

Moulding civilized citizens in the children's institutions of a welfare state.

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Our paper takes outset in a larger anthropological study called Civilizing Institutions in a Modern Welfare State. The aim of this project was to give Norbert Elias' theory of civilizing processes an analytical twist to look at civilizing projects and to combine this with the anthropology of children, in order to explore the practices, ideals and consequences of upbringing in Danish families, kindergartens and schools. The project involved ethnographic fieldwork in families, kindergartens and school classes, as well as interviews with mothers and fathers, pedagogues, teachers, school leaders and not least children of 5 to 18 years of age. In the ethnographic investigations we focused on the formative practices and visions of civilised behaviour outplayed in the everyday life of kindergartens, schools and families, and tried to grasp how children reacted to and influenced the norms and values expressed in this.

Yet, the purpose of our approach was not merely the micro-ethnography of every-day practices. Rather, the idea was to make an anthropological analysis of cultural ideals and moral distinctions in the Danish society and thus relate the insights from the ethnography to historical currents and ideals of broader society. Our starting point was thus that educational projects focusing on children are always societal projects – at once directed to give each child good opportunities for developing potentials and to form citizens of the right mould. A Scandinavian welfare state such as the Danish one, is particularly interesting in this regard, as the extensive focus on children, the investment of time and money that is put into their care and upbringing, and the massive institutionalization of childhood this investment has resulted in, show us that the welfare state cannot leave the practice of upbringing to random parents, but must ensure the proper civilizing of the up-growing citizens. In line with this, the main idea of the present paper is to show that the formative work with children as it occurs in the everyday practices of schools relates to broader cultural ideals of personhood, citizens and societies. It is however, important to stress that ideals are never simply translated in to institutional practices. As we will show, it is a dialectical process, where child-institutions at once relate to broader ideals and visions, contribute to the moulding of civilised citizens and influence ideas of proper citizenship and community.

The process of integration and the role of welfare institutions

Norbert Elias' theory and concept of civilizing processes, is highly relevant for the anthropology of education, as it focus on the relationship between social structures, cultural distinctions and ideals

of behaviour all of which influence and guide educational policy and practice, not least in state societies. In his theory Elias described how Western European countries have experienced long-term processes of social integration in which an increasing number of people and social groups have become interdependent. He argues that this interdependence have necessitated a development towards increased social awareness, self-restraint and a high sensibility threshold. While correct and formal manners were considered a mark of civilized behaviour in the court societies of the 17th and 18th century, the further integration of social classes during the late 19th century, started a move towards 'informalisation' - a democratization of interaction, which gradually meant a disregard of formal manners associated with the bourgeoisie, a worshipping of natural ways and a toning down of markers of inequality. In this transformation the upcoming nation-state came to play an important role. Following the early processes of integration, the state expanded both in volume and effect. Gaining monopoly to collect taxes, control the means of violence and widespread authority to rule, the state consolidated its influence through the establishment of a range of public institutions. The interesting point here is that the expansion and subdivision of the state apparatuses into a variety of specified welfare institutions reflects the process of societal integration; and that this process has been highly accelerated by the very same institutions. One can indeed view the establishment in Denmark of a system of welfare institutions, encompassing still more social groups and aspects of life, as part of this process and as indicative of the interest to assure a standardisation of norms.

Welfare institutions are designed not only to take care of people's basic needs but also to enable them to fare well, that is, to live their lives in relation to others and in accordance with the dominant norms and values of society. They are commissioned to organise social relations, to establish conditions for peaceful living by defining categories and norms and setting up standards for social interaction and codes of conduct. Daycares and schools play a particularly role in this regard. With the continuing development of increased social interdependence and the huge expansion of the state, coordinated upbringing became a still more important issue for the state. Gradually child-institutions became authorized to mould children in accordance with shifting understandings of the child, of education, and of what it entails to be a proper citizen.

According to Elias, social integration and cohesion necessitates the overcoming or at least diminishing of divisions in privileges between social groups, such as social classes. One of the dominant visions in the formative years of the welfare-state (the 1960ies and 1970ies) was indeed the ideal of social equality and democratic citizenship. One of the means to realise the ideal was by integrating children from various social segments in socially varied child institutions. The school in

particular was regarded important for social integration and for the development of the democratic citizens as children here at once would be taught about democratic ways and experience the more practical aspects of it in their daily interactions with other children of varying backgrounds.

This role and purpose of the school has, however, been heavily discussed since the 1980'ies. The threat of globalisation, international competition and the expanding anxiety about Danish children's academic competences have given rise to several reforms and critical voices arguing for a more academic focus. These initiatives are by some scholars interpreted as an indication of a general shift in values; that the more formative part of education and the focus on social coherence and social competences no longer are regarded educational core values. Our study does not support this interpretation, though the focus on integration of social classes seems to have vanished somewhat from sight. As we will argue in the following, we have found that the interactional norms and the ideal of social integration in more general terms remains central to the way children are brought up in the Danish school due to more encompassing cultural understandings of what it entails to be a civilized person. This does not mean that changes in society will not change this, that other changes in the school cannot or do not undermine the ideals in upbringing, but we will argue that these changes at least to some extent are counteracted by the institutionalisation of upbringing itself.

Our point here is that understandings of what it entails to be a civilized person and a good citizen not merely are the result of broader processes affecting the school, but that child institutions in themselves have gained influence on these understandings. As child-institutions encompass almost all children and include people from various social segments they have themselves played a leading role in the further integration and experience of interdependence between individuals in Danish society, as well as in disseminating and universalizing standards and norms of conduct. The very fact, that parents, state employed pedagogues and teachers have to cooperate about the children, and the fact that children across social differences – even when some are placed in private schools – are exposed to similar routines, demands, knowledge and norms, has a homogenizing effect, diminishing the expression of social contrast. This relates, of course, to the fact that child-rearing institutions, also the private ones, are supervised by local authorities and subject to state regulations. But it is as we will show in the following also an outcome of the institutional form itself. In order to coordinate the actions of many people there is a need for organization, for structure of space, days, programs and a need for regulating time and interactions. Such practical demands set up rules and

standards recognizable across institutions which become particularly influential as they echo historically formed, dominant understandings of behaviour and personhood. In the following we will take a look at the everyday upbringing of two Danish school classes, to argue this point.

Being social in school

While others explored the civilizing practices and ideals in families, kindergartens and among youths, I did fieldwork in 4 school classes in 2 schools. Here I will focus on the two 0. grade classes of 5-6 year olds, one in a school in an upperclass area and one in school in a lowerclass and multi-ethnic area to illuminate what they convey about the role of the school institution and especially the school class in the civilizing project of the Danish state.

In the Danish school the main objective of the first year of school – 0. grade – is to ‘socialize children to school’, and adapt them to the school class. This class – it must be explained to our foreign visitors – is a group of 20-28 pupils, that ideally stay together, undivided by ability groupings and the like, from they are 5 till 15 years, with a specifically assigned class teacher to follow them through the years. The class teacher should ideally take up the formative work from the 0. grade and keep the focus on the social wellbeing of the class though their 10 years of schooling. Even though this focus on ‘the social’ as it is termed, has recently been contested somewhat by the new focus on teaching the academic skills from an early age, it was the main focus in the two 0. grade classes, where I conducted my fieldwork.

In both classes, the teachers used a considerable amount of time and effort on cultivating the acceptable behavior and interactional forms in the children. The teachers were f.ex. telling the children about good behavior in group conversations and through verbal corrections of children’s behaviour, such as: *Don’t shout, say it quietly. Don’t hit him, tell him instead. If you do not want to play with her, tell her that you will play at another time* ect. Yet they also trained what they termed ‘the social conduct’ through small role plays conducted by pupils or teachers, special teaching programs designed to teach children to understand other people’s feelings, and games chosen to train cooperation and solidarity. Apart from this focus on acceptable behaviour, in both 0. grade classes the teachers saw it as their duty to assure good relationships among the children. They did their best to help the children become friends with each other, by arranging them to sit beside potential friends, by encouraging them to invite each other home, and by arranging the class into ‘play groups’ of 4-5 children which had to play with each other in the homes of the children. The

aim was to make the children empathetic and tolerant towards each other, avoiding harm and aggression, as well as malign competition, domination or exclusion of others, but also to make the class a tight knit and harmonious community of children. In one of the schools the children were put into two contemporary classes for the first two months of the school year, as the teachers wanted to find the best way to compose the classes, in order to assure that all children had friends and that the classes would be harmonious and well-functioning. In both classes the schedule also encompassed a daily play lesson, which the teachers used to observe and mould the children's relationships to each other.

I cannot go into all details here, but will focus on a central word in this social training of the children, namely that of *boundaries*. In the words of the teachers, the children had to learn to *respect boundaries*, avoid *transgressing other people's boundaries* or keep people from *transgressing their own boundaries*, and additionally they should *keep within their own space*, and *not take more space than their share* within the group. Transgressing these boundaries was done by being too loud, too aggressive, but also by bullying and excluding others, or by being too dominating, or unsensitive about other people's feelings. Across our projects in families, kindergartens and schools we have found this concern with boundaries, when adults talk about children and upbringing. What can be seen in this seems to be a central idea in the civilised ideal; that society or any given social group is a space of individuals each assigned a certain space with firm, yet fragile boundaries around it, and that civilized behaviour entails keeping within your own space and not transgressing the physical and psychological space of others. In the Danish school class this requires children to develop a fine-tuned sensitivity to other people within the group and the kind of behavior that could offend them. The children in the two 0. classes did not have to be very polite, to hide their feelings or to have correct manners, rather the teachers liked the cheeky, happy and enthusiastic child, as this was seen as a sign of a child not subdued by discipline. Yet the children they found to be good pupils and classmates, were the once who spoke to, treated other children and showed their feelings in constant consideration of their feelings and personal boundaries. Thus while behavioural norms are less formalised, they require children to develop a high degree of self-restraint and internalise an almost bodily sense of cultural and personal boundaries. In line with this much of the teacher's moral teaching and social guidance was concerned with developing an awareness and respect of these boundaries, and a sense of shame when transgressing them. Even though not all teachers took it upon them to train these practices,

most teachers would criticize children they found to be *transgressing boundaries*, being *without boundaries* or *taking too much space*.

This understanding of individuals surrounded by fragile yet distinct borders is evidently influenced by the psychological paradigm which has dominated Western thought about the individual and self for a century. The interesting thing is that teachers not only refer to psychological explanations, when explaining this focus, but also stress the institutional practicalities. They point to the fact that they need to adapt children to school: When you have to be 23 children in a small place and stay with the same group for 10 years, you will have to learn to adapt your behaviour to other people. The children have to learn to be social, to get along with the others, and solve and avoid conflicts in order for school life and the teaching to run smoothly. In accordance with this, when I ask the teachers to tell me which children they find to be ideal pupils, they point – often with affection - to the ones which contribute to the smooth running of the class and the social integration of the class. This is important as it shows us, that the social norms which teachers try to make children fit to, also are shaped by the conditions of the institution.

Yet compared to former times and to schools in other parts of the world, there has been added further dimensions to the expectations to proper interaction in the Danish school class. Before the horrors of the world wars made groups of influential intellectuals and pedagogues call for an education to democracy, there was no other requirements to children's interaction in the school class than politeness, good manners and self-restraint. But in today's Danish school the class is encumbered with all kind of social norms of proper ways to be and act together in groups. The children are required to relate to each other in much more substantive ways. They have to make collaborate projects, they are trained to show and develop proper empathy towards each other and not to express superiority over their classmates or hierarchy between them. Their competences to cooperate are assessed (in one class – it was awarded with a green or a red smiley each day), they are arranged into playgroups and encouraged to make friends, they have to decide common rules of conduct in class and to take decisions through discussions and votes. And children not committing to the group, who do not make friends in the class, do not engage in the community of the class, are problematized by teachers. These expectations stress the dialectic between school norms and societal norms. In many ways what is required to be a good pupil resembles the demands on citizens of the Danish welfare state, who does not merely have to respect and adapt to others due to tight knit integration and interdependence, but – ideally - has to take part, be active citizens, avoid

conflict, pay their share of the common bill, engage in civil society – play their part, integrate in neighbourhood, workplaces and institutions across social and ethnic differences.

What we see in the focus on harmonious interaction and relationships within the school class, is how children and childhood are vessels loaded with dreams and fears of the future and not least postwar ideals of the good society consisting of non-violent, democratically minded persons. These dreams and ideals are especially seen in the standards teachers hold for a good school class. When describing ‘a good class’ teachers stress, that it is a class where there is room for everybody – a point also emphasized and analysed in the work of Sally Anderson - , and where children meet and make friends across social divisions and personal differences and idiosyncrasies. Here children of different backgrounds take common decisions in tolerance of different views and needs, cooperate for a common goal and settle disputes through joint effort, common rules and empathy with one another. And not least - in a good class children are happy and creative and feel safe ‘to be themselves’. Though many classes do not live up to this ideal, it still shows us strong cultural values of civilized behaviour and interaction, which seems to remain strong though tested by pushes towards individualisation and discourses of global competition. Thus the good school class seems to be a model of the ideal, democratic, harmonious and civilized society, and it is to this often almost romantic ideal that teachers mould individual children and the group as a collective. Our point is that this has the effect that the school class and the kind of sociality and community that is practiced here, also functions as a model for the good society. Individual children may object or even oppose the extensive expectations to social behaviour. Nevertheless, generations of children shaped by these ideals and by daily interactions in the institutions carry these norms and practices into society and into the kind of communities they become part of here.

What we have seen across kindergartens, schools and families is indeed that the conditions of the child institutions in which children spend most of their time during childhood, influence children’s behavior, parents’ ways of bringing up children and more generally the Danes’ understandings of civilized behavior. Though the ideal is contested and children, as Anderson has shown, do indeed also learn how to avoid interaction and to exclude others in more or less acceptable ways in the tight knit group of the class, we will still argue, that the institutional conditions of the school tend to create a certain – institutional – ideal of interaction, which becomes widespread and dominant in wider society. Educational work in schools is, of course, decided by politicians reflecting contemporary notions of the educated person. Yet as argued here, institutional

practices also affect such notions through the long formative work with children. This makes it difficult to decide whether it is school which is influenced by cultural norms of the welfare society or welfare society which along the years has become shaped by institutional norms. For us the point is that the child institutions and the Danish society can not be separated, and that ideals of civilized behaviour and civilized communities are central to this interlocked relationship.

The teachers support this inseparability by stressing that the requirements of school fit both the norms of a good human being and the requirement of Danish society - that children as future citizens in a democratic society have to learn to adapt to other people needs and views and not merely think of themselves, and that they have to cooperate and get along with all kind of people in Danish society. When asked whether they bring up children to be good pupils, good human being or good citizens all the teachers indeed stress that they cannot make a distinction between the three.