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Parent's participation in a child's beginning at playschools in Iceland: A democratic perspective

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Abstract

This small scale research study reports on a new approach for young children and their families to the child's beginning at playschools in Iceland. In Iceland the term playschool is used for institutions for children aged 1 – 6 years. It is based on the belief that the child's main method of learning is through play. Therefore playschools are schools where learning occurs through play.

Beginning at playschool

Beginning at playschool is a big step for families. The foundation for collaboration and participation between families and school is laid during the first days. The goal is for parents to get to know teachers; how the school works; and, establish a trust in the pedagogue's abilities; for the child to get to know the environment, other children and pedagogues. In this article a new approach to how children and their families are inducted into playschool is presented, a method that was originally developed in Sweden and is based on the philosophy of Reggio Emilia and post-modernistic view of the child and childhood. Many pedagogues have grown tired of the discourse of the pedagogue as a surrogate mother for the children: that their profession is in some way that of a glorified housekeeper and that the playschool should look like a home. A way to change that vision is to change parents' views of the work of the pedagogue and for them to see the playschool as an educational place. For most parents the first step into the playschool is when the children begin their official life in the playschool. To change the perception it therefore seems logical to look at the theories of school beginning.

How children begin at playschool has been an issue in Iceland for almost forty years, the main reason being the importance of the children sensing security. In the Icelandic National Curriculum (Iceland, 1999) for playschools, the transition between homes and schools is emphasized as an important time for the children and for the family to establish a trust in the pedagogues. This is in accordance with research findings that state that secure children are more likely to develop a strong attachment to pedagogues than insecure children (Kienig, 2002; Pianta and Stuhlman, 2004). Today's research on the brain supports the claim that security is important for the children's wellbeing and some research show indicators between quality of the day-care and children's stress levels. From whichever perspective one chooses to look, children's feeling of security is an issue for the child's wellbeing and development.

The new approach does not deny the importance of security and trust; on the contrary it is argued that the approach will actually lead to stronger bounds between families and playschool. It will lead to relationships that are built on collaboration, common interests and communication.

The old and the new ideology

The Icelandic tradition for school beginning is oriented in Nordic early childhood ideology (Måneson, 2008). In the Nordic early childhood studies, it has been looked upon as a critical time when the child begins at playschool. It is a time when the foundation for the child's happiness and security is built and a bad beginning can have severe consequences for the child (Andersen and Rasmussen, 1996; Niss, 1989; Sträng and Persson, 2003). For a long time pedagogues have based their philosophy and working methods on Bowlby's and Ainsworth attachment theory (Bowlby, 2005). From that standpoint a bad beginning can traumatize and lead to deep-rooted emotional and developmental problems for children. Therefore in most Nordic countries the transition from home to playschools is looked on as essential and models have been built to lessen the effect or the trauma that the child is supposed to go through.

The result in many schools being that this period is expanded over a fairly long time (7-14 days). The children begin with very short days, (about an hour) and gradually the day is extended to a full day (in Iceland a full day is between eight and nine hours, Iceland Statics 2010).

The traditional ideology behind the method of transition time is based on the notion that the children are exercising being away from the parent, a short time each time. That the child has to partly transfer bonds, from their families towards the pedagogues (surrogate mothers). As stated above the ideology was furthermost based on Bowlby and Ainsworth theories on the importance of secure attachment between the child and her primary caretaker. In this paper the validity behind the attachment theory is not contested. Research on the effect of stress on the brain may even indicate some merit of the theory. What is contested on the other hand is the belief that beginning at playschool is such a stressful event in the life of the child that it warrants the measures people have been taking or even that the method described is a good way of handling the transfer of attachment (bonds) between parents and pedagogues. It can be argued that this prolonged start has been even a more stressful factor and a misguided use of the theory.

The new model and the concept democracy

The new approach to begin at playschool is based on the concept that if parents feel secure and know what happens to their children they transfer their security and curiosity to the children. The ideology is that beginning at playschool is joyful and something to look forward to for both the parents and the child. It is not based on the notion that beginning at playschool is a stressful event.

The approach, which in Iceland has been named participation beginning at playschool, is based on the idea that the child is strong and capable and that beginning at playschool is an exciting, normal part of life. It is based on a postmodern view of children and childhood. The child is not looked upon as weak or innocent, but as strong and capable, as curious and wanting to learn. And that the same applies for the families, that they are curious about life in playschool, about the people there and how their children react to other children, and other children to their children.

According to the traditional model one parent and one child at the time were adapted to life in school and to being apart from each other. This could mean for example for an Icelandic classroom with 16 one to two year old children, that the playschool could be “adapting” children to the playschool for weeks or in a worst case scenario, for months.

The new program is based on children arriving with their parents to the playschool and staying there together for three schooldays (from nine o’clock to three o’clock). During that time the parents take care of the children, see to the children’s daily needs, such as feeding them and changing diapers, but the pedagogues run the daily programme and get to know the children and the families. According to Dalli (2002) parents are insecure about their role and expectations when beginning with their child in playschool. It is so even in schools where the teachers have strong opinions or believes about the transition between home and school. The parents anticipated more leadership from the teachers, to know the borders between what was expected from them and what they could expect from the teachers. Part of the new method is to fade out those gray areas, so both parent and pedagogues know each other’s roles.

Another very important part of the approach is that most of the families begin at playschool simultaneously. That way parents get to know each other and the relationship between them is likely to become stronger. Hypothetically this will lead to a stronger collaboration between parents and a sense of belonging, an important dynamic for developing a democratic partnership. An important part being that the families sense that they have ownership of the experience and feel included. This is a period that the families learn about the playschool and the pedagogues get an opportunity to know the child as a part of a family.

According to a new act of law on playschools, parents are supposed to be in an interactive relationship with the playschool and are given power through elected parent counsel (Iceland, act of law 90/2008). Loris Malaguzzi (2009) an Italian educator and a leader of the preschool education in the town Reggio Emilia, stress the importance of parents and playschool communicating and talking together. His view is that parents are supposed to be the playschool’s collaborators and main allies. To be able to be that, the playschool and parents have to discuss matters that are important to both.

It is in the spirit of the philosophy of Malaguzzi and an important factor of the new approach, to support the idea that the playschool is a community where both parents and pedagogues have a voice in a democratic relationship. The perception of education as being one of the pillars of democracy is long standing. According to John Dewey; ‘A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated

experience' (John Dewey, 1916. p. 87). Dewey (1916) emphasized the importance of shared values that society has built up and the value of free associations between; groups, ideas and individuals. But he also claimed that 'the conception of education as social process and function has no definite meaning until we define the kind of society we have in mind' (1916, p.97). In his own words an idea of democratic society is reflected as:

A society which make provision for participation in it goods of all its members on equal terms and which secure flexible readjustments of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationship and control. (Dewey 1916, p.99)

These words of Dewey can be looked upon as a point of departure to develop a partnership between parents and playschool. The question many pedagogues face is; how can the playschool build up an evolving relationship with parents that will support the child, the parents and the playschool as a developing organisation in a democratic and vital way?

Osler and Starkey, (2005) argue that a democratic school provides opportunities for a wide range of communication and collaboration. It is a school where people are responsible to and for others as well as one self. Children can begin at a very young age in playschool. The parents are their advocates, therefore it is essential that they trust the pedagogues and are ready to communicate and collaborate with the school community. If a real opportunity is provided for parents to get to know each other as well as the daily schedule, and the pedagogues it can be argued that they are more likely to want to be a part of the school life. That they will take a personal interest in what is happening and gain a sense of control. That will for example lead to parents being more willing to involve themselves in school politics (for ex. in parent's board and in cooperation).

Another way to describe a democratic school is that it is a school in *becoming*, a school that is ready to define itself again and again, to reinvent itself according to; new ideas, the culture and the society that it is situated in, on the basis of human rights and human equality. In other words a school that is ready to look at children, parents, teachers and society as whole not as fragmented pieces. Over the years pedagogues have developed the curriculum, the frame, their ideas on the importance of collaboration between homes and schools. But this first orientation period, when a family begins in a playschool, has not been developed or looked at too closely. The methods have stayed more or less the same, and neither the methods, nor the theoretical background have been much contested, in Iceland at least. However to be able to contest an idea, the first step is to acknowledge it and analyse. Moss (2007) argues that playschools can be places for the production of new knowledge or reproduction of old knowledge, as may be seen as the case with the new approach in Iceland. An old theory and method based on that theory is contested, and analysed, it is thought through, from this point of departure a new method is developed.

About the study

The study was conducted in seven playschools in Iceland during September of 2009. All of the schools had changed from the older approach to the new method. During the fall of 2008 I wrote an official blog at my blog site about the new approach, after learning about it from a Reggio Emilia inspired school in Sweden. Shortly after this, some pedagogues contacted me and wanted to learn more and try this new method. In March of 2009, a new playschool opened and decided to try out and develop the idea from an Icelandic perspective. I worked as a consultant at the playschool. The playschool offered an open lecture for pedagogues from other schools that war well sought. During the fall of 2009 six more schools chose to try the method and I decided to interview the leading pedagogues in each of those schools.

Main findings

According to the pedagogues trust and closeness developed easily between families and pedagogues. The parents were not in a role of guests, visiting the school. One pedagogue said “they are more at home” and the young parents don’t know any other method so for them, this is a normal way of beginning with a child in playschool. When one pedagogue reflected on the first relationship between the personal and the parents they were not as shy and strained as she was used to before. The parents were more secure of them selves and their role. “The parent see the day as it is”, one pedagogue said. According to her the parents will see both the good and the “bad” time of each day. They know that some crying is a normal part of every day in playschools.

According to the pedagogues both parents were active through the first days. Some children came with both parents and in some cases parents divided the days between themselves. In Iceland both parents get parental leave and they can’t divide some months between them, it can be argued that because of father’s involvement with their children from the birth they will look at beginning at playschool as a normal extension of their duties as fathers.

One of the goals of setting up a special method of beginning at playschool is to build up a trust and strong relationship between parents and pedagogues. The goal is for parents to be interested and secure in coming to the pedagogues, amongst others, with their worries and thoughts. “Parents are more likely to talk to me in an informal way, now” one of the pedagogues said. “I think I know the parents better” another pedagogue said. “They are more likely to call me or approach me in an informal manner than I was used to.” “There is other kind of rapport between the parents, they discuss differently between them.”

The approach has resulted in some pedagogue’s thinking they get to know the children and parents in a way that was new to them. From their perspective the parents acquire a deeper and more profound understanding of the daily life at the playschool. According to the pedagogues an informal and a friendly rapport grew between the parents, they did chat more during transition time and at the parking lot.

The children’s crying period is perceived to be shorter with the new approach, which means that the pedagogues feel able to start the formal curriculum and daily schedule earlier than

during the traditional approach. None of the pedagogues wanted to return to the traditional approach.

The belief that children are doer's in their own life and can be able and competent was clearly visible in the words of the pedagogues. One pedagogue thought it was a positive method that in her playschool children got to "choose" the person whom they connected to. It had not been decided beforehand who should be the key person for each child. During the first days, the pedagogues followed the children and from there decided to who was to be the contact person. Most of the pedagogues reported that most of the children easily connected to the personal and each other, but at the same time acknowledge that they had to be open toward that not being the case with all children. In those cases a pedagogue has to be selected and made responsible. According to research this is a real danger that pedagogues have to be aware of and work with (Kienig, 2002; Pianta og Stuhlman, 2004).

Walkerdine (2009) points toward the risk following the perception that the pedagogic or philosophy is *either - or*, instead of allowing one to think *both- and*. The idea that a child is learning to be in the playschool, does not exclude the importance of attachment nor does it rule out the method of key-persons. The object is for all children to be attached to someone. The pedagogues mirrored the view that the children felt secure, they were not looking for their parents, looking toward the door as they were used to during the old method. The body clock was set to a new pace during this new method. All children got used to a long school day from the beginning and adjust themselves to that. Nobody is saying that all crying is over, it is normal for most children to show their emotion and miss their parents. It is way of life and pedagogues have to recognize that. The pedagogues that participated in this research did and thought that parents did so to. At last on the fourth day, most children came to school and waved goodbye to their parents, happy to go to this place called playschool.

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