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The threat of consumer society: ideas among pedagogues about young children's economic learning

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What ideas and practices concerning young children's economic understanding and learning inform the work of preschool staff? This paper is based on interviews with preschool employees and with children in nine Swedish preschools. The main questions to the staff concerned:

- the role of the preschool in children's economic learning
- children's economic understanding
- the impact of the variation in financial resources among families
- economic issues in daily work with children.

The preschools we visited varied in terms of the children's social background. One preschool had two major categories of families with very large differences in financial resources. Another had more homogeneously well-off families, while others again had less dramatic variations.

We interviewed two preschool teachers who were managers and five childcare workers as a pilot study aimed at raising questions for future research.

The threat of consumer society

A critical stance to social changes in children's conditions and in societal attitudes was evident in several of the interviews. The staff were against the development of the consumer society, as demonstrated, for instance, in a willingness to buy new things rather than being careful and looking after those you already have. Another negative change, according to the staff, was that children were learning later the difference between 'mine' and 'yours'. Parents were seen as responsible for these changes, and a suggested explanation was that parents did not have time to play with their children and instead 'bought' them. This meant that the children lost the opportunity to the valuable experience of longing for things. It was also negative that the relationships between parents and children and among children increasingly are monetarised.¹

Money is actually an invisible phenomenon at preschool

The staff did not see money as a topic to raise with children. Money did not belong to the preschool context and children had no use for money there. If children brought money it was taken away and put in a safe place until the parents came and took over the responsibility. Money should not become a part of children's activities. That children brought money despite this was seen as a mistake - they perhaps had money left in their pockets. Some staff however saw that children might have reasons to bring money to the pre-school, such as a wish to show the money or to talk about it. To buy friends was seen as a bad use of money in preschool - a monetarisation of relationships that was in conflict with the wish to make the preschool an asylum protecting from market forces.

¹ This kind of reasoning is very similar to that of Thomas Ziehe in *Die 'normalisierung' der Kindheit*. in *Westermanns Pädagogische Beiträge*. 1986, s. 5.

Which role do you think that the preschool ought to have concerning children and economic issues?

- I have never given that a thought, actually [manager]

All children have an equal value according to the curriculum. The preschool may compensate for or complete the resources of parents and give children options of consumption which all parents are not able to offer, and in this way contribute to equal opportunities for children. This may be related to inequality in financial terms, but that is not made clear in the curriculum.

Everyday household economy is not a subject of its own in preschool, but the financial aspects of everyday life can be seen as an area of knowledge and experience in which the preschool can stimulate children's learning of morals, values, facts and competencies. However, as stated above, some staff members did not see that everyday economy is a subject that belongs in the preschool, where the perceived function of sheltering meant that such issues were avoided in pedagogical work and the interaction with children. When a manager talked about the preschool's compensatory and educational function, economic issues were not included. According to her, such topics were raised only on the initiative of children, for instance when they played shopping.

Another manager with the same general ideal of equality gave a broad picture of how economic issues appeared in the pedagogical work. The task of the preschool was to transfer knowledge when answering children's questions and to forward positive expectancy as an aid to coping with the hardships of life. The financial conditions of family households, morals of consumption and an attitude of carefulness with things were, according to her, issues included in the work of the preschool. She also saw an obligation to support parents when they showed lax economic morals.

The extent to which the preschool knew about the level of living standard of children's families varied. Some staff did not know about household incomes and did not notice any differences, such as in children's clothing. In other preschools children's clothes were the most obvious signs of variation in financial resources. The activities of children outside preschool were also an indicator of financial position.

The consequence of the ideal of equal value may be equal treatment, or that children are given equal opportunities by compensatory measures. We saw dilemmas stemming from such choices of policy in several of the rituals and routines at the preschools.

Summer, Christmas and birthday in preschool

Some children did not have a summer vacation. That was sometimes interpreted as an indication of financial hardship. In some preschools these children were engaged in compensatory activities: in others however, the preschool made cuts in staffing during summer, which made that a time period of strain and poorer quality of care.

Inequality also surfaced when children who had been on vacation came back and had stories to tell. This posed a dilemma for the staff: could they respond to the interest of these children and offer an opportunity to tell about summer experiences while also avoiding giving children the impression that vacation travels were expected? The staff seemed very aware of the different family conditions in this respect. One way of coping with this problem was to support parents by telling them about cheap vacation

opportunities. In order to reduce the stigma of not going on a vacation trip and to make that a 'legitimate' choice, the staff stressed the time that children spent with their parents as most important.

In all but one preschool the staff arranged Christmas celebration ceremonies. The children were offered a base level of celebration; small presents etc. As with vacation trips, it was a sensitive issue to talk about the presents children were given at home. It was implicit that this was not a good topic of conversation. In one preschool the staff let each child tell about one gift only.

All the preschools celebrated the children's birthdays. The birthday child received gifts, but the emphasis was on paying attention to the individual child rather than on the material aspect of gift giving. Several preschools had a tradition that parents celebrated their child by bringing ice cream or a cake to the preschool. All children were given a similar 'ceremony' since the preschool compensated for those parents who did not bring any. If on the other hand a parent gave too much, the staff saw that as a problem since it broke the principle of equality. The staff described the importance of discretion when they took compensatory measures, but some saw that the child in question might know that the parents had not contributed and consequently feel different and uneasy.

Demands for financial contributions

Activities offered at the preschools required financial contributions from the parents in addition to the fees they paid. As already mentioned, clothes could be an indication of the parents' financial resources. The staff considered it their role to tell parents what kind of clothes children needed in order to be able to participate and how important that was for the children. Some informed the parents about where they could buy clothes of good quality cheaply or second-hand. The quality issue was frequently mentioned as a problem. Some parents preferred new clothes of poor quality to second-hand of good quality, in order to keep up their own and their child's social status.

If children were short of equipment or clothes, some staff solved this by letting them borrow from other children, while others were very much against this since it was a problem for the children as well as the parents if the borrowed things were lost or damaged when they were returned to their owner. Unmarked clothes were sometimes left unclaimed in the preschools: this was seen as a negative indication of the consumer society, but on the other hand did provide the preschool with a reserve of clothes that children could borrow without any problems.

Most preschools expected that parents in general brought some of what was needed in the way of equipment for out-door activities, but the staff also had reserves for children to borrow in case a parent could not provide or had forgotten about it. Again the staff tried to persuade parents to buy the equipment. One staff member stated emphatically that this kind of system could give negative experiences to children who had to borrow equipment, since it made them feel different even if the staff handled the matter with discretion. In another preschool a staff member sympathised with the parent in such cases, understanding it as shameful not to be able to buy what your child needed. She said that the staff ought to express an understanding that some parents might find it hard to make ends meet. Some kinds of activities were deemed so expensive that they were problematic and accordingly excluded due to the variation in the resources of the families.

Several preschools asked parents to give money to be used for excursions, ice cream and birthday presents for the children. The contribution was officially voluntary and one preschool stressed that the money was used for all children, whether or not their parents contributed.

In one preschool this informal fee had been discussed at a parents' meeting, while in other cases parents were asked individually. One staff member saw a dilemma in that parents would probably not say if they could not afford to pay. She concluded that even though the contribution seemed a small sum, it could be a lot if a family had several children. This issue was most sensitive at the preschool with the largest gap in resources between parents.

Some preschools also made less open financial demands on parents in activities where the parents took part; for instance parents were asked to give away things as prizes in a lottery, and were also expected to buy the tickets. One staff member expressed an awareness of the financial pressure this put on parents who were short of money, and one preschool for this reason chose a low self-cost level at meetings with parents.

That the preschool is in so many ways involved in the spending of parents may be seen paradoxically as a monetarisation of the relationship between the school and the families, with the staff representing the consumer society.

We saw a variation in awareness among the staff concerning the impact of unequal financial resources of families. A policy that actively addressed this in order to equalise children's conditions in preschool could lead to conflicts between the staff and some parents., and rules and agreements were developed to reduce these tensions.

In the preschool with the most striking inequality, the staff - who in principle took the opposite standpoint - questioned the integration of social classes in the preschool due to the heavy tensions, risks for conflicts and difficulties in communication.

Carefulness

A recurring theme in the interviews was carefulness. Money was most often raised as an issue in this context. The children were told to take care of things because of the economic loss when things were destroyed and the limited financial resources of the preschool.

Carefulness was also related to the problems when children brought their own toys to preschool. They could be damaged or lost, and the staff found it hard to keep them in order. Rules and ceremonies were constructed in order to protect the private property of the children. Toy-showing ceremonies were arranged in some preschools. The staff had to balance different sources of conflicts. Some commented that a restrictive policy could create problems in the parent-child relationship and felt it was better if the preschool softened its rules. All preschools allowed children to bring a cuddly toy.

It was important to the staff to regulate this in order to avoid conflicts among children or between staff and parents. Some conflicts among children were explained as competition for status. Children used private toys in bartering trade. The staff described voluntariness and reciprocity as important principles in the children's swapping. Some staff prohibited or regulated such a trade because of the children's immaturity: they did not really understand the principle of swapping and noted that there could be conflicts if children regretted the swop.

Gift-giving could also be a problem and cause tensions in the relationships among children and between children and parents. Strategies were developed to reduce the activity and the giving of 'fine' gifts was postponed until the parents could take over responsibility.

The difference between 'mine' and 'yours' was a sensitive issue to the staff. Toys from the preschool were sometimes taken home by children, who on one hand could be seen as unaware of any difficulty and were accordingly without guilt, but on the other were conducting the morally unacceptable act of stealing. One couldn't know which alternative parents would react to if they were told or asked about such a situation. The staff generally talked as if children made mistakes and were thoughtless. Some also expressed an understanding that children could yield to temptation, that is, that they are aware of the rule breaking but still too young to control themselves.

Young children's understanding and learning in preschool

The staff's expectations about the children's economic understanding and competence were low compared to what we found when interviewing the children. Some preschool staff emphasised that children's economic understanding varied and that this was partially due to differences in experiences, and some talked about successive learning with a wide scope of variation in the age at which children were expected to understand this or that. Nobody referred to a scientific theory - they rather relied on their personal experiences of children. Conclusions concerning children's lack of knowledge were not always based on what kind of knowledge children could reasonably gain from everyday life but was related to what adults normally know and do.

The expectations of children's knowledge formed the basis for the questions children and parents were asked about their everyday economic life outside preschool. This restricted what the staff got to know about children's understanding and so on, in a vicious circle.

Sometimes children initiated economic discussions, such as when they asked the staff to buy new toys or when they commented upon financial conditions at home. The preschool policy on these occasions was to listen, answer, explain and comfort children. The pedagogy was reactive rather than taking the initiative.

Financial matters did appear in children's play and games. Mostly the staff did not see this as relevant for learning about 'real' economic issues and children's own actions were not seen as financial transactions. When children used play-money, most staff did not understand it as symbolising real money. Transactions that mirrored adult economic activities were not always seen as pedagogically relevant. Such interpretations by the staff made them unaware of parts of children's economic learning in preschool. This may be because the staff did not have a reflective understanding of what everyday economics is about, except for that it concerns money, a topic rarely discussed with the children. It may also be the result of asymmetric interaction and lack of role-taking by staff members. Some showed an empathic thinking, saw children as actors and interpreted what kind of meaning a situation could have to children relative to their position in social life. Based on this the staff decided how to approach the children, showed respect and enhanced their opportunities to understand and act rationally. On other occasions staff dealt with a situation in such a way that the children were not contributing to the meaning the adult made of the situation. The children were 'protected' from experiences of the social and cultural life they were part of.

It is obvious that the preschool is an economic context in many ways, but one that the children were only made aware of in the fostering to carefulness. The other issues concerning morals and order were mostly not seen as relevant for economic learning. Property was often a relevant issue in staff-child interaction. The staff handled transactions such as loans and gifts, limited, regulated and developed adult-run ceremonies. Housekeeping values such as saving, carefulness and recycling were part of the policy but were hidden in the management of order. Distribution of resources and distributive justice was discussed by some but was otherwise a subject hidden in practice. In some preschools economic morals related to the critical discourse about the consumer society had a prominent place, but phrased as teaching good habits rather than as economic learning.

When staff saw issues as economic ones they often related to negative influences calling for restrictions. There was a tendency to see economic issues as morally questionable in preschool. The economic world outside preschool was mostly seen as harmful and kept out. This may be an expression of the romanticising of childhood and the protective ideology of caring.

Adults become unconscious role models when seen in interaction with one another. One staff member came to that conclusion at the end of the interview and argued that this means that children get a lot of information which may be both contradictory and misleading.

Children's economic learning in preschool took place in everyday life practices where children constructed meaning on the basis of the way the staff and other children interacted among themselves and with one another. Economic learning was not guided by a policy-driven pedagogy. The tense relationships with parents in these matters hindered a joint effort to support children's economic learning.