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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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## **The encounter between the adult and the child in pedagogical practice**

*Lotta Bjervås and Anette Emilson*  
*University of Kalmar (Sweden)*

This paper will discuss teachers' approaches to and attitudes towards children, and the consequences these views can have for children in pedagogical practice. Two commonly used expressions in Swedish pre-schools and compulsory schools are 'the competent child' and 'the child in focus'. Our purpose is to challenge these expressions with the intention of uncovering some different meanings and pedagogical implications. Hence our questions are:

- how do teachers in pre-schools and compulsory schools relate to children?
- how do we understand the encounter between adult and child in pedagogical practice?

We have reviewed existing research concerning these issues.

### **Why do we talk of 'the competent child'?**

Currently there is great interest in different kinds of competences. Even pre-school teachers use the word 'competent' when they talk about young children, but what do they mean when they speak about *the competent child*? Is it a matter of creating capable children who will grow up to be capable adults, who can contribute to the successful development of society? Is the child competent by nature, or will it develop and become competent? Is the child always competent, irrespective of the context, or is the child only as competent as the context allows it to be? When teachers use the expression, it is their responsibility to reflect on these questions, and on the consequences their answers have for pedagogical practice.

Dion Sommer (1998) talks of a paradigm shift in approaches to and attitudes towards children. Anne Trine Kjørholt (2001) agrees, and points out that during the last fifteen years we have created a new perspective of childhood. We now look on children as independent, individual citizens with their own democratic rights. They have the right to develop competences for their own sake. However Sommer (1997) also emphasises the risk of using the word 'competent', because it can be seen as an example of the adulation of the clever person. Professor Jens Qvortorp believes that the idea of the competent child has gone too far (Christina Thors Hugosson 2002): according to Qvortorp it is not reasonable to deny that children are still children, and it is dangerous if we give them the same rights and duties as adults. Children need adults to protect them because they are young, vulnerable and still developing. Sommer (1998) also refers to children as more vulnerable and have fewer skills than adults, pointing to many studies showing that young children have *different* skills and competences. However, both Sommer and Qvortorp point out that the 'competent child' is something different from a 'little competent adult': we taken this as a given in our paper.

Some aspects seem to be particularly important when talking about the competent child in the pre-school. These are: how we look upon the child; how we look upon knowledge and how to learn; and what we think about the pedagogical environment. By the

pedagogical environment we mean how we think about, organise and present the space and materials in pre-school. These aspects are significant when the teacher constructs his or her image of the competent child, and are also crucial for how teachers view their work and practise their profession. Together they create a pedagogical practice in which either the child's competences will be visible and can develop, or where they will be limited.

### **Different ways of viewing a child**

What is a child? This question allows for many answers. Gunilla Dahlberg and Hillevi Lenz Taguchi (1994) remind us that the concept of the child always depends on different historical and social contexts. Nevertheless, the answers to the question always have consequences for what happens in pedagogical practice.

How we view children and what we think about them is demonstrated in our actions towards them. Teachers do not always speak their thoughts, but they tell the child through their actions whether or not they think s/he is competent. It is important for teachers to consciously reflect on how they view and think about children. Carlina Rinaldi, from the pre-school in Reggio Emilia, says that each of us has his or her own image of the child: an image that reflects the expectations we have when we look at a child (Edwards & Gandini 2001). She emphasises that childhood is created by each society and therefore each society creates its own image of the child. Childhood is a cultural convention, and therefore there are many possible images. Rinaldi points out that some images focus on what children are able to do and their power and capacity, while others focus more on children's needs and what they are not able to do. These different ways of looking at the child give the teachers either positive or negative expectations, and this influences how they construct pedagogical practice - whether it values or limits the qualities and potential that they attribute to children (*op cit.*).

Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi (1994) describe how developmental psychology has influenced pedagogical practice and how we view and interpret children. They say that much of what is happening in Swedish pre-schools - both working methods and content - emanates from developmental psychology. They describe three different images of the child. Firstly, they identify 'the child as nature', which connects the child to Rousseau's romantic idea of childhood as a time of innocence. It is also linked to Fröbel, who said that when children play they are expressing their inner life: he considered that nothing the child does can be wrong, and that the learning process is less important in pre-school. The teacher who views a child in this way does not try to challenge the child in the learning process: the child is too immature to be able to understand and do more.

The secondly way of looking upon a child described by Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi is the 'the child as a re-constructor of culture and knowledge'. Both culture and knowledge are important for the child, and for society, to be carried forward from one generation to the next. The issue is what is happening in the encounter between the child and the adult: the teacher who has this image of the child is giving the child the 'right' answers, and expecting them to return the knowledge as exactly as possible. Such a teacher shows the child exactly what to do to perform a task and achieve a predictable aim. The teacher is less interested in the child's questions, or the knowledge and experiences they possess: the child is not the subject in a learning process.

'The child as a constructor of culture and knowledge' is Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi's third way of looking upon the child. The teacher with this image of the child not only

expects the child to reconstruct culture and knowledge, but believes that the child is also a *producer* of culture and knowledge. The child is the subject in the learning process, and s/he can participate and make a contribution to the learning processes of other children. In the encounter between the teacher and the child, both become researchers. The adult participates in the learning process with respect for the child's ability to share the responsibility for constructing knowledge.

Sommer (1997) claims that children's ability to solve problems strongly depends on the context where the problems are to be solved. Since teachers in pre-schools create this context it is necessary that they reflect over their own image of the child, because this will influence what is happening in pedagogical practice. Anne Smith (2000) says that when we look at a child and focus on its rights rather than focusing on its needs, we cannot see the child only as a receiver of knowledge. We have to look on children as active, competent citizens who have their own way of understanding the world and can make a contribution to their education, if they are allowed to do so.

Lenz Taguchi (2000) challenges teachers to consider what they take for granted in their practice. Sommer (1997) urges teachers to ask 'How can I resist this and think of and understand the child in another way, using new theories and at the same time, look upon these theories as one of many possible ways of understanding the child'.

If the expression 'the competent child' is to be more than a meaningless phrase, teachers will have to focus on their image of the child and ask themselves 'Is there a connection between what I say and what I do?' The child in pre-school demands of the teacher: 'How do you address yourself to my competence *and* to my vulnerability? Which of my competences am I allowed to use and develop in this pre-school?' The teacher's answer to this reveals their image of the competent child.

### **The child in focus**

What complicates the expression 'the child in focus' is that in pedagogical practice the expression is used in different ways, giving it different meanings. For example, two widely different perspectives are:

1. The adults or professional perspective: the child is placed 'in focus' for adults' various purposes. Teachers can have a marked 'child-centred' alignment. Birgitta Qvarsell (2001a) suggests that this means that adults place the child in focus to determine their interests and activities. From such an attitude it follows that the child must change and transform in order to fit the system. The pedagogical encounter reflects an asymmetrical approach, in which teachers have a privileged position of observing children (instead of observing themselves), noting shortcomings in children.
2. Rather closer to the child's own perspective: in which the adults have a genuine interest in children's life-world and conditions (Qvarsell, 2001a). This allows teachers to interpret and understand the child's perspective in a wider context. Pedagogical practice and conditions fit the child, and not *vice versa*. The pedagogical encounter reflects a more symmetrical relationship between the adult and the child, with respect and mutuality as two important components.

What is illustrated here are two different attitudes to pedagogical activity, based on different views of children. But pedagogical practice cannot be described in either one or

the other: it is much more complex. The intention here is to show that the two perspectives can be used as starting-points for discussion. The question follows: is it the children or the activity and its conditions that must be adapted, formed and measured?

The dominant perspective of developmental psychology has strongly affected the way of viewing children, learning and upbringing (see above). Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2002) argue that the tradition of developmental psychology linked with the pre-school functions as a technology for normalisation, which determines how a child should be. This creates a form of hierarchy among children, in which position depends on whether or not the child has reached a specific stage of development: the focus is then placed on attempting to reach the norm, and to avoid or to correct discrepancies.

This reasoning is similar to the discussion in special education, where Ingemar Emanuelsson (2000) problematises questions such as

- do we talk about pupils with difficulties? or
- do we talk about pupils in a difficulty situation?

### **The child perspective**

‘The child perspective’ is not univocal, and in this paper we will not show all its different meanings. Several Swedish authors (Strander 1997; Torstensson-Ed, 1997; Qvarsell, 2001b) have raised the importance of sorting out ‘the child perspective’, and they emphasise the influence of childhood in everything we do. Childhood is not something that can be left behind, but is something each individual carries with them, and our relationship to children is formed by our own growth (Strander, 1997). Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson (1995) suggests that teachers’ attitude to children depends on cultural influences of which they are not usually aware. These influences determine our view of the world. Thus teachers need to analyse their own behaviour towards children, to consciously reflect on possible pedagogical action (*op cit.*).

Tullie Torstensson-Ed (1997) suggests that the most genuine child perspective is to try to take on the position of children, to see the world with children’s eyes. Kerstin Strander (1997) also emphasises the importance of entering into how children are thinking and feeling in order to understand their needs and actions. Looked at this way, ‘the child perspective’ does not become a generalised term meaning to put the child in focus but

To look at something from children’s perspective is the same as trying to understand how the world looks if we take the position of children – trying to see and understand with their eyes and senses (Qvarsell, 2001a, s 3. Authors' translation)

This has pedagogical implications for teachers. These include ‘having to listen to the child and respect him/her as an individual with its own rights and perceptions’ (SOU, 1997:116, s 139: Authors' translation). Teachers should not object to this, as it is an aim in pedagogical practice to understand each child and to ensure their best interest. The question to be asked is why, then, is it still uncommon to make extensive use of the child’s own perspective?

However, a new attitude towards children is discernible on the value of listening to children and trying to understand their perspective. Research about young children (e.g.

Gopnik, Meltzoff, Kuhl, 1999) emphasises a new view of children as thinking, observing and reasoning human beings. Even young children draw conclusions, experiment and solve problems in the world around them: how open is the adults' world to take account of the knowledge and views of children? The Swedish Barnombudsmannen (Children's Ombudsman) (2000) points out that this demands the co-operation of the whole of society in having a conscious child perspective: all adults should perceive that children and young people have something important to say and contribute.

To seek knowledge via children about their life-world is a relatively new phenomenon. To understand children and to make it possible to see the world with their eyes, adults must have admission to children's life-world. Teachers have to do their utmost to become a part of the children's world; this demands an active interest and a deeply engaged professional teacher. The knowledge needed as a teacher in the encounter with children is provided by the children themselves.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper we have tried to challenge the meanings, interpretations and consequences of expressions commonly used in pedagogical practice. Our analysis does not yield simple answers or solutions. Instead it emphasises just how complex pedagogical practice can be. Different views arise and lead to different consequences for pedagogical encounter. One conclusion from our review of present research is that we are in the middle of a paradigm shift, i.e. approaches to and attitudes towards children are changing slowly, even if, according to Roger Säljö (2002), developmental psychology still predominates in pedagogical practice.

In addition to the perspective of developmental psychology, we also have tried to highlight the expressions 'the competent child' and 'the child in focus' from a more relational point of view in which the focus in the pedagogical encounter moves from the specific child to inter-human relations. Moira von Wright (2000) writes that pedagogical practice, which permeates a perspective of relations, takes its starting-point in concrete inter-human relations when we want to understand both each other and ourselves. The essentials become the actions of people and the processes of interaction where children and adults encounter one another in communication; dealing with an inter-subjective encounter which comprises a concord in contemporaneousness. This demands complete presence and attention from the teacher.

We hope that these kinds of challenge indicate at least something of the complexity, the great variety and multiplicity of pedagogical expressions. In spite of this one point of this discussion is to understand the expressions from a social constructional starting-point, where reality is seen as a social construction. It will then be possible to shift the focus from the individual child towards seeing the child in its context of relations and environment.

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