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Children in kindergarten - a possibility to participate in democracy?

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Over the last twenty years in Denmark there has been much discussion about participation and democracy as important elements in the pedagogical debate. Many experiments and tests have taken place in institutions in our country: this paper focuses on a project aimed at investigating possibilities for young children to participate as 'citizens' in their kindergartens. The project was carried out with the cooperation of the Danish Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture and the Social Ministry .

The observations reported on in this paper was carried out in a kindergarten in Copenhagen, where the intention was

- to build a kindergarten where children have a right to make their own choices
- to turn the pedagogical view from the adult perspective to that of the child.

Previously the adults had made all decisions for the children. The arguments supporting this were:

- the adult had a responsibility for the children
- children are less competent than the adult
- children have less knowledge.

Consequently it was argued that adults had to take charge of children's needs and upbringing, and teach them 'real life' skills. It was held that as children grow older they 'automatically' become wiser, more reasonably and more competent, and therefore could be increasingly granted the right to have influence on their own lives.

In the modern kindergarten staff now see this differently. Reflecting on democracy, it can be argued that democracy only can exist between human beings who are equal and in a situation where each person has the right to influence the conditions of his or her life, the right to think, to speak and to be heard. Children in kindergarten, like adults, have their own wishes, but the wishes of the children often deal with important events here and now – and children have strong opinions about what is important!

The project started from the position that in fact it was the adult who decided everything in the kindergarten, and asked how daily life in the kindergarten looked from a child's perspective.

The first changes were to give the children the right to decide when to eat their lunch, and whether they wanted to play outside or inside. It was soon found that children were able to deal well with these choices, and they were therefore given more freedom. They were allowed to decide which activities they would participate in, with whom they would cooperate, where each activity would take place, and for how long it would last. They could also make decisions about whether they wanted to join excursions away from the kindergarten, and to make their own choice of drink (water, milk or juice).

All these 'rights' were formulated by the adult in the kindergarten with the object of giving the children as much influence as possible in their daily lives. It was felt that children know what is good for them, and that they usually know what they want to do.

The adult in the kindergarten has a special responsibility to create circumstances and spaces for all the children's 'projects'. This means setting up interesting activities, in which the children are free to join, but in which they do not necessarily have to participate. A variety of activities is required to provide the children with a choice, and those which gain the children's special interest need to be followed up.

The new rights for the children can be summed up as:

- the right to make decisions about their own body (am I hungry? thirsty ? do I want to go to the toilet? when shall I sit? when shall I go and where? shall I run? whom shall I play with?)
- the right to make decisions about their own time (when to do what)
- the right to make decisions about the space they are in (going out? staying inside?)

In this kindergarten the children learn to think about their wishes and to define for themselves what is important for them: they learn to choose, and also how to deal with making a wrong choice; they will also learn to select from several opportunities. And they do this without adult interference. This is important, because the pedagogues believe that children cannot be taught democracy - they learn it through their own practice.

How do we understand small children's participation and their right to self-determination in their daily life?

Søren Gundelach discusses this in *Børns medbestemmelse i daginstitutionen*, setting democracy, participation and self-determination against each other in a theoretical debate. He looks upon participation and self-determination as two different ideas: self-determination (the Frankfurter school) deals mostly with the idea that the child tries to become free of the grown-up, and the adult should therefore help the child in this liberation process.

On the other hand to self-determination is participation (based on the Cultural-Historical School), in which the adult is always the responsible person, aware of the child's needs, who always works ahead of the child, showing him or her how to do something, ... and how to solve the problem!

In self-determination the adults tend to make themselves invisible, while in participation the adult's perspective is stronger than that of the child's.

According to Gundelach, the ideal situation would be to build a bridge between the two ideas: to this end, he suggests a pedagogical model based on negotiations between the child and the adult. However, in real life not everything is open to negotiation. For instance, the child is not allowed to decide everything; the adults are obliged to determine some circumstances because of the conditions and laws relating to their work. What is important is

- to make those circumstances and conditions visible to the children
- where the adults must act as the authority in the kindergarten, they should make the power visible.

Gundelach holds that it is important that children have the opportunity to decide some things with other children, and that this should be a right, given by the adult to the child.

The children often experience a community in the kindergarten, but they never choose companions they do not like. In the democratic kindergarten it is necessary to build an institution which provides sufficient space, time and opportunity for children to develop their own friendships, without interruptions by adults. Most children do not want to be alone: they like to be with other children, and often negotiate with friends until they make an agreement of their own. Relationships are built on an appreciation of give and take: they know that a good friendship is built on good play, where they have the chance to exchange roles.

But what about the power the adults have?

We must accept the fact that the adults have power in the kindergarten, even when the children have been given some rights as described, but it is necessary to discuss the difference between responsibility and power. The adult has both responsibility towards, and power over the children in the kindergarten. The responsibility towards the children clearly lies with the adult, but concerning the power, it is worth asking:

- is the adult's position of power based simply on a traditional relationship?
- what purpose is connected to the adult's power?
- what right is connected to the adult's power?

It is important to see the adult's relations to children in the same context as other kinds of human relationship. We are responsible because we care for them: it is a part of our mutual community, and this is built on sympathy and good relations. Power over other people is something that can be given or taken; the point is that

- power must be discussed;
- the power of the adults has to be visible; and
- the power eventually can be accepted or be rejected.

Rules and diversities

In Denmark we have a long-standing cultural tradition built on the value of being as equal as possible. The ambition has been to give everybody equality of circumstance within the welfare system. But in contrast, Danish kindergartens often had identical structures and similar ways of organising pedagogical practice in their daily work. This led to very strict plans for daily life in kindergartens: lunch time at 11 o'clock, all children in the playground after lunch, fruit and juice in the afternoon and so on. All these strict 'rules and traditions' have had to be discussed in the context of the democratic kindergarten, because in this situation the adults have to start from the child's point of view, and with the real needs of the single, individual child. The result is:

- the rules in the kindergarten have been simplified to the few ones that are necessary;
- the adult follows the children in their activities and in their choices; and
- adults have had to develop other ways of sharing the pedagogical work in the kindergarten.

The new role of the adult

The children's perspective of the daily work in kindergartens required adults to reflect on their role of in the kindergarten. The adults, representing many different qualifications and competencies which arise from different ways of solving problems with children, are the basis of activities in the kindergarten, and they need to be considered in the light of their desire to support the children's right to be heard and to make their own choices.

In the project *Children as Citizens* in Ballerup (Denmark), there was a special focus on the adults' position in those kindergartens where many activities and initiatives were given to the children. The focus was named *From the role of adult to adult personality*. Adults had to move from the perspective of the traditional role they had occupied according the traditional culture in Danish institutions to become a personality, a personality which showed the children that the adult had different competencies and a special kind of humanity. It was found that:

- responsibility is something you have towards persons whom you care for
- this responsibility is very close to the pedagogical work with children's rights to participation in their daily life in the institution.

Children's right to make their own decisions is closely connected with the nature of their relationship to adults. Children are situated in a psychological and mental vacuum, in which only the strongest individuals survive, and the weakest withdraw. The important debate is

- how do we create possibilities for the child's choice through the child - adult relationship?
- should we consider that relations and decisions are complementary, and that neither can be understood or realised independently of the other?

Relations

The project also showed that these relations were important for the understanding of child-adult interactions. Interactions are defined here as various small events going on in the kindergarten every day (often they are of the question-answer action kind, but these are not relations). Relations are special, implying intimacy, confidence and reciprocity, and are built when the need and the desire for a relationship arises. Relationships are necessary for the practice which respects children's rights to make their own decisions. In practice this has meant that the adult becomes primarily a pedagogue for the child, but the relationship is not only a formulation of words but more a caring relationship between one child and one adult.

In summary, every child has the right to have at least one good relationship with an adult – but of course this has not yet been achieved.

Children's perspective: the special point of view of the child

Adults are often concerned about what they must do in order to ensure that children learn – will children really learn all that is necessary if they are allowed to make all decisions themselves? Some of the results from the project in Ballerup show that children often

chose to concentrate on a special interest in the kindergarten and therefore not to select other activities.

Here the adults have a particular task :

- to follow each single child, and to know exactly what each is interested in for the moment;
- to set up activities built on special themes, open to all children, so that the children experience an adult concentrating on activities which they had decided was special, and in which the children are able to join.

The children learned (after some time) that:

- when you choose among possible activities, you cannot do them all;
- what is chosen has a meaning - it is your personal choice;
- wrong decisions can be made; and
- it is necessary to prioritise.

All this leads to a daily life in the kindergarten in which both adults and children have to build relations and variations just to cope with 25- 40 children's lives, wishes and decisions.

Is this an aimless pedagogical practice?

Examining a pedagogical practice often reveals one of two perspectives: either the practice has an intention, or it is aimless.

In the first instance, we refer to a practice with short and long term purposes. Aims, practice and methods are connected to each other in order to meet the purposes.

The aimless practice describes a series of more structural conditions which drive the pedagogue; often these are imposed from outside. We advocate a practice which combines the two, so that

- the adult both plans and take initiatives, but both takes account of their meaning for the children and shares that meaning with them;
- the intentions are to give the children good experiences, if they want them; and
- the children are able to follow (and choose not to follow) their personal interests.

Finally, to return to the connection between children's rights and a democratically pedagogy. The democratic idea is based on equality, equal rights to choose, respect for human beings, respect for diversity, respect for our own experiences, and for the process of learning.

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