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Becoming a Pre-school Child

The creation of the subject in the youngest children during their introduction to pre-school

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Abstract

This article throws light on the child's first meeting with the pre-school, as social practice. The first period of initiation at pre-school is now called an "introduction". Only limited research has been carried out into this introductory process, which is given great importance in the Swedish pre-school. The study is of a class of infants at a pre-school and the investigation is a case-study with four teachers and 19 one year-old children. The focus is on the interplay between the children and their teachers and between the children and the social practice itself. The article is based on empirical material which consists of field notes, observations and interviews from the introductory period at the pre-school's infant class.

Introduction

This article is seen as a contribution to the accumulation of knowledge about the institutionalization of childhood that the introduction to pre-school composes. It also highlights the processes of subject-creation that occur in the social practice of the pre-school; in social interaction with the teachers and with the pedagogical environment. The creation of subject occurs in organized routines, in both explicitly-expressed and implicit rules and norms which are partly founded on the teachers' perceptions of children, childhood and the pre-school, and with gender as a productive force in the creation of subjectivity.

In Sweden today the majority of children in pre-school are between one and four years old. Almost all six year-olds are in their first year at school and most five year-olds are with their own age group.

The introduction of children and families to the pre-school is an important initiation, which comprises the very first meeting with the school system and the long sequence of years that the child's school years will encompass. The pre-school that is the focus of this case study gives an introduction to 21 children between the ages of 1 – 1½ years old, and their parents. The low age of the children and the early phase of development the children are at mean that they are – to a much greater extent than later in the education system – completely at the mercy of institutional practice and their integration with their teachers.

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Theoretical starting points and perspectives

The study can be placed above all in the field of sociological theory (Giddens, 2002; James, 2006) and pedagogical theory (Säljö, 2005), which is shown in the following sections. The discussion led by sociological research on childhood and the new view of children has prompted the search for aspects of the child's interaction with teachers and with pedagogical activities and environment. As a sociologist, Giddens comes close to psychology, and in his survey of the growth of self-identity a psychological dimension is also included. A Danish childhood researcher, Sommer (2005), maintains the importance of an interdisciplinary perspective in research on children and childhood. The pre-school in Sweden is an institution with its own traditions, prescriptions, norms and rules, both formal and informal. Säljö (2005) refers amongst other things to the pre-school and says that it, like other public institutions, is a world of relatively durable human relationships that people act in relation to. He uses the concept social practice and by this means interaction related to structural material conditions. Ideas, norms and routines are included in social practices at the same time as these can be changed through interactions in various contexts. The study has its foundation in an integrative perspective in the sense that there is an interplay between the institutional structure, which is part of a pre-school practice, and the involved participants. It is the mutuality in the relationship between individuals, tools, institutions and social practice that is central. This concept of institution includes both macro-processes (structures of society) and micro-processes (the individual and his actions).

The youngest children: a changed view of the child

Questions about and research into children and childhood within the disciplines of social science - and particularly within sociology which in the past has mostly had its focus on the adult world - have played a central role since the 1990s. Within sociological research, children and especially the youngest children have been marginalized due to their subordinate position in society (Cosaro, 2005; James, 2006). *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* attains importance and a paradigm shift from developmental psychology's dependent and needy "insufficient child" to the formation of a competent, socially-constructed and context-bound child, and is afforded significance within a number of disciplines, especially in the Nordic countries, according to Brembeck et al, 2004.

The perspective of the competent child

According to Ellegard, (2004) et al, the term "the competent child" can primarily be viewed as a break against the previously prevailing, directly opposite representation of the child. He also points out that it is far from everyone who embraces this image of the child and still other, partly opposite discourses about children, childhood and practices with connection to children, exist parallel to the competent child. One example is developmental psychology with sequences of stages, especially Piaget's theory on the development of the child. A study on individual developmental plans (assessment plans) (Månsson, 2006) is an example of this discourse. The image of the child emerging in that study shows, as a predominant discourse, a self-regulating child out of context, often described in terms of developmental psychology.

Identity/subjectivity

The concept of identity is used in many contexts and within a number of scientific disciplines, which means that a short overview of the concept can be illuminating, with reference to the choice of theoretical connection in the current study.

Professor of philosophy Charles Taylor (1994) has made a thorough survey of the changes to identity through the centuries in his *Sources of the Self, The Making of the Modern Identity*. Taylor maintains that individual identity cannot be understood without the individual's self-understanding and that included in this understanding is the individual's interpretation and experience of himself in various social and cultural contexts. A child who is a part of a cultural practice such as, for example, a school/pre-school learns a language and participates in various practices that have imbedded values. The pre-school/school becomes in this way participatory in the formation of the child's identity. The individual child's identity cannot be understood only as an individual choice, but as formed in inter-subjective actions.

Within the post-modern discourse "subjectivity" is the concept that is used.

The children in this study meet for the first time an institutional world with all its interactions, everyday practices and symbolic systems. Their entrance into this, for them, new world, gives different experiences and encounters and changes the character of their everyday lives. It becomes too a part of the child's creation and formation of subjectivity (identity). (Giddens, 2002).

Carrying out the study***A beginning in ethnography***

The study can be placed within the category of ethnographic research (Silverman, 1985). Silverman is an ethnologist who has a wide interpretation of ethnographic studies. This study is limited to one pre-school. Theory and empirical study are interwoven. Giddens' (2002) use of the term "the potential space" has emerged as an analytical tool during the collection of the empirical material and the beginning of the analytical work. The use of this concept directs the focus onto what is potential in the social interplay between the participants and between the participants and the surrounding institutional practice.

Collection of material

The study is carried out at a pre-school with six different classes, in the infant group of 19 children range in age from one year to one and a half, 15 girls and 4 boys. Introduction to the setting has its start in the first week of August and continues until the middle of September, when the 19 children are expected to have completed their introduction. After that time, two further children joined the group with a couple of months' interval, depending on the parents' wishes about the introductory time. Four teachers work in the group and are included in the study. The study has been carried out for almost one year. The material consists of observations and field notes, as well as interviews with all the teachers and a number of parents.

The main question under consideration is how the child's first meeting with the pre-school appears. The study also addresses the question of how many possible subject positions can be adopted by the children during the introduction period.

The child's meeting with the pre-school as social practice

This section reports on the results of the analysis of the collected empirical data. The analysis of the empirical data is directed towards the pre-school as an institutional social practice and what appears in the actions of the participants in various contexts (Giddens, 2002), as well as towards disclosing the meaning which surrounds social practice in relation to the creation of the subject.

The initial introduction in the pre-school

At the pre-school where the study is carried out, the teachers have for several months prepared themselves for the reception of a new large group of children and their parents. The parents firstly received a written offer of admission of their child at this pre-school. Most parents take the opportunity to visit the pre-school before responding to this offer. After they have accepted the offer, they are further offered a home-visit.

Planning for when and how the children should be introduced to the pre-school is carried out in accordance with the wishes of the various parents. The parents are asked if they would like a home visit by one of the teachers, which most of the parents consider desirable. The aim of this is to enable the parents and child to meet the pre-school's personnel in their own home environment to be able to ask questions and to talk about their child. The pre-school personnel are careful to assign one particular teacher to each child and parent(s) who becomes responsible for the introduction during the whole process: a "key person". The importance of the key person in the pre-school is stressed by Page. He mentions the significance of the key person building the relationship with the child and the parent. After that, a period of familiarization is started, with short visits of a couple of hours' duration at the pre-school, gradually lengthening day by day, with the parents or one of the parents present. After a few days the child eats a meal at the pre-school with the parent nearby and after three to four days, the child naps at the pre-school while the parents are still on the premises. Following this, the parent(s) leaves the pre-school for short periods of time, and depending on the child's reaction, these absences are lengthened gradually. The duration of the introduction period suggested by the teachers is 14 days.

The child's creation of the subject, and the potential space

The institutional world with all its interactions, everyday practice and symbolic systems makes up part (in this case) of the child's experience and changes the character of everyday life (Giddens, 2002). He stresses the importance of the interpersonal organization of time and space and the close connections with basic trust. He uses an expression from Winnicott (2003) "the potential space" (which is actually a temporal/spatial phenomenon) (pg 51) and which makes up a sort of dividing line between the child and the world around it. It is in this potential space that creativity and play is born. He expresses this as the basic trust growing out through the potential space, but that also the faith in and dependability of the surrounding world is a prerequisite for this potential space, in that it both connects and separates the child and the care-givers.

(Winnicott himself mentions the mother above all in this connection.) Habits and everyday routines have an important role to playing the creation of relationships between the care-givers and the child in the potential space. I consider that care-givers can, as in this context, even be pre-school teachers. Giddens says “Basic connections emerge between routines, reproduction of coordinated conventions and the feeling of ontological security later in the life of the individual.” (pg 51). One means of easing the change from the home and the known environment can be a “transitional object” (Giddens, 2002).

The transitional object in the pre-school

The transition from home to pre-school brings with it great social and personal changes and restructuring (Giddens, 2002). He mentions (with reference to Winnicott) amongst other things the importance of transitional objects for children as an emotional bridge (pg 52). The transitional object, which can be a security blanket, a teddy bear or a dummy, works as a symbol for the absent care-giver and has a stabilising function in a situation of uncertainty. The transitional object can up to a point fill the vacuum left by the absent care-giver, and particularly in the introductory stages can help the child to an emotional acceptance of the parent’s absence.

The child’s reactions when the parent leaves the pre-school vary, but during the first weeks most children cry for a short while when the parent leaves. Some children hardly react at all when the parent leaves, but starts busying itself with something or approaches one of the teachers. Tora, who has been at pre-school with her mother for a week and who in the beginning found it hard to leave her mother, is to be left some hours in order to get used to being without her mother.

The mother takes off Tora’s outdoor things. Tora looks at her mother intensely and her mother gives her a hug, telling her that she is going. Karin picks Tora up, gives her her dummy and goes to the door and waves. Tora just looks and starts crying. Karin sits down with Tora in her lap, and she quietens down and sucks the dummy. Karin: “We decided that the mother should leave directly on Thursday and Friday, because she is starting work on Monday and in that way it will be routine. It’s not worth dragging the introduction out longer because now she just watches her mother all the time in case she’s leaving. She can feel it.”

The teachers often make use of the “transitional objects” when children are left and have a tolerant attitude to these objects at this time. The teachers have, during the first phase of the introduction period and especially when the parent is leaving the child at the pre-school, a perception of the child as dependent and above all in need of security: “It’s important that they feel safe and secure.” (teacher Bodil). “It usually works out that you have to have them closer to you. They need much more, you know.” (teacher Ingrid).

The potential space and everyday routines in the creation of meaning and subject

Giddens (2002) stresses the structuring and stabilizing function of everyday routines, which helps our understanding of how certain aspects of a daily routine – sometimes

trivial details – can be given emotional importance. The repetition and continuity which everyday routines impart strengthen the feeling of stability over time.

Mealtimes: daily routines that create security

To serve a hot meal in the middle of the day, with teachers sitting at the table sharing the food - giving the mealtime pedagogic input as well as direction in care-giving - is an old tradition in Swedish pre-schools (Johansson, 1994). That the mealtime is associated with closeness, feelings, ethics and care is central, but there is also an obvious aspect of discipline involved (Johansson & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2001). Regular care-giving (in the form of, for example, meals) is elementary to the growth of trust in a child's life (Giddens, 2002). The example below is taken from the second week after the introduction period started. Some children are at the pre-school for their second week, while others have just started. They are now 10 children in total.

The children and the teachers and some parents have just been out in the pre-school's playground. The children have been helped out of their outdoor clothes and given clean nappies. Many children are crying, some screaming. Tea says "Mummy!". Dina sits on the floor alone and weeps loudly. Then everyone goes and sits at three different tables, each with their teacher. All the children sit quietly and look at each other and at the food. Teacher Karin asks Emily: "Would you like some gravy?" She asks Helen: "Would you like a fork or a spoon?" Many children eat with their hands and there is food all over the table and floor.

The children and the teachers have been outside during the morning, and a number of the children are tired. It seems as though the transition from one activity to another makes the children insecure about what is to happen next. The calm that spreads amongst the children when they sit up at the table in the groupings they recognize from earlier mealtimes motivates the interpretation that mealtime routines give stability and order in the surroundings, and a feeling of trust (Giddens, 2002). A situation which sometimes provokes tears though, is before the meal, instead of a bib the children are given a "meal shirt" – a t-shirt that is only used at mealtimes instead of a bib - and their own garment is removed. The following observation is taken from the third week of the introduction:

All the children are given a clean nappy in the bathroom and at the same time a "meal shirt": their own top is taken off and they are given a second-hand shirt instead of a bib. Some children cry when their own top is taken off. Ingeborg protests loudly when hers is removed.

It is my opinion that it is the "newest" children and those who are a little insecure who cry the most when they change their shirts. My impression is that taking off their own shirt is experienced by the child as a removal of their identity. Their own clothes are a part of their own person and removing them for meal times is a loss of something that represents part of their self. Clothes have functions quite separate from the basic one of protecting the body. They also provide a means for the individual to give self-identity an outer form (Giddens, 2002).

The competent child in the potential space

A prerequisite for the development of the child's competence is the presence of adults who function as the architects of everyday life (Sommer (2005) pg 145). The teachers' perception of children and their pedagogical standpoints makes up the foundation of their pedagogical choices and their attitude towards the children at the pre-school, and can therefore be seen as productive (Dahlberg, 2004).

During my observations I have noted that, as well as the child seeming very small and helpless, the image of "the competent child" (Mansson, 2007 (submitted)) also appears often in numerous situations. The following example is taken from Lina's second week of introduction:

Lina comes up to me and lifts her skirt, pointing at her bottom. I say: "Have you pooped?" Lina nods in assent and goes to her shelf in the hallway, taking down a packet of nappies hanging there and removing a nappy. I tell the teacher, Anna, who takes Lina into the bathroom: "That was good, telling us. You can't go around with poo in your nappy".

The teachers' encouraging attitude towards the children, and their expectations of the children's competence, contributes to the development of the potential space for self-initiative and learning. In the following example from the fourth week of introduction, the teacher Bodil and little girls Helen and Elsa are in the play room:

Helen grizzles and points to the radio. Bodil says: Yes Helen, put the radio on. Helen looks questioningly at Bodil. Then she walks slowly to the tape recorder and pushes some buttons, with no result. Bodil: "Elsa, help her – go and push the button". Elsa walks over and pushes the button so that the radio starts.

Children's competence is encouraged by the arrangement of the pedagogical environment. This in turn is dependent on the view of the personnel on the potential competence of the children (Nordin-Hultman, 2004).

Conditional trust and regulations – parts of the creation of the subject

There is the possibility for the child's creation of the subject in the potential space. How this potential space acquires different meaning for different children has, amongst other things, to do with both the adults' attitudes about children and their attitudes about the pre-school and what a pre-school is. There is a connection between the collective opinion on one hand and the design of the activities on the other (Säljö, 2005). The pedagogical practice is co-constructive in the child's creation of the subject (Dahlberg et al., 2003, Nordin-Hultman, 2004).

One example of this is how the use of the dummy is a heated question, and is subject to rules. After saying goodbye to the parent and the tolerant attitude towards the use of the dummy at that time, restrictions on the use of this transitional object increase. Opinions on the dependent child and the autonomous child clash: "Yes, I find it hard to see them running around with it (their dummy). Some of them go along with us at once while

others think we are too hard. If they are upset. Ye..es, if they are really sad, but they can't run around with it (teacher Karin).

An example of the restriction on the use of the dummy is given in the following observation. A pram is used as a regulatory marker. It was brought into the playroom when a child was upset for a long time during the introduction period, and often wanted its dummy and security blanket when it was not time to take a nap:

One day when I come to the pre-school, a pram is standing in the playroom. Helen is sitting in it. I ask why the pram has been brought in. Teacher Karin explains that as Helen walks around with her dummy, they have decided to limit the area where the dummy is allowed and this is why Helen is sitting in the pram. Later when Helen wants to leave the pram Karin says "Yes, so we'll leave the dummy here". Karin takes the dummy, Helen gets out of the pram and starts to walk around the room a little.

The transitional object is a heated question which is expressed in strong rules about when and where its use is allowed. Children are introduced to a social practice, with framework that structures and limits, but which also gives openings and the stimulation of new challenges. The teachers' perceptions about the children as competent provide the prerequisites for a pedagogical environment where the children also have the chance to adopt various positions (Månsson, 2008, submitted), which makes the widening of the potential space possible (Giddens, 2002).

To conclude, one can ask the question what consequences there are for the child's creation of subject with large groups with such young children as one to one and a half years old, and teachers without enough time for interplay on the child's terms. Children as young as "toddlers" are still dependent on adults and their care, at the same time as they are seen as competent and with the ability to act.

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