’s Perspective on Children.”

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