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Visions of what inclusive education can be – With emphasis on kindergartens

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ABSTRACT: The research questions of the article are: What takes place in the professional cooperative work of including children with special needs in kindergartens and in counteracting exclusive process? How are views on children and ethics expressed through practice and in reflections on practice among the staff in kindergarten? What constitutes ‘pedagogical presence’ ‘attentive love’ and children’s participation in developing pedagogical practice? A common understanding of these concepts are highlighted by Fromm’s understanding of ‘be-mode’ and ‘have-mode’ as different modes of orientation toward ourselves and the world. The article draws on critical social theory on preschool education and is based on empiric findings from ethnographic studies in two kindergartens. While planning and regulating the practice according to a biased view on ‘what children need’ earlier were main topic in the kindergartens studied, now concentration on listening to and ‘reading’ the children is focused, and thus expansion of the interests and questions the children themselves bring in is facilitated. The new practice can be seen as a resistance movement against the growth of an instrumental and technical approach to preschool education the last years.

RÉSUMÉ: Les questions de recherche, dans cet article, sont les suivantes : que se passe-t-il dans le travail de collaboration professionnelle pour inclure des enfants ayant des besoins spécifiques dans des jardins d’enfants et contrer les processus d’exclusion? Comment les visions des enfants et l’éthique s’expriment-elles dans la pratique et les réflexions sur cette pratique au sein des équipes des jardins d’enfants? En quoi consiste ‘la présence pédagogique’, ‘l’amour attentif’ et la participation des enfants dans le développement de la pratique pédagogique? Une compréhension commune de ces concepts est éclairée par la distinction proposée par Fromm entre le ‘mode-être’ et le ‘mode-avoir’, deux modes d’orientation envers nous-mêmes et envers le monde (1978). Cet article s’appuie sur une théorie sociale critique de l’éducation préscolaire et se base sur des résultats empiriques d’études ethnographiques conduites dans deux jardins d’enfants. Alors qu’auparavant les études étaient centrées sur la planification et la régulation de la pratique en fonction d’idées préconçues des ‘besoins de l’enfant’, aujourd’hui l’intérêt est centré sur l’écoute des enfants, qu’il s’agit de ‘lire’, ce qui facilite la mise en relief des intérêts et questions qui viennent d’eux-mêmes. Cette nouvelle approche peut être perçue comme un mouvement de résistance face au développement, ces dernières années, d’une approche instrumentale et technique de l’éducation préscolaire.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Der Beitrag untersucht pädagogische Haltungen in der professionellen Integration von Kindern mit besonderen Bedürfnissen in Kindertageseinrichtungen. Gefragt wird, wie das Bild des Kindes sowie ethische

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Konzepte in der praktischen Arbeit und in der Praxisreflexion im Team zu Ausdruck kommen. Was konstituiert «pädagogische Präsenz», «aufmerksamen Liebe» und die Beteiligung von Kindern an der Entwicklung der pädagogischen Praxis? Bezugnehmend auf E. Fromms Begriffe 'Sein' und 'Haben' (1978) und ausgehend von sozialwissenschaftlichen Theorien zur Vorschulbildung werden Ergebnisse einer empirischen Studie in zwei Kindergärten vorgestellt. Während früher die Planung und Regulation der Praxis auf der Grundlage eines einseitigen Verständnisses von dem, 'was Kinder brauchen'; im Vordergrund stand, geht es in den Einrichtungen heute eher darum, Kindern zuzuhören und sie zu 'lesen' (zu verstehen). Damit werden die Interessen und Fragen, die Kinder selbst thematisieren, ins Zentrum gerückt. Die neue Praxis kann als eine 'Widerstandsbewegung' gegen die Tendenz zu instrumentalistischen und technischen Ansätze in der vorschulischen Bildung der letzten Jahre gesehen werden.

RESUMEN: Preguntas de investigación del artículo: ¿Qué sucede en el trabajo cooperativo profesional de inclusión de niños con necesidades especiales en los jardines de infantes y en el esfuerzo por neutralizar los procesos de exclusión? ¿Cómo se expresan las opiniones sobre los niños y la ética a través de la práctica y en las reflexiones que sobre esta práctica hace el personal de los jardines de infantes? ¿En qué consiste la 'presencia pedagógica', el 'amor atento/vigilante' y la participación de los niños en el desarrollo de prácticas pedagógicas? Una interpretación común de estos conceptos se pone de relieve en la interpretación que hace From (1978) de los conceptos de 'modo: ser' y 'modo: tener', considerados como modos diferentes de orientación hacia nosotros mismos y hacia el mundo. El artículo parte de la teoría crítica social sobre la educación en los jardines de infantes y se basa en los resultados empíricos de estudios etnográficos en dos escuelas infantiles. Mientras que hasta ahora, los temas fundamentales en el estudio de las escuelas infantiles eran la planificación y regulación de las prácticas de acuerdo con una visión parcial sobre lo que 'los niños necesitan', ahora el enfoque se concentra en escuchar y 'leer' a los niños. De este modo se facilita la ampliación de los temas de interés y de las preguntas que los niños mismos proponen. La nueva práctica puede ser considerada como un movimiento de resistencia contra el crecimiento de una aproximación técnica e instrumental a la educación preescolar en los últimos años.

Keywords: Different rationalities in education; children's participation; pedagogy of listening

Introduction

Inspired by a field study I have conducted in two Norwegian kindergartens since early 2009¹ until now, I will focus on counter-movements against features and trends of neo-liberal management spread in Western world's educational thinking after the shift of the decennium, creating 'inter-societal and intra-societal polarizations' (Bauman 1999, 27). I will argue that instrumental thinking, mated with technological practice, is not the way to avoid processes of marginalization and exclusion in education to day. The perspective will be from a Nordic, especially a Norwegian, point of view, and will primarily focus on the implications for kindergartens.

I will start by giving a short historical outline of Norwegian kindergartens, and thereafter rather briefly reflect upon some contradictory concepts generally used in governmental policy documents relating to content and organization of Norwegian kindergartens in recent years. An exemplary document in this respect is the Norwegian White Paper *Quality in the Kindergarten* (Norwegian Ministry of Education 2009) where concepts of learning and achievement seem to a certain degree to switch places with the

concepts of playing and care. The White Paper represents a tendency which has caused worry among preschool teachers and educational scholars in the field of preschool that an even stronger tendency of a preparing-for-school tradition is prospering and succeeding. I will discuss aspects of what this situation means to kindergartens' philosophies and practices of including all children.

Drawing on my experience from the field study mentioned above I will reflect upon the pedagogy practiced in the kindergartens studied, and show how these kindergartens can be considered as counter movements against an instrumental paradigm that prevails in the document mentioned and other policy documents regarding kindergartens' role in society today.

I end the article by reflecting upon pedagogical philosophies which practitioners in the kindergartens studied are inspired by, and briefly focus on theories standing in contrast to a growing instrumentalism and technological practice.

My perspective in trying to analyse and illuminate different rationalities and mind-sets that prevail in the educational field, with focus on kindergartens, is a critical humanistic one. A humanistic perspective means to me a perspective that involves a true democratic, ethical, holistic and critical thinking where recognition of and respect for people's psychological and sociological differences are central aspects. I will refer to humanistic critical thinkers without regard to the possible prefixes of modernism labeling them.

Kindergarten traditions of the past meeting new times

Norwegian kindergartens were in the beginning, in the early twentieth century, part of the European kindergarten movement, and was mostly based on the Fröbel tradition, modern pedagogy and developmental psychology (Balke 1988, Bleken 2005). The Norwegian word for nursery or preschool is 'barnehage', a direct translation of the German word Kindergarten, also used in English. To become a kindergarten teacher (the title used until 1970) one had to go to the Fröbel institutes in Sweden, Denmark or Germany to be educated. The first Norwegian education for preschool teachers was established at the Child Welfare Academy in Oslo in 1935, owned by a voluntary organization (Denk). Today there are 17 preschool teacher educational establishments, all of them at universities or university colleges governed by the state with delegated ownership to the municipalities or to private organization and are subject to State and municipality regulations (Norwegian Ministry of Education 2006a, 2006b).

According to researchers in the field the kindergarten teachers, who were all women (clearly shown in the title's feminine ending, like 'lærerinne'), had until the first Kindergarten Act came into force in 1975, a great freedom in their professional exercise. Kindergarten teachers themselves and their education mostly defined what was to be evaluated as 'the good childhood in the kindergarten'. Kindergarten teachers had different roles, as pedagogues, culture workers, checkout ladies, among others, and not least, as leaders. The management of kindergartens was clearly professional, with no governmental interference (Bleken *ibid.*, Korsvold 1998). Since the 1970s preschool teachers (the title used since 1970) in Scandinavia have gradually lost their professional influence on kindergartens. Important decisions have increasingly been taken in ministries responsible for the kindergartens and in the municipalities. It is no longer preschool teachers themselves who form and rule 'the businesses' through their associations and their educational institutions (Bleken *ibid.*).

Regardless of political changes preschool teachers have the daily responsibility in kindergartens, either as a leader of a kindergarten as a whole which most commonly is divided into groups counting approximately 15–20 children, or as a pedagogical leader of one such group, cooperating with two assistants (often crafted as child workers),² for whom she also serves as a supervisor in pedagogical questions.

One of the great ‘old ladies’ in the field of Norwegian kindergartens, both as a practitioner and as an educator, Unni Bleken, says that leaders of kindergartens today ‘have to argument and balance in an obscure area’ (Bleken *ibid.* 23). When political lines have to be drawn on local level, they have to analyse their own role and their tasks constantly. In terms of money they have to fight, and not least, it is on local level many struggles for ideas have to be fought. They have the daily responsibility for the purpose clauses of the Kindergarten Law to be normative for kindergarten’s work. The regulation to the law, called The Framework Plan, has been the tool to help them in practice.

In recent years preschool teachers’ argumentation and balancing in a difficult landscape have not become easier. A restructuring has occurred within the kindergarten field, – a restructuring which can be compared to a revolution within the kindergartens. While kindergartens earlier were subject to the Ministry of Children and Family Development they became subject to Ministry of Education. The new revised Kindergarten Law came into force in 2006 (re-revised in 2008), followed by a new Framework Plan, *Content and Tasks of the Kindergartens* (Norwegian Ministry of Education 2006a, 2006b). However, the rather eclectic language and messages of this plan have to be subject to interpretation, and the interpretation work has to be done by the preschool teachers. It is not a small task, and the work done will have consequences for practicing. Depending on the individual preschool teacher’s philosophy and understanding of children and childhood and the inspiration she/he is able to give her/his staff the plan can be read and practiced in different ways. This problem and the tensions and dilemmas it creates will, based on my experiences through the fieldwork mentioned, be a main topic elucidated further in a later sections of this article.

Roughly we can say that there are two main trends in Nordic kindergarten today. The understanding of purpose and rationale of kindergartens has until recently been characterized by what is called a socio-pedagogical tradition (OECD 2006). This understanding sees a child as a whole and gives childhood an intrinsic value. In this tradition children are recognized as ‘beings’, as social actors (Uprich 2008). In recent years, however, there has been a clear tendency that education authorities consider kindergartens as institutions with a duty to prepare the children for school. This view represents what is called a preparing-for-school tradition (OECD *ibid.*), in other words, children are regarded as ‘becomings’, as ‘an adult in making’ (Uprich *ibid.*). Two different sets of traditions thus live side by side today.

Two different paradigms governing kindergarten today

Two different understandings of learning can be found in the same public documents regarding official early children education policy. Briefly and simply it can be claimed that one view is based on the insight that learning processes depend on the desire to learn, motivated by a lifelong natural need (Dewey 2008 [1902]; Rogers 1994 [1969]; Jarvis 1992). The other is based on the society’s need for its members

to achieve certain basic skills. These two understandings may contradict each other. The contradiction between these two approaches have appeared and prevailed – in different fashions – for a very long time in the field of Nordic school policy and practices, but have been spread to kindergarten policy since the century shift.

Dominant goals of educational public policy on Norwegian kindergartens may be symptomatic for trends to be recognized in a wider European context. These goals are linked to the concept of *acquiring skills*. In a recently published Norwegian White Paper called *Quality in the kindergarten* (St. Meld. [White Paper/Report] 2008–2009) it is emphasized that the educational ministry considers clarifying more clearly the goals of the fields of subjects in the curriculum of the kindergarten.

In key policy documents on kindergartens' purpose and tasks released from the government in recent years we find the use of concepts belonging to paradigmatically different scientific contexts.³ A valid example is the mentioned Norwegian White Paper. On the one hand, concepts belonging to a sphere of an instrumental rationality and a technological practice, like *mapping, measurements, acquiring of skills, disciplines, effect and evidence based best practice* are used frequently. These concepts are applied primarily in contexts where working methods and assessment are the topics. On the other hand, almost side by side in the same document, concepts anchored in humanistic and ethical philosophy and practice are applied, like *community, participation, diversity, inclusion, childhood as an intrinsic value* and a *holistic view of children*. When speaking of values which are intended to characterize kindergartens these concepts are frequently used.⁴

In spite of the recognition given by OECD (ibid.) to the socio-pedagogical approach, the Norwegian government started to develop a preparing-for-school tradition, influenced by 'countries it is natural to compare ourselves with', which appear to be Great Britain and France (NOU 2010), paradoxically though, since those countries are commonly known as having generally quite different traditions for preschool institutions than the Nordic ones.

This situation is described by Dahlberg and Moss (2005, 3):

The current situation of preschools ... exemplifies very vividly more general changes in thought and practice, including the way technology, science and management drive out ethics and politics: exploring this process in the preschool, and how it might be reversed, can contribute to a debate.

It seems that the understanding of children's needs for developing their competences as part of *natural social human needs* and as human beings actively seeking insight in their environment and their own place in community with and in relation to others (Vygotskij 1978, 1986, Stern 1985, 1990) is in retreat. However, attempts to reverse this process are exercised in different ways. As an example, last year more than 3000 preschool-teachers, other professionals and parents signed an online petition against a governmental suggested bill of mapping all three-year-old children's language skills in the spring of 2010.

However, several preschool teachers just try to adapt to the new regime of mapping according to predefined forms of what is regarded as important information about the children to be saved and stored (Østrem, Johansson, and Greve 2009). Others may not dare to protest against the contradictions because they are afraid they will be left behind if they discard the new instrumentalism and management thinking which is said to be 'based on research' which claim to show how social equalization can be fulfilled. All

preschool teachers have not reflected on the fact that 90% of the literature referred to in the White Paper on quality in the kindergartens is written by economists and statisticians and are based on calculations of possible social economic welfare prospects (Solheim 2009).

Some cling to the fact that, after all, the concept of a holistic view of learning is kept alive in both in the framework plan and in the White Paper. There are, however, reasons to doubt that instrumentalism mated with management thinking on the one hand and humanism on the other can be brought into a unifying wholeness. Basic human value differences between the two paradigms are too large.

Different methods of working with children bring to life different values and thus different perspectives of what a child is and what it may become. One of the goals set for kindergartens is to ‘contribute to social (in terms of economic) equalization’. However, there is reason to doubt that counting and weighing skills among the children in kindergartens are the way to go to create social equality. Standardized methods and measurements forms are based on a kind of hypothetical view on equality, which puts the recognition of every child as unique at stake. If preschool teachers primarily use ready-made programmes and mapping tools they will lose the opportunities to become familiar with the children on their own terms, and also for their own opportunities for development as professionals and as human beings (Bae 2011).

Opposing a regime of truth

By forcing instrumentalism and technology on teachers, politicians underestimate and disallow knowledge which the professionals themselves have developed over nearly 100 years, based on a humanistic view on children’s development. The official document on quality in kindergartens may be a disciplinary power (Foucault 1977) which constitutes a regime of truth. Such a regime is described by Foucault to consist of several elements, like types of discourse that make ‘the truth’ function, mechanisms and instants to distinguish between true and false, means of sanctions, techniques and procedures of measuring the acquisition of truth and the status of those who are in charge of saying what counts as true (Foucault 1972, 131).

Some of us remember that a settlement against positivism took place in social science, including pedagogy, a couple of decades ago. The Norwegian philosopher, Hans Skjervheim, a pioneer in the resistance, called the tendency to calculate persons as things ‘the instrumental mistake’ (1976, 260), a mistake caused by modeling the logical structure of the experimental natural science instead of seeking insight in human and pedagogical relations (1976, 263–270). He argues that in raising and formation of the young ones questions of technical solutions appear when you have no longer anything to say to others (ibid. 242). In other words, *alienation* between people is taking place.⁵

Today there are many voices rising against this kind of alienation. Peter Moss (2007, 232) talks about *draining*:

The technical practice and instrumental rationality embodied in the dominant discourse have been problematized as features of a long-term and more general process, which in recent years has gathered pace: draining political and ethical practice from a series of social issues and replacing them with technical practice. [...] The possibility of making ethics and politics first practice in early childhood education has been explored, with particular attention given to...ethics, an ethic of care and the ethics of an encounter, and to minor and minority politics.

Further he points to the fact that in spite of the increasing hegemony of the technical practice and instrumental rationality there is a vigorous growth of counter-discourses.

As an example of counter-discourse and opposition in public I will mention a group of colleagues⁶ who took initiative to arrange a meeting with a Parliament member and the State Secretary of the Ministry of Education and Research in relation to the case of mandatory mapping of children, mentioned earlier in this article. I will briefly refer to a part of the discussion taking place in the meeting (Sandvik 2009). The State Secretary argued that ‘the government will find a system for mapping which take short time and which reveal the important things’ (author’s translation). Excerpts from my colleagues’ comments on this argumentation are referred below:

First, it is necessary to have an open discussion on the premises for mapping, what is ‘the most important things’ in relation to children’s life and learning in the kindergarten. This discussion is largely enclosed in economical and special educational academics ..., thus the profession’s own competence is excluded from the discussions.

Second ... The less time and competence that are embedded in relation to becoming familiar with, listening to children’s different expression, noticing and observing children, the more questionable the result will be ... Rapid tests...will just limit the basis for eventual measures, and thus risk that one absolutely not will discover ‘the important things’ ... (Sandvik *ibid.*, author’s translation).

There is one great difference between seeing development of knowledge as skills to be acquired as a kind of property and seeing knowledge as processes of becoming familiar with the world. In the former, knowledge is available for measurements forms. The latter understanding is that the ‘the important things’ cannot be measured in predefined forms.

To illuminate different understandings of development and learning, like those between the socio-pedagogical point of view, represented by the scholars cited above, and the preparing-for-school view, represented by the State Secretary, I have found it fruitful to use the concepts of *to be* and *to have*, developed by Erich Fromm (1978).

On the basis of the thesis that there is a mutual relation between what he calls character structure (a concept close to what is called ‘personality’ today) and the socio-economic structure of society, Fromm shows how most people in Western society consider have-mode as the most natural way of living and even the only acceptable one. He refers to the have-mode and the be-mode as two fundamental different modes of orientation toward oneself and the world. The one or the other of these two dominates a person’s total thinking, feelings and acts. If we are in have-mode our relation to the world is associated with property, and we wish to make everybody and everything, including ourselves, to be something we possess. Be-mode, however, means to relate in a living and authentic manner to the world (Fromm *ibid.* 24).

He gives a number of examples of how the different modes may be reflected in different learning situations. A child in have-mode will, for example, listen carefully to the teacher and try to understand what is said as best as she can so that she later when assumed necessary can memorize the subject material she has heard. The content, however, will not be part of the child’s individual system of thinking, enrichment and expansion. The learning child and the content of the learning material become alien to each other. The learning process of a child in the be-mode is quite a different character. She responds to what she hears and sees in an active and proactive manner. When she listens there is a process of thoughts that is going on in her, and if she is

exposed to empty talk or teaching which do not stimulate her sufficiently she will be able to refrain listening and rather concentrate on her own thought processes.

Even remembering is different dependent on which mode is activated. This has to do with what kinds of connections are created. For a child in the have-mode remembering is to make a mechanistic or logical connection, while for a child in the be-mode remembering means actively recalling words, ideas, pictures and music and other modes of communication, and connect them to what she herself has experienced, – they bring to life what she has seen, heard and sensed before. The recalling is simultaneously also connected to what she thinks and feels when she remembers.

I find reasons to remember Fromm's philosophy because his theories of relation between the rationality of market management and its influence on our minds and ways of thinking might be more important than they were at the time when he wrote them down.

Fieldwork in kindergartens – Methodological approach and findings

In the following I will give a review of my experiences from an ethnographic field study conducted in two kindergartens (Andresen 2010) which has opposed to a governmental regime of truth in their own way. Before doing so, however, I will give a brief account on the way I have gathered my empirical material in the kindergartens. Four kindergarten departments were involved in the study. The four groups belong to two different kindergartens, two groups in each institution in the same municipality.

To be a pedagogical researcher in the role as an ethnographer means to do studies in natural settings, but still having pedagogical questions in mind. My project deals with questions of how conceptions and practices of care among preschool teachers and their staffs are related to children's play and learning in the kindergartens. A main question has been: How do the preschool teachers and their staffs perceive and practically express possibilities and limitations which influence them in developing and realizing an inclusive environment for all children who belong there? Another central question has been: How do preschool teachers and their staff members think and act in their functions as *both* caretakers *and* teachers?

I have, for ethical and academic tenable reasons taken my 'findings', my reflections on them and my tentative conclusions back to the staff and have in that way got complementary reflections on what I have seen and heard – and sensed (Crapanzano 1992). I have discussed empirical anonymity with the different staff involved in the study, and they have all, beside of my own statement of anonymity, declared solidarity compliance of anonymity in case they would, in spite of my efforts to make my descriptions unrecognizable, recognize situations and persons.

My descriptions of philosophies, methods, viewpoints and challenges which the kindergartens studied have in common will be characterized by a kind of summary of central aspects of the way the preschool teachers and their staff members in both kindergartens are acting and reflecting. This applies to both their communication with the children and to how they are reflecting upon their own practice together.⁷

The first day of being present in one of the kindergartens⁸ – with the intention to visit the two groups situated in it – there were three conditions that struck me. Firstly, activities going on, both outdoor and indoor, mostly seemed to be cross-department activities which were freely chosen by the children – accompanied by staff members who seemed to be responsible for children in general, not only for those belonging to their own department or group.

Children were all over the place which consisted of open rooms and halls and a large outdoor playground. In each room at least one of the staff members⁹ attentively followed the children's movements and activities – at the first glimpse it was hard to know whether these staff members were preschool teachers or assistants. Some of the children were outside, looked after by at least three staff members who did not stand or sit in groups talking together, like I had previously observed was a common habit among staff being 'guards' outdoors in other kindergartens. They were actively involved with the children's activities.

Secondly, I found no plans or schedules hanging on the walls in visible places to remind staff and inform parents and others of what was to be done and what had been done in the different groups in the kindergarten. I had been walking around to get an impression of what the agenda was at that time. What I found, however, were lots of photos, and children's paintings, drawings and other 'texts', not only on the walls, but also on tables and shelves, being subject to descriptions and discussion involving both staff and children.

Thirdly, biased because of previous experiences, I found a total lack of restlessness prevailing all over the place. To find words to express this 'lack' I had to resort to a somewhat vague description like a 'calm atmosphere'. It does not mean there were a minimum of sounds, like singing, laughing and even yelling. In spite of what I initially tended to describe as something almost like aimlessness, there seemed to be a kind of order in the affairs. My curiosity was awakened; what was going on here?

As soon as I got a chance to talk with the leader of the kindergarten, I commented on the situations I had found so special, and she explained to me that what I had perceived as aimlessness, was quite the opposite. The way they were working, she explained, was a result of a long process among the staff reflecting upon how they were able to achieve their purpose of *children's participation*. The kind of participation she was talking about was not the 'normal' one they had practiced before, namely activities planned and facilitated by the staff in the different groups to activate 'their children'. The process she referred to was the staff's work with the radical understanding of *pedagogy of listening* (Wien 1998) and the significance it had to their practice. Closely linked to the practice of meeting the children's expressions was the 'trinity' of *observation, reflection* and *pedagogical documentation* which might lead to projects and new practices. The photos and different 'texts' I had observed around the place were parts of processes of documentations and reflections upon them. When I commented on the 'calm atmosphere', she emphasized that 'open doors', children's feelings of 'being heard and listened to' and the staffs' cooperation becoming more closely might have contributed to needs being satisfied. Some days later, when visiting the other kindergarten participating in my project, it appeared to me that also this one had started a similar process. Aspects of the philosophy these two kindergartens have in common and the way they had transformed it into practices will be described and reflected upon in the following.

A pedagogy of listening – Children's participation as inclusive processes

From my observations and conversation with preschool teachers and assistants in both kindergartens I soon understood that a new insight in to what children's participation could mean had consequences for their practice. The staff were clearly working on observing the children's initiatives and self-directed activities; they told me they 'were training on reading the expressions of the children's needs, wonderings and

interests'. The themes the children brought into 'the room' might guide the staff in finding actual activities which could be widened and developed during the day. By talking of 'widening' the themes brought up by the children the staff did not exclusively mean expanding the themes, but also awakening the curiosity among other children for themes brought up by their comrades. Preschool teachers emphasized that the current practice was part of a process. What they might think was their 'way' today could very possibly look different in the days to come.

When I reflected upon my observations together with different staff members my impressions were usually confirmed, and not least, deepened to me, emphasizing different aspects. After having taken the decision to test this way of working the entire staff soon realized that this kind of practice involved a high degree of attentiveness to what individual children and groups of children experienced and were concerned with – be it of mental or physical conditions, or both simultaneously, as such conditions usually occur. Both the preschool teachers and the assistants all agreed that in spite of the fact that their new approach was much more challenging than 'the old way'. The challenges could be felt at the same time both provocative and liberating. The listening pedagogical approach was constantly claiming more wakefulness and openness. Still, it was more interesting. One of the assistants exclaimed 'and even funnier because it is more enriching', and was met with agreement from other staff members around.

After they had dimmed the planning they meant to note that the children became more 'naturally relaxed' in their activities than they were before; the level of activity was 'not less, but different', they claimed. While the staff members were training themselves in being present and attendant in new ways, they saw that the children seemed to be present in new ways as well. In this situation they found it easier to allow for the children to move between the groups and for the staff to welcome and include the 'visitors'. The different staff members' responsibility was not limited to their 'own group', nor responsibility for children with special needs.

Some of the preschool teachers claimed they were convinced that the idea they had developed together of how real inclusion regarding children with so-called special needs really worked; the more inclusive the kindergarten as a whole is, the better development for children in need of special support. One little girl who was a late developer, is an example. She had no special training beyond the games and activities together with the children and the staff in the kindergarten. She had, however, a support teacher who also had the function as her primary contact. Since every child had one of the staff members as their own primary contact the girl did not stand out as being different from the other children. Her support teacher told me she was most concerned about the child becoming as independent as possible, she meant that her most important task was to let the girl explore the environment on her own as much and often as possible, knowing, however, that she at any time could find her special support teacher. While the girl was playing and exploring the environment together with her peers and other members of the staff, the special teacher was sitting in the agreed place, all the time occupied either with other children or with pedagogical documentation work.

This kind of documentation was in no way based on standardized measurement instrument. It was about recording and reflecting on what was seen and heard in relation to the girl's activities and relations. The records were later used as a basis for reflections together with the rest of the staff in efforts to continuously improve the relations between all children, including the child with special needs.

The special teacher dared to let the girl move freely around; she could do so because she trusted her colleagues' attentiveness to this child, even if the responsibility for this

cooperation was her. Likewise, her colleagues trusted her in taking responsibility for 'their' children. Actively observing and documenting the processes of practicing children's participation in the kindergarten's daily life had brought the staff together in new ways. Some expressed the satisfaction related to their own participation in the processes – an aspect that made them themselves owners of the process and of the consequences. In developing their ability to listening to the children they had simultaneously been trained in reflecting on their own practice, involving 'both head and heart'. Some told me that the new ways of thinking and working had made them somewhat more 'vulnerable', but the new openness allowed for 'feelings of being insecure'.

Some of the assistants together with the pedagogical leader had explored that the difficulties and emotional challenges they encountered were related to how they themselves had been brought up. An underdeveloped creativity and ability to respond to the children's creativity, interests and thoughts was one consequence. The assistants also connected this 'lack' to the old perception of the relations between staff and children which implied that the pedagogues knew 'what is good for children'. Therefore the assistants had usually done what they had been guided to do, like 'following recipes for the best ways of stimulating children's development'. Now, however, the reflections on how to expand and widen themes brought up by the children, be it the content of the themes or the ways of approaching and communicate the themes, were central among them – in *togetherness* with the pedagogical leader. A new openness had occurred among them along with the processes of training the ability to be open to the initiatives coming from the children.

Taking power over thinking and practicing

With reference to Fromm's concepts explained above, I will argue that the staff members in the kindergartens studied are about to leave the have-mode in their understanding of children's development and learning. The staff members try to listen and to speak in a manner that can be described as a be-mode. They listen and speak in this mode – be it in relation to each other or in relation to the children. They actively seek to understand conditions they had not thought of before. They are trying to support the children in their motion and change by being in motion and change themselves.

We can imagine conversations between staff and children in the have-mode where staff members will tend to place themselves in an authoritarian position while children will try to show that they can 'deliver' what is expected from them, like a showcase of goods they can offer. Conversations in the be-mode, however, are characterized by responses given spontaneously and fruitfully in relation to themes and to the other participants. The staff members' authority does not stand in the way, and that is why they can respond fully to the others and to their ideas, both towards colleagues and children.

The susceptibility and liveliness which are characteristic for the be-mode conversations is immersive and helps the other participants overcome their egocentricity, shyness or feelings of inferiority. The conversation then does not become an exchange of goods, like information, skills or status, but rather becomes an authentic dialog (Fromm 1978, 33–34). It is inclusive in its nature.

Members of the staff in both kindergartens are concerned about the changes that makes a difference when you replace the authoritarian way of responding with a 'listening' and questioning approach. The constant ongoing reflections among them often focus on their own role in meeting the children's many languages. The reflections

are based on wonderings arising from the observations they do, and not least on the documentations they do of the observations. Such documentation is part of the daily work, – short notes, logs, photos or videos which the members of the staff make in relation to children they have the main responsibility for. In discussing these with each other the possibilities of new ways of understanding the observations continually are emerging. Most of the documentations are made ‘in flight’. More time is spent on observations and reflections on the documentations of those observations.

What is significant here is that the children get the opportunity to be heard, and their different voices are listened to. It can be said it is an exemplary way of holistic learning, expanded from playing, adopting body, feelings and intellect. Not least, children get the opportunity to put into words their different ways of experiencing. In turn staff’s observations and documentations will involve the parents in their child’s interests and engagement as it is expressed and appears in the kindergarten.

The kind of exchange described above could not have taken place if the staff had not met the children in different settings with the mentioned attentiveness. This kind of attention is close to the concept of Nel Noddings’ *attentive love*. She seeks to discover ‘what we are like’ when we engage in caring encounters. She says: ‘Perhaps the first thing we discover about ourselves as carers in caring relations is that we are receptive’ (Noddings 2002, 13). Her understanding is conceptually similar to Emmanuel Levinas’ *primacy of the other* (ibid. 304). Noddings focuses on the concept of *sympathy* – which mostly includes ‘feeling with’ more than does the concept of empathy – to capture the affective state of attention in caring (ibid. 14). As far as I can see from my observations of and conversations with the staff members in the two kindergartens described, they meet the children’s needs and interests with both empathy and sympathy. By using both cognitive and affective aspects of themselves as persons I think they may be good models for the children for how to live and how to learn.

Several topics have burning questions which are constantly discussed in all areas of the kindergarten field, and also in the kindergartens described here. Political rhetoric of kindergartens as good *systematic pedagogical institutions* and as *institutions of learning* is the most current issues of great interest. Main questions of my research deal with how kindergartens can work for inclusion of all children and how relations between the phenomena of care, play and learning play a role in inclusion processes. I have had the pleasure of being able to follow two different kindergartens over time. Experiencing the practice in both of them have learnt me the significance of seeing children as whole people, and that this holistic view on children is related to – and possibly even requires – a holistic perception of the relation between the phenomena of care, play and learning. This perception may imply that we see each of the three phenomena as part of a system of life as living relations, both mentally and practically. Putting this perception into practice may even give the term *systematic* a new meaning.

Discourses and counter-discourses – A conclusion of hope

The last decade a socio-pedagogical way of thinking has been threatened by a new increasingly pervasive trend seeing kindergarten as preparing-for-school institutions. This inclination is meeting opposition from several professional quarters. Some kindergartens have, instead of just retaining the existing, rather widened and expanded the traditional ideas and values of the kindergarten, like what has happened in the described kindergartens.

Referring above to Moss I mentioned counter-discourses to the prevailing hegemony of technical and instrumental discourses; he gives examples of such counter-discourses, and emphasize the early childhood services in Reggio Emilia in Italy. This philosophy has also reached the county in Norway where I have been doing field work, and it turns out that it is not just a few kindergartens that have been inspired by it. It is no coincidence, however. Via pioneers of this philosophy at the university of Stockholm¹⁰ and Oslo University College¹¹ several colleagues at my working place have been inspired. In *Pedagogic documentation – inspirations to moving practices* (Kolle, Larsen, and Ulla 2010, author's translation) reflect upon experiences from developing the philosophy locally throughout the district by teaching students in kindergarten teachers education and in continuing education for kindergarten teachers in practice (ibid.: 237). What Kolle et al. highlight about the Reggio Emilia inspired work can also be said about themselves and their colleagues, teachers in kindergartens and students: 'They make visible a pedagogical philosophy which deals with the perceptions of children', but is above all there is 'an ever ongoing learning process which deals with both children's and adults' learning' (ibid.:117, author's translation).

Johannesen and Sandvik (2008), inspirers like the authors cited above, have been occupied by *seeing and listening to the youngest children in kindergartens*. They say in the preface to their book about participation by the youngest ones that their text 'is not written for the purpose to describe participation as a finished area, rather it is written to explore some possible aspects of the right to participate that challenge us'.

When this right is translated into practices based on philosophies of children's participation in radical forms, they may also be challenged by governmental regulations and may create tensions between public intentions and the practice of ethics developed among preschool teachers and others working in kindergartens.

In the last months of my study I observed two different solutions to meet the public requirements in the two kindergartens studied. After having been subject to deep discussions; in one kindergarten the pedagogical leaders and their staff decided to divide children into age homogenous groups to facilitate working with aspects of the curriculum imposed on them. In the other one they no longer have the preferred time to fully reflect together on the pedagogical documentations. Another kind of documentation takes their time. Still they let children's desires and needs of exploring guide them to different activities. But themes brought up by the children and the widening of the themes they engage in are now subject to documentation regarding what parts of the *prescribed curriculum* are covered during the day.

The kindergartens' life of change and movement will continue. The history of kindergartens and children's participation may be a never-ending story of being with or against the blowing winds, depending of the prevailing regimes of truth.

My article however, ends here. What I have observed and what I have heard during conversations with preschool teachers and their staff is that the people in charge of the children really take the relational aspects of caring seriously. Their attitudes give hope for the future.

Notes

1. The study is part of a larger project, *Kindergartens' work with inclusion of children with disabilities in a professional perspective* (author's translation) (Arnesen et al.).
2. Often there are more than two assistants, since it is common that the assistants have part-time work and thus they share a full time position.

3. This phenomenon is to be found in all of the Nordic countries, even if the impact has differed a little in time and speed.
4. Regarding the different mentioned concepts being applied in the rhetoric of the White Paper I have not referred to pages because they are frequently and generally distributed in the whole document.
5. The references, direct or indirect, to Skjervheim are all translated by the author.
6. Related to Kindergarten Teacher's Education, Department of Teacher's Education, Ostfold University College and Oslo University College, Norway.
7. My descriptions have been presented for the staff of both kindergartens and have been approved, with no exceptions.
8. In advance I was not familiar with the two kindergartens, and neither knew anything about what kind of pedagogical philosophy was in focus there.
9. Depending on lunch breaks, etc.
10. Gunnilla Dahlberg (2000) and Hillevi Lenz Tagushi (2010) are two significant initiators of the Reggio Emilia Institute in Stockholm.
11. Among others, Jeanette Redding-Jones' feminist theories (1997) has been inspirational.

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