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Developing children's social competences in the Danish school system

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'In the school you have to act carefully because you are responsible for the education of human beings'

Modern society

Contemporary society has become an information society, with increased globalisation and internationalisation, and this means that children now have to be competent in many different ways. The education of children must therefore include development of personal and social competences as well as the traditional professional competences. They must become capable of managing their own lives. People in modern society live in an age characterised by change, at a speed never seen earlier in history. Beliefs in what were previously thought of as almost natural common values and moral standards are disintegrating, a fact which is reflected in both institutions and individuals, including schools, families and children's lives.

The modern family is scattered through the working day in time and space¹: The father works in one place in Denmark, perhaps far away from home or abroad, and the children can communicate with their mother on the mobile telephone from school and the child-care centre². Communication systems are highly developed and they do not require the involved parties to be in the same place. This influences us all, as individuals and as families. These ways of communicating impact on our lives as a whole, and in particular on schools and institutions where the mobile telephone and the computer have become 'natural' elements.

A number of functions which earlier were handled by families at home are now, in Denmark, taken care of by modern institutions for children³. This is especially true when it comes to care and upbringing. Most children are in day care or in kindergarten. These institutions are taking care of their socialisation, which earlier was learned in the family, especially from mothers. In Denmark 90% of all children spend their time in institutions while their parents are at work. We have the highest frequency in the world of women working outside the home, which is why the number of child-care centres is still increasing in Denmark.

The modern family

In this modern society the function of the family has changed. This is not to suggest that families are unimportant – the family is still a very important centre for the development and socialisation of children, and parents are still the most important people in children's lives, but the modern family is smaller than previously. The average family has three or

¹ Anthony Giddens : The consequences of modernity Polity press, Cambridge 1990

² Ibid. p. 23

³ 'Disembedding' – the things that normally took place in the families, are now handed over to the institutions.

four members, parents are older when they have their first child, and the children they have are in most cases planned children, whom they want to bring up as perfect children. Most of the parents, women as well as men, work many hours and very hard – their jobs are sometimes far away from home, which takes up a lot of time in travel – and the children spend most of their day with nursery assistants or kindergarten teachers.

This means that the conditions for creating a society and having a family are new. The family today is seen by several researchers as ‘a family of negotiation’ in contrast to the traditional image of a family, characterised by rules and moral standards of living. In the family of negotiation all the members have the same rights and discuss responsibility for what and for whom. Family life has to be planned and discussed. When the members of the family have been separated all day in different institutions they have to meet each other in the evening and everything has to be picture perfect – definitely without any conflicts.

Modern parents bring their children to day-care centres and schools, spoil them and do everything with the best intentions and wishes to secure peace in the family. The needs of the family have to be met – who wants what, when and how? Many families are split because of divorce. They live in new family constellations where conflicts due to these new constellations arise during the day, both between children and their biological parents and between their new ‘plastic parents’. Many children from these kinds of families have an increasing degree of influence on discussions. Some professionals point out that in some families it is the children who make the rules, when they are not at school or in kindergarten. There are still families with an in-built hierarchical structure. In these families the parents are authorities and decide everything: this is the case in many immigrant families. In other kinds of families, including the socially exposed, where everything is disorganised and the children have to manage their own lives and take care of several of the basic necessities of life, there are problems. In these ‘weak’ families it is difficult for the adults to cope with the surrounding society, and very often they are not integrated into the community around them – not even the labour market. The difference between the families is noticeable, especially what values and norms are different from previously. For instance there are many very different social traditions of living; what is eaten, children’s bedtimes, clothing, ways of spending holidays and so on.

Parents have now developed a certain expectation of teachers’ participation in their child’s upbringing, conditioned by the modern labour market, new family structures and children’s participation. They seem to expect the institutions and schools to develop their children’s social competences, including how to behave and act in social contexts.

The Danish school system

Folkeskole Act (The Danish Primary and Lower Secondary School)⁴

Chapter 1

1. The *Folkeskole* must – in cooperation with the parents – further the pupils’ acquisition of knowledge, skills, working methods and ways of expressing themselves and thus contribute to the all-round personal development of the individual pupil.

⁴ Ministry of Education Consolidation Act no. 55 of 17 January 1995

2. The *Folkeskole* must endeavour to create such opportunities for experience, industry and absorption that the pupils develop awareness, imagination and an urge to learn, so that they acquire confidence in their own possibilities and a background for forming independent judgements and for taking personal action.
3. The *Folkeskole* must familiarise the pupils with Danish culture and contribute to their understanding of other cultures and of man's interaction with nature. The school must prepare the pupils for active participation, joint responsibility, rights and duties in a society based on freedom and democracy. The teaching of the school and daily life must therefore build on intellectual freedom, equality and democracy.

It is clear that the Danish school system aims at a democratic education, and obeying the law above can be a very hard task for Danish teachers. In the following section we give our perspective on this very important matter.

Democratic education

Children must be able to think and act democratically in order to take responsibility in modern society. Democracy is very fragile; therefore they have to understand the democratic tradition, and one way of making this happen is teaching children democracy in school implicitly, so to speak.

All-round personal development goes on in the interaction between the individual and the surrounding communities. How can teachers contribute to a sensible and worthy development of both the individual and society? We are convinced that teachers and educationalists (in kindergartens and day nurseries) have a great influence on this development. To start with, ask yourself what knowledge and which skills contribute to such a development, and let these become criteria for selection of content⁵. Here it will be obvious that academic, social and personal competences are closely connected, and that knowledge is used in both private and social connections. It will also be obvious that a single person's freedom only exists when every person is prepared to take the responsibility for the development of society, giving the individual the possibility of living 'the good life' with others. Who wants to live 'the good life' all alone on a desert island? As the German theorist Wolfgang Klafki once suggested, you could base the school curriculum on the conflicts of society— not all of the time, but 40-50% of the time, because connection, context, and not least global and international mutual interdependence is the agenda of today and tomorrow in a democratic perspective.⁶

Teachers' qualifications

Teachers must be good models for this project to succeed. They must be conscious of the values transmitted to the next generation. What is important and what is not? They also need to be able to understand and listen to the children, in order to develop empathy and democracy in practice. The essence of democracy is dialogue. If teachers are not able to make real dialogues, to manage conflicts and to cooperate with the children, the children will probably not develop 'democratic intelligence'. This is our assumption: different competences are needed to develop 'democratic education' or 'energetic competence', as

⁵ Skolens rummelighed – fra idé til handling. UVM 2003 (only written in Danish)

⁶ Klafki 1996 : p. 43-81

the theorist Kristensen suggests. To achieve this aim, teachers must focus on the specific competences, demanding knowledge and courage to successfully reach this goal.

Practice

Dealing with conflicts in practice, with children, is one way to do this. With Marshall Rosenberg's theory as our starting point, we will demonstrate a possible approach. Another useful theory is 'the theory of communicative action' by Habermas, which we also want to demonstrate. It is of great importance to understand that learning should provide development of empathy, because the cognitive and the affective skills are not divided but connected dimensions which have mutual influence on each other. Therefore our contention is that development of empathy must be cultivated as an important element in the development of children's social competences. This can be done in three different ways:

1. in a professional context (in individual subjects)
2. explicitly with rehearsals developed to meet the practical situation
3. in a democratic education context.

The choice of the content in individual subjects can promote and encourage the development of social competences. Similarly, the choice of different approaches to a subject can encourage the development of empathy. All competences are developed most efficiently when children are busy and engaged with the things they are working on, and when they consider their work necessary, important or just exciting. That is why we do not see any contrast between professionalism and empathic thinking.

Teaching with the direct aim of developing empathy is also possible. Training sessions with giraffes and weasels⁷, with dogs and snails⁸, and with different games⁹ exist, and the aim of these is to train the children to imagine themselves in other people's situation, to learn to understand the background of their own and other people's actions, and to be aware of their own feelings and needs. In this kind of teaching the professional content is secondary to the training itself, as the aim is appropriate behaviour in different situations. These training programmes are not always very expedient as they can be intimidating for some children.

Teaching empathy in a democratic context is, as we see it, very appropriate to do in cooperation with children, and for many reasons:

- because in all matters we must live up to the aims of the *Folkeskole*¹⁰, which means education and upbringing to democracy
- it is a good idea to teach children the art of conversation, because the whole of modern society is built on communication, which means receiving information, talking, listening, discussing and argument. The German philosopher Jürgen

⁷ Rosenberg 2001 & Weirsø 2002

⁸ The material is called 'Step by step', and it is used at many schools in Denmark.

⁹ F.eks. 'Kort og godt' udgivet af dansk psykologisk forening

¹⁰ Act on the Folkeskole 1995

Habermas proposed four validity demands for a conversation, namely truth; intelligibility, correctness, and honesty¹¹. These demands are preconditions for a reasonable conversation, which can lead to decisions, compromises, renewals and a respect for democratic duties and rights. To put such a democratic practise over everything that you do with children and young people, may necessarily lead to a respect for other people's expressions and attitudes in life.

- democracy is so incredibly fragile that it demands a massive effort to preserve and improve it.

Handling conflicts

'Non violent communication' or just 'NVC' is one of many different methods that professionals use with positive outcomes in a number of schools. The Crime Prevention Council in Denmark has tested the method in three very different schools – in a process of development¹². Each of the schools has developed special exercises which can be used through the school day, in class or at the after-school centre, with all exercises adapted to the individual needs of the child.

The method does not only make demands on the development of the social and reflective competences of the pupils. To work with this or other similar methods every day at school or at the after-school centre, the kindergarten teacher, recreation centre teacher and the classroom teacher have to develop social competences which in practice enable the individual to solve conflicts communicatively. The teacher must behave as a role model every day. Professionals have to develop their own competences and learn this communicative language – NVK. Developing children's social competences demands the development of the same social competences for the teachers. The professionals have to deal with communication, conflicts and democratic communication on a daily basis in the classroom, in the teaching community, in the teaching team or in dialogue with parents. It is essential that the professionals behave like authorities and role models.

Final comments

The school must educate children for the whole of life, not only for working life. Therefore children must develop both personal, social and academic competences and skills in order to manage to live a good life in modern society. For us it is very important that development goes on in a coherent education at school; it does not make sense if it is separated into parts. It is both important and urgent that teachers are provided with some working methods and instruments to develop children socially and professionally throughout their education. This is not a game we play: it is for the next generation, who must be prepared for the world waiting for them to take over.

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¹¹ Habermas 1997

¹² Grib konflikten & skolens sociale liv, The Crime Prevention Council in Denmark

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