

Understanding the Phenomenon of the Learning Environment in Early Childhood Education

- *A phenomenological research study of the coherence between children's possibilities to participate in learning processes and the pedagogical establishing of a learning environment*

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UCC is one of seven university colleges in Denmark. UCC is a self-governing educational institution under the jurisdiction of the Danish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Higher Education. The department of Research and development at UCC is a cross-disciplinary research program with four research programs. This research study is a part of the program "Didactics and Learning Environment". The department started up in December 2012.

UCC has several locations in the Copenhagen area.

Paper introduction

This paper is the first attempt at giving a status on the newly started research project. Since our paper submission, some aspects of the research methodology have changed and a larger number of preschool¹ classes are now participating in the project than previously mentioned.

Our research project is financed by UCC and is as mentioned before a part of the Research departments goals. This means that our time as researchers is financed but our partners, and the preschools have to organize and finance the teacher participation. In September 2013 we started up our pilot project in one preschool. Based on our trial in this preschool we adjusted the research methodology. In February 2014 another two preschools were involved in the project and at the moment, we are negotiating the participation of another two municipalities and some of their preschools. The project period for the moment is; August 2013 until December 2015. We are collaborating with UCN on some of the aspects of this project. This collaborative research is financed by the National Knowledge Center on Children and Youth at Risk <http://www.nubu.dk/>

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¹ The term preschool refers in this paper to the Danish term "Dagtilbud". "Dagtilbud" is a term closely connected to the implementation of the learning curriculum and points to the role as a public welfare offer.

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The context of research

Day-care facilities shall promote children’s learning and development of competencies through experiences, play and educationally planned activities that give children room for contemplation, exploration and experience. (...) All day-care facilities shall prepare a written pedagogical curriculum for children aged 0-2 years and children aged 3 to school age. The pedagogical curriculum shall provide room for play, learning and development of children in day-care facilities. On preparation of the pedagogical curriculum, the composition of the group of children shall be taken into consideration.

(Act on daycare ACT no. 501 of 6 June 2007, extract from the English version)

This summer, The Danish Preschool Pedagogical curriculum will be able to celebrate its 10th Anniversary. And during these ten years, the Danish government and municipalities have steadily increased the demands and focus on early childhood education. Effort, work and finances have been invested in continuing education for

both educated and non-educated staff in order to fulfill the demands made in relation to the act on daycare and the pedagogical curriculum cited earlier. In many ways the law has changed the role of the preschool, and today preschools are considered a part of the Danish educational system (Ny nordisk skole). To shorten a long story of why it became a law and how it changed the preschool discourse, we here want to point out just some of the main issues behind the law. We have observed three main discourses which seems to point to this changed perception, 1) a social policy discourse (children at risk, school dropouts and unemployment), 2) an educational discourse (the curriculum-based agenda, the change from a concept of care to a concept of learning) and 3) finally an economy discourse (the preparation of a knowledge producing generation) (Kornerup 2011).

Historically Danish preschools have been based on a child-centered approach where the focus has been on the child's rights, the right to be a child, the right to play and the staff's ability to take care of the children and give them the possibility to follow their own interests. The political demands, where preschools are obligated to focus on childrens learning and readiness for school is relatively new (from 2004). The scholastic perspective has in Danish Early Childhood Research been criticized a lot from different positions Some researchers fear that the preschools will be too closely connected to the school system resulting in downgrading time to play due to a strong focus on the learning outcome. Though we consider this concern important and part of the research field, we want to take another point of departure for our research. We do start by the fact that preschools are obligated to work with and create learning environments for all children. Therefore, we start by asking how the preschools actually are dealing with the demands of the concept of learning and the learning environment, the curriculum of pedagogical learning and developing early childhood education. We also want to emphasize our interest in the child perspective, so if looking from this perspective, we would like to ask; what is in it for the children?

This research project inscribes itself in the discussion of preschool quality, the Danish strategy of inclusive education and the discussion of a learning perspective focus on early childhood education. We will return to the discussion of quality later in this paper.

This study is part of a bigger study of investigating the learning concept in Danish preschools and the deeper understanding on how preschool-learning environments constitute themselves. This study can be described as a phenomenological study of learning and the learning environment. Our methodological considerations rest on how to extract knowledge from the understanding of learning and creation of the learning environment from the field of practice and how to collaborate in a way, so both we as researchers and the professionals participating in the research can profit from a joint investigation of the field of early childhood learning.

As such, our research questions are;

- According to the Act of Daycare all Preschools are obligated to implement a pedagogical curriculum. In what kind of ways does the focus of learning influence the organization of everyday life?
- How does the pedagogical staff in Danish preschools ascribe to the concept of learning and how is it constituted in the creation of a learning environment?
- What seems to be advancing or inhibiting the process of planning and implementation of the learning environment and how does this affect the children's ability to participate and their achievement of learning potentials?
- How can the use of a reflective and developmental tool (such as ECERS) support and maintain a continuing didactic process and development of early childhood learning environment? In which ways does a developmental and dialogue tool support the didactic reflections?

As it is clear in our research questions, the study is supported by two theoretical pillars. One is deeply rooted in a hermeneutic and phenomenological approach when studying children's learning and the learning environment. The other is rooted in how to support the professionals process of developing a learning environment for all children, and is a turn towards a more educational research related approach. Our study is a two-year study, and will be divided into field studies, analyzing studies and finally resulting in a production of articles, a conference and the development of a supporting dialogue developing tool for professionals.

Later on in this paper, we will discuss our research design in more details. Before going into the design, though, we find it necessary to turn to the discussion of early childhood education quality since it seems to be closely connected to the focus of the educational setting.

Early Childhood Education Quality

Though quality might be difficult to standardize it is never the less a fact to which preschools must pay attention. We find it necessary to emphasize this in relation to a child perspective (Præmling Samuelsson et al. 2011). As mentioned earlier, research shows that high quality can boost aspects in later life, such as school achievement and social adjustment, while low quality early childhood education can have a detrimental effect on children (Siram-Blatchford et al. 2012). According to the latter, it becomes clear that though quality might be an abstract concept, it is a matter of importance, since it is a concept used in discourses of research, daily life and political management. Quality in daily life is something you bodily feel and recognize and closely connected to the discussion of "the good life". Every child knows the feeling of being involved in important matters of their everyday life decisions. As a parents, you know and bodily feel when this preschool is a place where you want to leave behind your child. Politically, quality is a concept inscribed in the welfare discourse and it becomes visible in terms of the evaluation demands in early childhood education.

These demands cause the authorities and pedagogical consultants to set up criteria for how to measure the individual preschool quality

In order to be able to deal with and research the phenomenon of quality, we find it necessary to outline a definition of quality, which we use as our point of departure.

The Swedish researcher Sonja Sheridan, who for many years has been researching early childhood education, defines quality from this interactionist perspective as follows:

(Quality is) A multidimensional educational phenomenon in which interdependent dimensions and aspects constitute an environment that in different ways contributes to children's opportunities for learning and developing in educational settings. These dimensions and aspects are partly constituted of sustainable qualities and partly by dynamic and relative qualities that are inter-subjectively agreed on and subjectively conceived depending on perspective, time, and context. (Sheridan 2009:254)

Time, text and values are no doubt important when one wants to understand and capture the concept of quality, but at the same time research also shows that the core of quality goes behind different national educational strategies, values and goals; the quality core is about the interaction between the teacher and the child.

How a child's time in preschool turns out depends to a large extent on the teacher's attitude and view of children, how they believe children learn, and what knowledge they value as important for a child to learn. High-quality interplay is characterized by teachers who have a pedagogical awareness of how their own values, pedagogical beliefs, theoretical perspectives of learning in relation to their understanding of the task of preschool influence their work with the children. In high quality preschools, the teachers reflected continuously over how these values and pedagogical beliefs were expressed in their different teaching approaches and learning strategies. (Ibid :257)

The EPPE research (Sylva et al.2010) also pointed to another important factor; the staff ratio and the education of the staff.

In this research, quality also refers to the preschools' ability to establish communities where the children are able to participate thrive and have influence. This is important from the children's perspective (Kragh-Muller & Einardottir, 2010, Dencik, Haavind & Langsted, 1995), and also for the children's learning processes. In our research, the children's own play and communities are therefore seen as important for the quality of the learning environment.

Levels of quality

In the Swedish research study on early childhood education (Sheridan, Samuelsson & Johansson 2009) "Barn Tidiga Lärende" three different types of quality were identified:

Low quality; a differentiated and restricted environment characterized by abdication and domination. The teachers are either very restricting or occupied elsewhere than being with the children.

Good quality; a child centered, negotiating environment where the teachers are oriented to children's learning possibilities and interest in learning. The teachers are good at seeing the children as individuals, and at following what the child/children seems to find interesting.

High quality; a learning environment characterized by teachers who at one hand are able to be oriented toward children's interest and activities in learning, and at the other hand are able to draw upon the curriculum themes in their interaction with the children. The teachers are oriented towards learning possibilities and offer a didactic, reflective environment. This type of quality is also characterized through respectful cooperation with the parents in a way where the parents are seen as partners in early childhood development.

Our theoretical perspective of learning

Our theoretical perspective of learning is based on an interactive perspective. It takes its point of departure in the theories of Vygotsky, Bruner, Mead, Blumer and Lave and Wenger, amongst others. Mutual for the theoretical perspectives are, that learning is understood as an active process and that learning processes are based on action and interaction with both the material and social world. Our theoretical approach is in many ways similar and informed by the Swedish research study on early childhood by Sheridan, Samuelsson, Johansson (2009) mentioned earlier, as well as the EPPE research by Sylva et al, 2010. The interactionist perspective is informed by many different theoretical approaches and involves a broad understanding of learning. In Sheridan's ph.d. thesis, titled *Pedagogical Quality in Preschool – an issue of perspectives*. She is referring to Confrey, 1995, she points out the following issues as relevant with regard to learning in an interactive perspective. Because we find these relevant to our approach, we would like to give a short introduction here:

[...] education involves knowledge about interactions with objects and with others, to recognize the importance of children's own actions in solving problems, their engagement with a variety of tools and materials in such activities, the importance of reflection as a method of transforming physical actions into mental operations [...]. Confrey states that the key arena/issue for investigation is how to obtain an appropriate balance between encouraging children's active constructive, recognizing, and legitimizing diversity in their effort and placing such constructive activity within the framework of guidance and encouragement from more experienced others (Sheridan, 2001, s. 52).

Point of methodological departure

Both the British (the EPPE, Early Childhood Matters, study Sylva et al. 2010) and the Swedish research study (Sheridan et al. 2009) makes use of the tool "Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale" (Harms et al. 2005). The ECERS-R (revised edition) is a common and internationally, widely used research tool. In most countries, the scale has been translated and revised in relation to the local national standards within the early childhood educational values and goals. It is a commonly used scale in both Sweden and Norway, both in relation to research and as a professional developmental tool. In Denmark it has been translated and revised by UC Nordjylland (UCN) but is has never been objected to research here.

Why did we choose to include ECERS in our research study (in the first place²)?

The scale offers a way to divvy the learning environments in to smaller parts more easily observed. As mentioned earlier in our paper, the learning environment is a complex phenomenon to capture. In order to structure our study, we chose to make use of this scaling tool³, which is already internationally accepted in early childhood education research. However, most of all, we were inspired by how it in the Swedish research study was used as a reflective tool for the professionals. In the study, both researchers and practitioners were involved in making observations and reflections on the learning environment, and thereafter collaborating on the scoring process. Mona Samuelsson investigated in her Ph.d. (1999) ECERS as tool for improving the preschool quality and concluded that it also seemed to develop and maintain reflections on how to keep up a continuing process of developing the local learning environment of the individual preschools.

Planning our research project, we decided to use such methods as research logs, observations, interviews, document /literature studies and collaborative reflection workshops. Within the restraints of available time, capacity and financial resources, we planned a pilot study, in order to sharpen our methods. ECERS was never the direct focus of our research, but we have used it to facilitate reflections of the quality of the preschool learning environment. Because of that it provides our point of departure for understanding the inner parts and symbols of a learning environment. The reason for drawing on a tool like ECERS in the reflective processes, was to frame the preschool teachers' reflections on the facilitation of the learning environment in their own preschool. As in the Swedish study, we also asked the teachers to make their own observation study on the learning environment. Right from the start of the study we focused on observations and reflections as a pathway to knowledge of how preschool teachers describe, conceive and understand/plan learning and learning environments in Danish preschools. The research is a collaborative study, where the professionals are given instructions on how to observe and reflect, and during the

²² Later we downgraded the tool and made our own categories of the learning environment.

³ Scaling tool in the meaning of a research based attempt to break down the learning environment in minor parts that individually could be objected to further investigation.

time we are cooperating, we offer and facilitate reflective workshops using the empirical data collected during the observing process.

Planning and collecting the empirical data

In this section of the paper we will go deeper into the methodological parts of our study.

The observation/reflection part

In our pilot project, the preschool teachers were asked to make observations of a couple of chosen items of their learning environment. In the collaborative analyzing process we used the ECERS rating scale as a frame for reflections. In this process we discovered, that the teachers were likely to start comparing their observations with the scale instead of digging more into their own didactic reflections on why and how. We then started to give the teachers more time to reflect upon their own observations before the comparison process, in order to make more space for their own creation of details and significant findings from their own empirical observations. We found that giving the reflections more space and time, allowed the teachers to be more curious and reflective when comparing their own observation results with the rating scale. Furthermore, in this process, we discovered that it became important to present the rating scale as a frame of knowledge, not as a set of facts⁵.

In this process, we also decided to turn to the English version instead of using the Swedish and Danish translations. In the light of this decision, we hereafter decided to split up the scale and revise it. For the moment we have broken down the environment into two parts of activities;

- 1) Activities organized by the staff and
- 2) Child initiated activities.

Staff organized activities will be studied as both in the meaning of planned activities, but also, as we later in this paper will discuss, in the meaning of spontaneous and routinized acts of practice.

We visit the preschool classroom 3-4 times per focus observation and require the teachers to gather the same number of observations. How many times we visit all in all differs from site to site and classroom to classroom, since it also depends on the collaboration, participation and numbers of points of focus in each setting/preschool.

On behalf of these initial experiences, we decided to use observations as a basic tool for reflections. Working from the hypothesis that to become a reflective professional

⁵ In some ways we find the scale normative. The normative presentation of the research findings therefore might turn to narrow down reflections instead of open up a more curious and reflective perspective.

developer of an inclusive learning environment, a teacher/one must be confident in seeing and reflecting on how to create participation pathways. One has to be confident in observing and reflecting one's own actions and thinking before one fully critically can take on and professionally use a knowledge frame created by others (mostly researchers).

We do not mean to suggest that a tool as ECERS cannot stand alone, be used as a guideline and as an evaluative scale. However, we feel it is important that in order to develop a continuing and grounded competence of how to sustain a learning environment for all, one must be confident in critically reflection on one's own actions, participation and interactions.

Research logs

Using a hermeneutic approach requires attention to the researcher subjectivity. The researcher is newer *tabula rasa*, and in this case, we as researchers are already embedded in the societal contexts as in the educational settings, since we both for many years have been researching and working in the field of early childhood education. We hereby take into account, that we are part of the field of study and therefore we must, as expressed by Husserl use the technique "Epoche". This refers to the importance of the researcher having an open, critically approach towards one self, constantly confront, and question one's own impressions, feelings, interpretations and most of all pre-understandings. The researcher must constantly be in relation towards and in dialog to oneself and the empirical data (Alvesson et al.2002). Writing and using researcher logs as empirical data, supplement our observations, reflections and interpretations. An example of how we use these logs as grounding new types of analyzing material, points is the reflections and attentions towards the professionals' expression "every day is a special day" (explained later in this paper). The logs also serve the purpose to elaborate on some of the feelings that occur during the observations or just to frequently give room for questions relating the field of study.

The collaborative reflection workshop

The preschools participate in the research study for a minimum period of six month. Around every third month, we facilitate a workshop. The purpose is to reflect on the collected observations. In this workshop, we break down the observations and together we reflect from different perspectives⁶. The perspectives are; the child, the professional, the parents, the learning perspective and the structural perspective. A deeper purpose of the workshop is to facilitate the professionals own acknowledgment of significant elements of the learning process and creation of the learning

⁶ To support the workshop and the reflective processes we have developed a questionnaire. Here several perspectives and questions are optional as support to the reflective dialogue.

environment. The knowledge⁷ from these workshops will be part of the supporting dialogue tool that we plan to develop as part of this study. (Part of the educational approach)

We plan to perform workshops for both groups of teachers and groups of managers. The manager workshop will be focusing on early childhood education management

Using a supportive and empathic approach – getting access to the field

A part of doing a participative study is the researcher's capacity to be empathic and to develop a trustfully and respectfully relation towards the participants in the field of study. To be observed and objected to a study rest on a very sharp edge of ethics. This is the methodological argument for sharing observations and reflections. We try to make time for meeting with the participants both in between observations and workshops and we invite them to stay in touch with us as much as possible.

In order to get access to their trust and readiness to participate we have a lot info meetings and an observation workshop in the beginning of the study period. Furthermore, we have composed an educational supportive material, and we try to keep up a process of support and participation.

Interviews

As part of our data collection, we use group interviews. These interviews are executed based on our analysis and interpretations of the empirical data and as an individual investigation of our research questions. They are being set up regularly during the whole research period. Participants in the interviews are groups of teachers and groups of managers.

A research design in progress

Our research design is in constant progress. Using a phenomenological approach often involve a continuing process of new findings that again requires new subjects of investigations. In the interpreting process, analyzing categories will pop up and down, as levels of the empirical data are being excavated and divided into micro parts of the field of study. Therefore, our research design is to be understood as a frame for a continuing research process.

⁷ All workshops are being recorded and used as research data

Preliminary observations and points of attention

We have only just started collecting data. The following is just work in progress, and therefore in no way the final conclusions, but just the preliminary observations and interpretations of our collected data from our encounter with the field of practice.

'Every day is a special day'

One aspect that has caught our attention across the preschools is the statement; "this day is a special day". We met it in almost every visit and every classroom. Not special in the way that something good or exciting is going to happen, but in the way, this day is different from usual, and cannot go on as planned or as usual. Therefore, it is not a good day for observing, because things or activities are canceled, reorganized or changed. The explanations behind these statements are many and different. Sometimes lack of staff because of sickness, time off or training/education, sometimes about interruptions from craftsmen repairing the kitchen, the playground etc. Other times it was about new demands or procedures, they needed to pay attention to or implement. Finally, it was about new children, new staff or new procedures, that needed special attention and resources. Only one time they canceled our appointment⁸.

Because of these special circumstances, rather frustrated and apologetic staff sometimes meets us. We get the impression, that they would have liked to have done things differently and better, if it had not been these circumstances. They also express that they feel that they have to deal with many different agendas and conditions at the same time. Among other things, they have to deal with frequent change inside or outside. Therefore, the practice we meet in the preschools cannot be looked at without understanding the massive cut downs, increase of policy demands and required participation in projects and continuing education, high expectations from parents and merging processes. , Many changes have taken place during the recent years, which without doubt have had a major influence on practice., These changes and demands urge our curiosity in how the structures and ways of organizing daily life, and how it support their ability to deal with continuing changes and interferences that apparently influences the daily practice. Finally yet importantly, we have become curious of in which ways these interferences influence the pedagogical work in different ways and how this affect the children.

The question of interest that arises from this study and our continuing work is this:

*How does this phenomenon, that many days are 'special days', influence the preschools' possibilities of establishing/creating learning environment for all children?
How can this be understood and how is this dealt with?*

⁸ This was a workshop on how to perform observation. It was to be in the evening, but too many had turned in sick.

Possibly, in connection to this aspect, our attention in this first part of our collection of data has been drawn to the challenges that the preschools have, in relation to assess, analyzing and evaluating their own practice. Many teachers find it difficult to find the time to observe, and when they find the time, they find it difficult to write. This has resulted in a lack of observations performed by teachers.

Assessment and evaluation of practice – a significant challenge for the learning environment?

In our preschools the staff, express great interest in being part of investigating the field of study. They consider it to be interesting and relevant, and express willingness to contribute with their observations of practice. However, it appears to be difficult for them to get the observations done. This difficulty could relate to a lack of 'ownership' to the study at this early stage, and it could relate to the previously mentioned 'interferences' in their daily practice. But, it could also be a result of a daily practice in which systematic assessment, analysis and evaluation of practice is not an integrated part of the working practice and pedagogical professionalism.

When we ask the staff in the preschools, why they don't get the observations done, they reply something like 'we simply don't get it done', 'we think about it, but we don't get it done' or 'we don't manage to sit down and actually observe, it is difficult to find the time'. To us these answers indicate that performing observations is not a natural, tested and integrated part of practice. A fact, that might have to do with limited resources, but according to the staff, also has to do with habits and institutional culture.

In our interviews, the staff expresses lack of systematic assessment and evaluation of practice as a weakness in their work. As one says, when asked about their work with their learning curriculum:

It's been a long time since they have been (used/looked at?), I would say

Interviewer: When was the last time they were looked at?

I don't remember, (pause) I simply don't remember, when they have been looked at

Interviewer, addressing the other preschool teacher, who has been employed for one year: Do you remember the last time you looked at the curriculum in some form?

No, no, I haven't seen the curriculum at all during my time here.

A little later in the interview, the staff is asked, whether the curriculum is used in the evaluation of their practice, and the preschool teacher answers:

Well, we are not good at evaluating. We don't get it done. It is not something, which we don't want to do, we just don't do it.

Interviewer: What are your changes based on then?

Mmhh some quick ideas about something (smiling)

The other preschool teacher adds: Yes, this room for example, since you were here the first time, there has been made some changes, but actually not because we have evaluated, that it didn't work. We had an offer from someone to give us some ideas how to organize the room. So then we quickly got some great ideas.

What would make a difference if you used evaluation in your work?

You get to talk about things, what you could do differently, you focus on the work and see if there are areas where we could improve, even though you don't notice it in the daily work. It would make us talk about things, and also about what quality is.

As it is shown above, but also in our conversations with other staff members in the preschools, they really want to observe and reflect, and they express that this would qualify their work and create new points of interest in relation to possibilities and limitations in their practice. But systematic assessment including observation, reflection, analysis and evaluation is only to a very limited extent taking place in the institutions. Though this is a methodological challenge in this study, it primarily raises the question; which consequences this might have on the practice and the opportunity to establish and develop learning environments and learning opportunities for the many different children in the preschools ?

In relation to our study, the following question arises for further investigation: How does a possibly weak 'Investigation culture' affect the practice creating learning environments for all children, and conversely, how does a stronger 'investigation culture' affect the work and the concrete creation of learning environments?

As formerly stated in this paper, to grasp the complexity of the pedagogical practice in a preschool, we have observed in two different activities. 1) Activities organized by staff and 2) child initiated activities. Our purpose has been to investigate how learning opportunities are created in the interaction between the children, the adults and the materiality and organization of the room.

Activities organized by the staff:

The observations, we have performed in this category, has primarily been in relation to 'circle time, which in all three preschools are a commonly and integrated part of the day. Other observations have been in relation to more spontaneously 'here and now' initiated activities, as for instance 'Catch', 'Motor skills track', drawing, art or puzzles. Our observations of the staff-initiated activities can be characterized as spontaneously organized. This means that the activity arises from a staff member's judgment, like this activity will be appropriate in relation to the situation and the other ongoing

activities. At the same time, we have observed, that morning time also become the time for quickly organizing the single day. As soon as all staff were present, most times the teachers then decided what was possible to do today and who to do it, and with whom. It was not a regular meeting, just staff talking. It might also be simultaneous playing or being with the children. At this point it could be discussed, whether the already staff initiated activities could be completed or whether the children should play freely. This practice can be understood in relation to the formerly stated phenomenon of 'a special day', which would call for reorganizing and rethinking of the practice. As a consequence of this phenomenon, it doesn't 'pay' to plan in advance, since it is likely that changes need to be made anyway. It might also be understood as a lack of didactic competence in the staff or as a reflection of decades of focusing on and weighing play, care and well-being in Danish institutions', where a structured and focused focus on learning and didactics has belonged in the school context. In 2012 Danish Institute of Evaluation (EVA) performed an evaluation of the preschools' work with their learning curriculum, which pointed to the same tendency. Though preschools have been obligated to prepare and carry out a both written plan and creation of a stimulating learning environment for nearly ten years, the overall tendency seems to be a lack of a systematic didactic planning was the conclusion made by EVA. It is the responsibility of the local municipality to describe and set the detailed standards for the curriculum approach including the incorporation of the six learning themes in daily life education.

The kind of 'ad hoc' practice, that we have observed, which is characterized by 'here and now' planning and a lot of free time, can be seen as both beneficial or limiting. On the one hand this organization of practice offers some children (primarily the children with the ability to verbalize their wishes and needs) influence on the content and activities, and at gives the opportunity of adjusting to the specific and current needs and wishes of the staff and children present. On the other hand, some children do not have the capabilities to participate in these kinds of activities or the activities just not fit the needs they have.

At the same time, it seems as ad hoc activities are based highly on the staff's spontaneous considerations and habitual dispositions; habits, experiences, orientations and routines, and less on common didactic considerations, goals, methods and orientations based on the different needs and interests. It seems to be a very complex, difficult and sometimes frustrating way to organize practice and activities, always to be in a more or less unprepared situation, never knowing who will be present, or not clearly be updated on the demands (see interview). In practice, the activities typically engages some children, while others (typically 4-5 children) are not involved or engaged, and therefore leaves or participate without engagement and attention. This without a doubt can also occur in more well planned, thought through activities, where the staff may be too focused on the content and result of the learning process. But in the first case, it appears that the staff gets a difficult time cooperating around the activity and getting the children involved and engaged, since

the goals and methods are not explicit and discussed, and maybe not even clear to the staff member, initiating the activity. This overweight of more spontaneous activities, leaves difficult conditions for a practice of assessment/investigation, analyzing and evaluation in order to develop practice.

Our aim here is in no way to argue that only strictly planned and schemed environments, which staff and children must follow strictly, can be a promoting learning environment. Furthermore, we are not arguing for a specific content of the curriculum, our concern is that without planning – and most of all joint planning- it is difficult to meet and support all the very different needs and learning dispositions children possesses.

Since children are having different dispositions in life and therefore have different needs when it comes to educational settings, different interpretations and ways in dealing with an educational curriculum and practice might not necessary be a problem. The problem occurs if lack of didactic plans and pedagogical considerations, causes that some children are offered poor or non-learning opportunities, because of difficulties connecting to the activities, and instead are disconnected and not participating, and maybe even disturbing or interrupting the activity, from the staff's perspective.

The problem furthermore evolves when one starts to focus on preschool quality. Social research studies on children at risk shows that quality, her specifically high quality, is an important factor when it comes to improve the participation in school, the education system and later on the participation in work life, and thereby increasing the possibility to become a participating democratic citizen. (Nielsen et al. 2013, Christoffersen 2009)

In relation to this, it becomes central looking at which conditions might be contributing to creating including learning environments, not just for some children, but for all children.

In this context the following question for our continued work arises:

What are the opportunities and limitations of respectively spontaneity and didactically planned activities in relation to the creation of learning environments with opportunities of participation for the children involved? And how do the relational competencies, managing competencies and didactical competencies influence the pedagogical practice, and how does it affect the learning environments established?

From this the following categories of analysis arises:

The relation between observation, reflection, didactical planning and intuitive, habitual pedagogical practice, and this relationship's influence and consequences on the creation of a pedagogical learning environment, viewed from the social participation- and learning perspective of the child.

Child initiated activities

In relation to this category, we have a large amount of observation data, since this practice was easiest accessible. This category contains the children-initiated activities, spaces and time, in which the children can play alone or together, have disposal over their own time and what to do and who to play with. In these spaces the adults participate in different ways. Predominantly they participate at a table in activities, initiated by the children or organized around some materials.. It is usually activities such as puzzles, play dough or drawing. When not sitting at the table, the staff are walking around, organizing or helping individual children. In these spaces/contexts we rarely observe the staff participating and engaging in the children's play/activity.

In addition, these kinds of context offer various opportunities for participation for the children. For some children it promotes and feeds their creativity and fantasy. It gives them the opportunity to establish play relations, create the content of the play and be engaged in play with their friends. It gives them the opportunity of meaningful activities, where they have control and influence, and where they through interaction with the other children among other things develop their language and social skills and competencies.

For other children this kind of context causes whole mornings spending their time not being engaged, trying to get included, disturbing others or playing alone. Or it causes the children being involved in conflicts or fighting with other children, as for instance Ibrahim one morning, when we were observing:

At first, Ibrahim walks around with two friends in the room. At this point, they watched the other children. At some point, they took the other children's toys, threw it back or put it away, when the other children complained. Afterwards, they sat down in a corner, the two friends opposite of Ibrahim. They were talking, but disagreeing and more and more loudly arguing. Ibrahim started to cry, but remained seated with the two others. He cried for about 3 minutes, then he stopped. The three boys then began to walk around again. 45 minutes had passed by at this point. They tried to get included in a 'bus'-play/game with two other boys. That did not work out and the other boys started shouting, and Ibrahim shouted back in return. When the arguments got loud, an adult got involved. The other boys ran away, but after a while Ibrahim was crying. He apparently has had a fight with his two friends. The adult walked towards him, but he ran away. He walks around, crying, for 5 minutes. At this point an adult gets close to him, takes his hand, walks with him to a different room, and his crying stops.

For children like Ibrahim and his friends, the self-organizing, free space/context is a huge challenge to their participation, and their learning opportunities become difficult. They are not engaging or gets involved or included in the play or activities, or social

relationships. Their own relationship is conflictual, and they spend most of the morning searching for opportunities to participate and establishing activities.

For these children, in this 'open, self-initiating space there are no already obvious trajectories of participation organized for them, in form of friendships or staff-organized activities or communities in which they can participate. Therefore, they have to search for such themselves, which is hard work and often not successful.

We have observed children totally on their own for more than an hour. Walking around on their own, not being invited or contacted by neither children nor staff.

The questions arising from this, which will have our continued attention, are; How are the staff working on creating learning environments for the children, who do not thrive in these open, self-managing environments

And how are these children's learning opportunities incorporated in the daily pedagogical practice?

What are the consequences for these children, when the staff more deeply than in this case, organize and relate didactically, participating and pedagogically in this child-initiated part of practice?

From this, the following category of analysis for our continued work arises:

Category of analysis: The relationship between, on the one hand side, the individual opportunities for pursuing own interests, creating and developing own trajectories of participation and constructive communities , and on the other hand side, the preschool teachers opportunities for working didactically and pedagogical with creating, supporting and maintaining differentiated communities.

Summary

A preliminary and tentative interpretation is, that the institutions we are collaborating with, are characterized by the type of environment, Sheridan calls the 'child centered environment. Here the staff have a way of relating, which can be characterized as negotiate and child oriented. In such an environment, the staff is skillful in the relational work with the children, and the children to great extent are offered opportunities to display themselves as agents. To smaller extent, the staff is working systematically and didactically with the children's learning. It is a child-oriented approach, which correlates with the play oriented approach, which has characterized the practice in Danish institutions for many years. In the light of the growing demand, which the institutions also must work systematically with the children's learning, a stronger focus on learning is missing. An approach, Sheridan calls a 'learning oriented environment', which offers the children so-called 'challenging learning environments' – learning environments, offering the children meaningful opportunities for participation

in different and varied kinds of learning communities in which the children are challenged and at the same time influential (Sheridan 2001).

Therefore, the question, that we, together with the other questions raised in this paper, will continue to explore are the following:

What is the coherence between the way teachers ascribe to a learning concept and the way they create the learning environment? How do understanding of learning, intentions, spaces, working with learning curriculum, didactics and opportunities for planning and investigation of practice affect this process, and which forms of participation and interaction does these environments give rise to – seen from a child perspective?

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