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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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Learning democracy in Danish kindergartens - benefits and drawbacks

Kim Judson

Slagelse Seminariat (Denmark)

During the last twenty years Danish kindergartens have been through a tremendous development, and experiments have been made in order to build the best educational methods to train children for the society they grow into.

From the room-divided kindergarten to the open-plan kindergarten

Kindergartens have usually been structured around a unit divided into rooms, in which each child was allocated to a room according to her/his age. Each room would have a permanent group of staff taking care of the children, and each day was normally very structured, with schedules time-tabling each activity and its duration. Lunch and the afternoon fruit break were set for the same time each day and the children always ate and played at the same times. Each day was structured by rules and managed by the kindergarten teachers.

The opposite structure is now found in open-plan kindergartens. Here there are no rules. The children are still based in a special room according to age, but most of their day is spent in other rooms, or outside, with other children of different ages. The children meet in their own room in the morning to say hello to everybody, but then choose which workshop they will attend in the morning and which in the afternoon. Between the workshops the children can play freely either outside or inside the kindergarten and they are free to eat whenever they are hungry. The kindergarten teachers' work is based on the principle that each child is a free individual, free to choose whatever it likes. Choice has consequences for what is possible and what is not possible; when children choose one thing they are in effect choosing not to do another thing – they cannot take part in all activities.

Changing from a structured form to a less structured form

Before changing the structure of the kindergarten several factors have to be considered. Firstly it is important to see the structure from the child's point of view, that is to consider under which conditions the child best develops social and other skills. Secondly, what implications does the structure have for the child's understanding of itself and of the democratic process? Thirdly, does it affect the child as a whole not to have a common base? And fourthly, how do the kindergarten teachers avoid 'losing' some of the children in an open-plan structure?

Under which conditions does the child develop the best social skills as well as other skills?

One of the most important purposes of a Danish kindergarten is the development of the social skills of the child. An average Danish child spends almost 40 hours per week in the

kindergarten, meaning that most of the social education of the child is taking place in the kindergarten¹. The average child:adult ratio is more than 1:10². This means that for most of the time the children are left on their own, learning social skills the hard way, from each other. For socially weak children this could lead to non-social behaviour, but for the strong children it can lead to good social adaptive skills and well-developed negotiation techniques, both of which are very important skills for life in a democratic society.

In an open-plan kindergarten the children are left to make their own choices about where to spend the day. This means that children spend time in different workshops, and in the playground or in other playrooms are not under supervision but are left very much to themselves. The theory behind this is to make the children develop an understanding of the meaning of making a choice. They will become aware of the consequences of their choices (for example, if I do this, I cannot do that). From a social point of view this means that their choice is based on several considerations (what do I want to do today, who is in charge of which workshop, who is taking part in that workshop). These considerations should, in a socialising context, develop self-esteem and self-consciousness in making choices.

However, one of the drawbacks in the open-plan kindergarten is that children tend to want to swap between the different activities. A child might start in one workshop and then meet difficulties which mean he or she has to wait for help: instead of waiting, she or he gives up the activity and leaves for another workshop. Other reason for swapping workshops could be that a kindergarten teacher reproves the child for inadequate social behaviour, or because a friend decides to swap workshops, so the first child decides to do the same.

This movement between workshops, and the high number of children for each adult, makes it difficult for the kindergarten teacher to supervise the children fully and also makes it hard for the teacher to develop a full picture of a single child's development. This means that individual children may stay out of close observation, avoiding supervision.. One way of addressing this difficulty is to make some things compulsory (for example, when a child chooses to attend a workshop, it must stay in it until it finishes). This emphasises the impact of the choice the child makes, but it prevents the child from doing what it wants to do.

What implications does the structure have for the child's understanding of itself and of the democratic process?

The structure of the kindergarten is very important for learning democracy. In the traditional divided-room kindergarten, the children are offered very little choice – the boundaries are often very limited in order to make the daily schedule work. One of the reasons for these limitations is lack of space. A typical room in a kindergarten is about 45 square metres, which has to contain about twenty children and three adults plus tables and chairs³. Such conditions make it very difficult to allow each child to make decisions about what he or she wants. It is possible to teach the children the basics of democracy (for example, making suggestions, letting everybody be heard and making choices based on a majority), but one of the drawbacks is that the individual child does not have the

¹ Velfærdsanalyser fra BUPL en velfærds- og familiepolitisk redegørelse, BUPL 1999.

² Velfærdsanalyser fra BUPL en velfærds- og familiepolitisk redegørelse, BUPL 1999

³ Klit, Lene. Fra Forbudtland til Mågodtland, 0 – 14 nr. 2 1999.

opportunity to choose between different options and hence dedicate him- or herself to the activity he or she likes most: the child must follow the decisions of the majority. This could develop a conception of democracy as a process in which individual needs are suppressed because of the needs or wishes of others, and this might not support the development of the individual child's self-consciousness and self-esteem.

In an open-plan structure the child usually has more choices, and it is possible for the child to attend the workshop it likes most. Very often the children can eat when they are hungry, instead of at a fixed lunchtime. This develops in the individual a sense of 'I can do what I want, whenever I want'. Does this support the idea of democracy? From an individual point of view it does not. The child develops the idea that everything is possible, and it is simply a question of deciding what it wants. But this is not how society works. The notion of letting children decide and implement all their own decisions might develop very narcissistic individuals, rather than the feelings of solidarity and common understanding which are the bases of democracy.

Does it affect the child as a whole not to have a common base?

In the kindergarten that is composed of divided rooms, each child has a secure base. Here they always meet the same children, the same adults and they feel secure within the place. In an open-plan kindergarten, they meet in their own room, but afterwards attend the workshop they select, and may swap between one or more workshops during the morning and afternoon.

The possibility of deciding, and later swapping, can cause stress in some children. They do not have the same primary kindergarten teacher at hand from whom to seek comfort, but will meet several different teachers during the day. This, and the possibility of swapping all the time, might develop restlessness. It is possible that a higher degree of stress might influence the children's health. Children under stress have a higher rate of absence through sickness than those children who are not stressed⁴. But stress might also occur in kindergartens divided into rooms under the conditions described earlier.

Another consideration is the child's opportunity to identify with suitable people. In their development children need to identify with more developed – older – children; these older children can demonstrate and model skills the smaller children strive to develop. In the traditional kindergarten, divided by age group into separate rooms, this aspect is not possible, because all the children in a room are about the same age. In the open-plan kindergarten the availability of older role-models is a part of the overall concept - workshops and playmates are not chosen by age group, but by shared interests. However the spread in age groups could be solved in the room-divided kindergarten by mixing the children by age in each room.

Finally the noise level in Danish kindergartens is very high. In a traditional kindergarten divided into rooms the noise level is very high, because the children have more conflicts with each other and because the space to carry out different activities and games is limited. In an open-plan kindergarten, the possibility of choice lowers the number of

⁴ Ringmose, Carsten. Ro, renlighed og regelmæssighed er ikke døde – de lugter bare gammeldags. 0 – 14 nr. 2 – 1999.

conflicts and the noise level is thus also lower. This in turn leads to a lower level of stress and hence to healthier children.

How do the kindergarten teachers avoid 'losing' some of the children in an open-plan structure?

In the room-divided kindergarten the teacher has the possibility of observing each child every day and thus following his or her development, socially and physically. This insight into the child's daily activities and contacts places the kindergarten teacher in a very good position to evaluate development. The open-plan structure might lead to the teacher losing such a full insight into the children; different teachers can only observe the child for short periods, so the supervision of the child might be absent or wrong. This is especially the case when children are swapping between activities. In an open-plan kindergarten a single child or two can easily slip out of one activity, merge into another one, and go on like this all day. The kindergarten teachers have less possibility of supervising the child according to its needs because it is less easy for any one teacher to gain an overall view.

In essence this means that we can easily 'lose' the weaker children by not observing their needs. Children can use the possibility of choice to 'hide' and this prevents them from developing into active citizens. On the other hand, if a structure which combines the two types of kindergarten is offered and, as mentioned earlier, has compulsory workshops, the kindergarten teacher retains the ability to supervise the individual child in the most suitable way⁵, and it gives the children a permanent kindergarten teacher from whom they can seek comfort.

Democracy and the possibility of choice – how the children choose

The individual child's choice is very often based on who else is choosing the activity: choices can be based on a social hierarchy and hence on different motives than complete freedom. For example, a socially strong boy may choose an art and craft workshop because it matches his interests. But a second boy, who is not socially strong, may choose the same workshop, for different motives - he is looking up to the first boy, who may also be the individual who decides who should take part in a game when they are playing in the playground. The second boy is choosing the workshop because he wants to be with the first boy. Is this a democratic way to choose? When we are taught democracy, we are often taught that everybody is equal, meaning that choices should be made from personal convictions, not from those of others. On the other hand, it could be argued that if one chooses to be led by another, then a free choice has been made, and hence democracy has been maintained.

It could be argued that the development of the second child's self-esteem and self-consciousness is suppressed in such a situation. But is this more important than the development of democratic understanding? Often children (and people in general) do make choices based on what others are deciding⁶ - the activity itself is a secondary purpose, and being together is the primary purpose.

⁵ Hansen, Niels Chr. Pioner eller Prügelknabe. 0 – 14 nr. 2 1999.

⁶ Gulløv, Eva. Betydningsdannelse blandt børn. Gyldendal, 1999.

Conclusion

Danish kindergartens have tried to develop democracy through open-plan structures and organisation. In open-plan kindergartens the children themselves choose what they want to do and when they want to eat. There are both benefits and drawbacks in teaching democracy in this way. The open-plan kindergarten is not an objective in itself but a means to develop democracy. The benefits are first of all that children make their own choices. Secondly, they develop a high degree of self-esteem and self-consciousness. They are very motivated to carry out activities, because they have chosen them themselves. This might lead to a lower noise level in the kindergarten because of fewer conflicts among the children. However, open-plan institutions have some drawbacks: stress levels may be higher among the children because they do not have a permanent kindergarten teacher from whom they can seek comfort, and stress levels increase with the number of choices the children have to make.

From a kindergarten teacher's point of view, a drawback could be that the general view of the development of the child is lost. Some children might be hidden in the swapping among activities, hence avoiding supervision. It is also argued that children's choices can be based on social conditions rather than on their interests, which means that democracy – the notion that choices are made from individual interests – is not being demonstrated, and that we accept leadership among the children when they are making choices. The question is then, how we develop the individual child's self-esteem and self-consciousness, if we accept leadership in choices.

In many Danish kindergartens there is a mixture between the kindergarten divided into rooms with permanent kindergarten teachers, and the open-plan kindergarten with workshops. Experience suggests that this might be the best solution. Here the children can seek comfort and at the same time be supervised properly.