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A Nordic approach to Early Childhood Education (ECE) and socially endangered children

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I examine the Nordic model, i.e. a child-centred and holistic approach, in order to discuss Early Childhood Education (ECE) as a key policy instrument for fighting social inequality. Since 1999 it has been an important goal for the Danish government to ensure equal opportunities for all by starting with early intervention. This is especially relevant in Denmark, where >95% of all children attend day-care. International research shows that early interventions can make a positive difference, and as shown in US Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) studies, the effects are lasting. On the other hand, international research does not address the two different main approaches to the ECE systems (holistic/academic) nor to the questions of how pedagogic initiatives and framework conditions work as prerequisites for success (best practice). An analysis of research into the situation in the Nordic countries shows growing awareness of how to identify target groups for ECE-intervention as well as an increased focus on pre-school school teachers' education and the need for new assessment and evaluation methods for determining best practice. Since it would appear that the ECE system fails to provide equal social and intellectual opportunities to all children, further development in this area is required. Based on an analysis of the Nordic situation, some preliminary results of a recent Danish intervention involving some 60 centres and 2700 pre-school children are presented and discussed.

Statement

In a Nordic context, a holistic approach to Early Childhood Education Programmes is generally preferred over an academic approach. However, when it comes to serving socially endangered children, the holistic approach seems to have certain limitations. A Danish trial based on the Nordic model of ECE aims to generate evidence about this issue.

RÉSUMÉ: Dans cet article, j'examine le modèle nordique, une approche holistique centrée sur l'enfant, dans le but de discuter l'éducation préscolaire comme un outil politique majeur de lutte contre l'inégalité sociale. Depuis 1999, un but important du gouvernement danois est d'assurer l'égalité des chances pour tous grâce à une intervention précoce. Ceci est spécialement pertinent au Danemark où la fréquentation des services préscolaires est importante (>95% des enfants). La recherche internationale montre que les interventions précoces ont des effets positifs – et comme montrent les études américaines ECR, ce sont des effets à long terme. Mais la recherche internationale ne prend pas en considération les deux principales approches des systèmes préscolaires (holistique/académique) ni la façon dont les initiatives pédagogiques et les conditions organisationnelles

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jouent comme conditions pour de succès (les meilleures pratiques). Une analyse de la recherche sur la situation dans les pays nordiques montre une conscience croissante de la manière d'identifier les groupes cibles pour une intervention préscolaire ainsi qu'une focalisation accrue sur la formation des enseignants et la nécessité de nouvelles méthodes d'évaluation pour déterminer 'les meilleures pratiques'. Dans la mesure où il apparaît que le système préscolaire ne réussit pas à offrir une égalité des chances, sur le plan social et intellectuel à tous les enfants, de nouveaux développements sont requis dans ce domaine. Une récente initiative danoise, basée sur une analyse de la situation nordique, concerne 60 centres et 2700 enfants d'âge préscolaire. Quelques premiers résultats sont ici discutés et discutés.

Constat

Dans un contexte nordique, une approche holistique des structures préscolaire est généralement préférée à une approche académique. Pourtant, lorsqu'il s'agit d'accueillir des enfants à risques sur le plan social, la méthode holistique semble connaître des limitations. Une tentative danoise basée sur le modèle nordique du préscolaire vise à le démontrer.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Die Arbeit untersucht das Nordische Modell eines kinderzentrierten und ganzheitlichen Ansatzes als Beitrag zur Diskussion der frühkindlichen Erziehung und Bildung (Early Childhood Education – ECE) als ein entscheidendes politisches Instrument zur Bekämpfung sozialer Ungleichheit. Seit 1999 ist es ein wichtiges Ziel der dänischen Regierung, die Chancengleichheit aller durch frühe Intervention zu gewährleisten. Besonders relevant ist dies in Dänemark, da der Anteil der Kinder in der Kindertagesbetreuung sehr hoch ist (> 95% aller Kinder). Internationale Untersuchungen belegen, dass eine frühe Einflussnahme sich positiv auswirken kann und dass sich daraus, wie in amerikanischen RCT Studien gezeigt, nachhaltige Auswirkungen ergeben. Andererseits thematisiert die internationale Forschung weder die beiden hauptsächlichen Ansätze des ECE-Systems (ganzheitlich/ akademisch), noch behandelt sie die Fragen näher, wie pädagogische Initiativen und Rahmenbedingungen als Voraussetzung für den Erfolg (bewährte Praxis) wirksam werden. Eine Forschungsanalyse hinsichtlich der Situation in den nordischen Ländern zeigt ein wachsendes Verständnis für die Auswahl der Zielgruppen zur ECE-Intervention, sowie eine stärkere Konzentration auf die Lehrerbildung und die Notwendigkeit neuer Bewertungskriterien zur Bestimmung der 'bewährten Praxis'. Dennoch ist eine Weiterentwicklung in diesem Bereich notwendig. Basierend auf einer Analyse der Nordischen Situation zielt eine neue dänische Untersuchung ab auf soziale Innovation (60 Tagesstätten, 2700 Vorschulkinder); einige vorläufige Ergebnisse werden vorgelegt und erörtert.

Statement

Im Nordischen Kontext wird im Allgemeinen der ganzheitliche Ansatz zu frühkindlichen Erziehungsprogrammen dem akademischen Ansatz vorgezogen. Dennoch, wenn es darum geht, Risikokinder zu unterstützen, scheint der ganzheitliche Ansatz vielfach begrenzt zu sein. Eine dänische Untersuchung, die auf dem Nordischen Modell der ECE basiert, zielt darauf ab, den Nachweis für diese Argumentation zu erbringen.

RESUMEN: El artículo investiga el modelo nórdico que es una aproximación holística con el niño en el centro a fin de discutir la Educación de Temprana Infancia (ECE) como un instrumento político clave para luchar contra la desigualdad social. Desde 1999 un fin importante del gobierno danés es garantizar oportunidades iguales para todos empezando a intervenir temprano. Eso es

especialmente importante en Dinamarca donde hay una frecuencia alta de niños en guarderías infantiles (más de un 95 por ciento de todos los niños). La investigación internacional muestra que las intervenciones tempranas pueden hacer una diferencia positiva que tiene un efecto a largo plazo, como muestran estudios americanos de RCT. Por otra parte, la investigación temprana internacional no se acerca a las dos aproximaciones principales a los sistemas de ECE (holístico/académico) ni a la cuestión de cómo funcionan las iniciativas pedagógicas y las condiciones de estructura como presuposiciones de éxito (best practice). Un análisis de investigación de la situación en los países nórdicos muestra una conciencia creciente de cómo identificar a los grupos destinatarios de la intervención de ECE y un foco aumentado en la educación de los profesores y las necesidades de métodos nuevos de evaluación para determinar best practice. Todavía hace falta progreso dentro de esta área. Basado en un análisis de la situación nórdica se discuten un nuevo experimento danés dirigido a la innovación social (60 centros, 2700 niños preescolares) y unos resultados preliminares.

Conclusión

En un contexto nórdico es preferida una aproximación holística a los programas de la Educación de Temprana Infancia en vez de una aproximación académica. Pero tratando a los niños en situación de riesgo, la aproximación holística parece tener su límite en muchos puntos. Un experimento danés basado en el modelo nórdico de ECE intenta dilucidar la evidencia de ese argumento.

Keywords: ECE; Nordic approach; endangered children; intervention; effects

Introduction

Who are socially endangered children? What do they need and how can society address the socially endangered children's social problems and improve their life-chances? The topic of this paper is how society, through public sector programmes, tries to change the life course of endangered children by making early life interventions. Research defines socially endangered children in many different ways, from 'children from poor families' and 'children from socially deprived families' to concepts such as 'at risk children', 'deprived children', 'children disadvantaged by poverty' or just 'disadvantaged' (Jensen and Mehlbye 2009). The range of definitions is partly one of the differences in views on the problem as well as views of human nature. If the problem is considered as an individual problem, the term 'deprived children' is most likely to be used, while a contextual perspective employs terms like 'children at risk for marginalisation'. In this paper, the term socially endangered children is used to emphasise the fact that the child's vulnerability is related to the social context as a result of the interaction between the child and its surroundings.

An overwhelming body of literature that shows that parental background characteristics have a large, and maybe the most important, impact on children's life course. This correlation covers all important aspects of life: education, income, longevity and life satisfaction (Jensen 2007; Ploug 2007). Earlier research tended to focus specifically on intergenerational correlations in earnings, but it is now understood that many other factors influence the life course of offspring. Especially, new research points to the importance of the educational and cultural characteristics and behaviour of the parents as very important determinants for the life course of their children (Jæger and Holm 2007). In many countries, including Denmark, we find increased attention towards 'what works' in day care/pre-school facilities, not least also in respect to socially endangered children. Since almost none of the initiatives are based on

research results, however there is currently a need for more research and funding for research in this area. Recent research indicate that the impact of interventions on changing the life course of endangered children are most pervasive if they happen at an very early stage of the child's life (Doyle 2007; Esping-Andersen 2002, 2005). This suggests that interventions through childcare facilities are optimal for public sector programmes targeted at endangered children.

In most Western countries, the high and rising female labour force participation has resulted in expanded day-care/pre-school facilities for pre-schoolers. Most countries therefore now run a variety of day-care facilities. These institutions are most developed in the Nordic countries but are found in most other Western countries as well. This means that a large number of pre-school children spend a large part of their time in day care.

Very little is known about the effect of day-care facilities (Nordenbo et al. 2008), even though day-care facilities potentially comprise a major influence on the future opportunities of pre-school children through different types of interventions and ECE-programmes. This is especially relevant for children with socially endangered background, as they systematically face lower chances of success in different aspects of later life, e.g. education, income, health and longevity (see Borghans, Weel, and Weinberg 2007; Jæger and Holm 2007). However, the successful implementation of such programmes requires knowledge about how they work and how they affect the behaviour and abilities of different children. Such knowledge is currently sparse (Hede 2005), despite the fact that several researchers suggest that interventions are most powerful when applied to children at a young age (Heckmann 2007; Heckman and Masterov 2007). We do know, from some early intervention studies such as the Perry pre-school study in the 1960's (Schweinhart, Barnes, and Weikart 1993; Schweinhart 2006), Abecedarian from the 1970's (Ramey and Ramey 2004), the Head Start programme and present longitudinal and comparative studies (Anderson et al. 2003; Melhuish 2003), that early life interventions can have a substantial effect on subsequent achievement, such as high school graduation (Heckmann 2007). But we do not know how particular interventions can improve opportunities in life chances for children. Hence, even though we know that massive interventions in many dimensions, including staffing, provision of resources etc. might help disadvantaged children, we cannot pinpoint any particular mechanism or any particular type of intervention that may lead to an effect, even though interventions such as the Perry pre-school project and the other mentioned projects are more than 30–40 years old.

To sum up, international research seems thus to indicate that positive results can be achieved from early intervention in day-care centres (Early Childhood Education, ECE) by supporting children in broad competence development through systematic learning-initiatives of a certain duration and intensity, which start early in the children's lives (Barnett 1995; Penn 1999; Penn et al. 2004; Zoritch, Roberts, and Oakley 2007). In terms of interventions, we find shift from US Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) studies to longitudinal studies (Sylva et al. 2006) that examine the effects of different kinds of day-care/pre-school offers and quality effects. One recent development is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) focus on educational programmes for children at a very early age (Bennett 2006a, 2006b). Results from the research give us reason to believe that interventions enhance the development of children's resources. Our knowledge of the interventions' effect on socially endangered children's social development and integration is insufficient for us to base solid conclusions on that alone. Furthermore, we do not have sufficient

knowledge about what types of interventions are the most effective (best practice) and what factors promote and restrict educational intervention, respectively.

Development in this area is called for and underway (Soriano 2005). In this paper, I provide an analysis of the situation in policy, practice and research in the Nordic countries. Furthermore, the paper contains a description of a Danish intervention and effect study, thus contributing to the overall discussion of the possibilities of ECE programmes in future interventions (see also Bennett 2008).

The Nordic model

In the OECD countries and hence also in the Nordic countries, intervention in day-care/pre-school is considered the best way to give children a good beginning in life, particularly socially endangered children. In Anglo-Saxon countries, the dominant view is that the earlier children develop academic skills and knowledge the better, as these skills it will enable them to participate in society on equal terms with children of the same age. Emphasis is put on using the same learning standards and evaluations of whether the objectives are obtained (Bennett 2006b; OECD 2001, 2006). On the other hand, the Nordic countries often oppose introducing standards for learning too early in children's lives because of the risk that such standards may limit the children's free development. It is considered unnecessary and almost harmful to introduce a paradigm of 'school-readiness' too early. This would, so to speak, clash with a Nordic value of 'the good childhood, which means that day-care/pre-school have to practice democracy and children have to be active participants and have a voice in their own everyday life (Committee of the Rights of the Child 1989).

When and how does the Nordic model find its expression in the various countries' policies and how do the national ECE-curricula objectives deal with the question of social inequality?

The legislative basis of ECE was formulated in Sweden and Norway towards the end of the 1990s, while Denmark did not introduce the national curriculum till 2004 (Ministry of Social Affairs, Denmark 2004) – revised in 2007 (Ministry of Family and Consumer Affairs, Denmark 2007). However, in Finland, the ECE system is well established and has been under development since 1973, and from 2000, the Finnish ECE has focused on children's learning and children's rights (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland 2002).

Sweden's national curriculum is aimed to make day-care 'take care of and support children in developing their ability to feel responsibility and social readiness to act in order to establish solidarity and tolerance' (Swedish National Agency for Education 2006, 3). Furthermore, the objective is to 'encourage and strengthen child's sympathy and empathy for other the situation of others' (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2006, 3) and 'no child should be subjected to discrimination at pre-school based on gender, ethnic belonging, religion or perception of other belief, or sexual orientation' (3–4). An important point is that preschool/day-care sets the grounds for lifelong learning and that pre-school has to be a stimulating environment that encompasses possibilities for children's play, concentration and interplay between child and surroundings in order to develop children's societal understanding and understanding for mutual democratic values (4). The problem related to social inequality and differences between children is addressed implicitly by writing that no child should be discriminated.

Norway's national curriculum (Ministry of Education and Research, Norway, 2006a) specifies a holistic concept of learning. 'Kindergartens' programmes shall be built on a holistic pedagogical philosophy, with care, play and learning being at the core of activities' (3). The educational strategy has to, according to the framework, contribute to children's development of social interaction skills, language and communication skills in the broadest sense and the learning process includes play as having content in itself and as an independent educational method (11). The mutual values of responsibility, egalitarianism, freedom of mind and tolerance are explicitly mentioned in the national curriculum (6) and so is student participation, meaning that adults have to listen to children's views and use these in the planning (8). Concerning social inequality and the responsibility of the preschool, words like 'children with disabilities', and 'children with special needs' are used, and the preschool should also create an 'inclusive environment', paying attention to 'children's age, level of functioning, gender, and social, ethnic and cultural background' (12). The problems related to inequality and socially endangered children are seen in an individualised perspective, where the child is seen as carrying symptoms and the educational strategy is aimed at these needs as well as in a cultural perspective.

In Finland, the national curriculum revolves around cognitive, ethical, social, religious and aesthetic objectives (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland 2004, 24) and the teacher has to work towards these objectives (14, 16ff). Thus it becomes obvious that Finland refuses to base the ECE work on fixed learning standards. Concerning the question of social inequality, it is an integrated part of the overall objective 'that ECE is seen as a part of lifelong learning for all children (16). Care, education and teaching should form a seamless whole, which flexibly supports the individual development of each child. There is a special emphasis on treating children as equals (31). Early childhood education in Finland is based on a 'view of the child as a human being whose growth, development and learning happens in formal and informal ways in different environments' (Niikko, 2006, 142). Thus, the importance of the ECE intervention in relation to socially endangered children is not specified, the legislation's emphasis on all children being treated equally, however represents a step in this direction.

The Danish legislation is based on a broad concept of learning, based on a free and creative development of the child in a social context. The national curriculum is designed to enhance the possibilities for children's learning and their development of competences through experiences, play and educational activities, thus improving children's concentration, exploration and experience (Ministry of Family and Consumer Affairs, Denmark 2007, chapter 2, section 7, subsection 3). This text also stands above specific learning standards, but six learning plan themes form the basis of the most important objective (chapter 2, section 8); that children acquire competences and the desire to learn. The broad holistic learning concept can be found throughout the Danish legislation, but it differs from the other countries' legislations by addressing the issue of social inequality most explicitly. The latest edition of this curriculum specifies that the objective is 'to prevent negative consequences from social heritage and exclusion by making the educational offers an integrated part of the local authorities' general offers to children and their supportive interventions towards children with special interventional needs, including children that are psychologically and/or physically disabled' (chapter 1, section 1, subsection 3). Thus the Danish legislation is quite different from the other Nordic countries' legislation concerning socially endangered children.

There are huge differences between the Nordic and the Anglo-Saxon models for ECE in terms of learning, standards and assessments. However both approaches are concerned with the question whether the gap between privileged and less privileged groups of children can be reduced through early interventions via ECE systems. Despite the fact that the two models are different, they both reflect the view that the question of social equality is a political question, i.e. that it is via the educational system that so-called negative effects of being 'socially endangered' can be prevented. Both models are based on the assumption that society can reduce social difference by educating children, i.e. by supporting their development in a broad sense (the Nordic model) but also by strengthening school-related achievements in a more narrow sense (the Anglo-Saxon model) (Bennett 2006b).

Interventions in ECE must take into account the risk that socially endangered children in day-care/pre-school may be locked into the marginalised positions by the very interventions that were meant to address their needs (Jensen 2007; Jensen and Mehlbye 2009). This question is pursued in analyses of the research about the Nordic situation.

The situation in the Nordic countries

Recent Danish evaluations document that it is very demanding to implement the Nordic model in an improved practice (Danish Evaluation Institute (Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut, EVA) 2008a, 2008b; Sloth et al. 2006). Professionals experience a lack of symmetry between their existing educational competences and the many challenges that day-care faces today. But what actually happens? How do they deal with socially endangered children in a learning perspective, and what problems arise in relation to the gap between privileged and less privileged children?

A representative study of the work with socially endangered children in Danish day-care centres, 'Kan daginstitutioner gøre en forskel?' [Can day-care centres make a difference?] (Jensen 2005) identifies two paradigms in Danish day-care centres: 1) A compensation strategy (or so-called 'blaming the victim'-strategy): socially endangered children 'lack' something which they need to be compensated for, and 2) An innovation strategy aimed to promote socially endangered children's life opportunities through education, competence development and social inclusion. One thousand Danish day-care centres and 2722 pre-school teachers participated in the study, and one of the main conclusions was that the pre-school teachers require more time and knowledge to change their current intervention, i.e. to stop applying the compensation perspective, which turned out to be the most prevalent, and which itself may work against good intentions of learning and of social inclusion. And to use instead the innovation perspective, which is characterised by a focus on new opportunities based on children's resources and rights. Another conclusion is that there has never been a tradition for actual programmes aimed at socially endangered children in Denmark. Instead, we have invested in general preventative interventions in the all-round offers. However, in 2004 a policy in this field was adopted: the Act on national curriculum (Ministry of Social Affairs, Denmark 2004).

Another Danish study (Palludan 2005) is a qualitative study based on an anthropological approach, which found evidence that there are many exclusion mechanisms operating in the day-to-day pedagogy in day-care institutions. Basing the study on Bourdieu's theory, Palludan sheds light on differentiation mechanisms and identifies a number of processes that create or maintain inequality. First of all, the study showed

that the socially endangered child did not receive any acknowledgement for its actions. On the other hand, the child's skills were considered insufficient. In relation to the pre-school teachers' expectations and norms for development, it is very likely that the endangered child is considered as belonging to the lowest part of the hierarchy. Secondly, and in continuation hereof, Palludan showed that socially endangered children were considered to be 'lacking' something. As a result, a model looking for shortcomings, which unintentionally confirms the child and his/her family's assumptions that they are not good enough as valid members of the community – a phenomenon that Jensen also has documented (2005) was employed. Thirdly, differences in language, rules and other communication strategies used in the institutional life were identified. The gap between children that already understood the codes and were able to interpret the teachers' messages and children and those who could not, was expanded. Fourthly, Palludan (2005) showed that the child's relations to the teachers, which are vital for the child's feeling of belonging and for his/her self-worth, could not be taken for granted. The relations were constructed and negotiated on a daily basis, and consequently they were influenced by the way in which the child was seen by the teachers. Exclusion occurred in the meeting between child and pre-school teacher and the positions that the children placed themselves in and were placed in by the pre-school teachers, were defined by the pre-school teachers' perceptions. All in all, Palludan showed that the children often are (non-intentionally) divided into groups that receive a high level of teachers' acknowledgement and groups that do not. The pre-school teachers considered the latter group as children that were in need of adult support, and the pedagogical task as aimed at helping children whom they saw as children with flaws and shortcomings. Such differentiated meetings that take place on several levels between pre-school teacher and child contribute to reinforcing or maintaining social inequality.

Despite all good intentions, these processes actually work against the potential effects of early intervention. Differences are created through language, communication, the recognition of certain competencies, concepts of normality, social relations etc., and it seems that the reproduction hypothesis, which posits that social inequality is constructed and reconstructed through the daily life in institutions, still holds true. Inspired by Bourdieu's theoretical work (Bourdieu 1998; Bourdieu and Coleman 1991; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) and new educational sociological analyses (Jæger and Holm 2007), this hypothesis is still considered very relevant despite societal changes and better opportunities for more people.

The Danish Clearinghouse for Educational Research conducted a systematic review of studies of day-care/pre-school (Nordenbo et al. 2008; Moser et al. 2008). Three categories became apparent in that review: 1) studies that shed light on socially endangered children in a sociological perspective, 2) studies that shed light on socially endangered children in an individualised psychological perspective and 3) studies on in- and exclusion mechanism in day-care/preschool. The issue of marginalisation constituted a recurring theme in the studies. One study showed that it is harder for children from an ethnic minority to function in the daily institutional culture than for other children (Tireli 2006). According to this study, one explanation lies in the discourse on ethnicity in society as a whole, because this discourse is passed on to the institutions and is reflected in the way in which the children are perceived and how the teachers intervene. In other Nordic studies that appear in the review (Björk-Willén 2006; Lunneblad 2006), we find similar patterns, i.e. that working professionally with socially endangered children requires certain professional qualifications in order to

manage not only the specific child but the overall assignment. The review's results show that if the pre-school teachers do not feel adequately educated or equipped professionally to handle the job, then pragmatic solutions are chosen or perhaps the problem is even silenced and discrimination occurs instead of an adequate pedagogical strategy (Lunneblad 2006). Again there is an emphasis on exclusion risks in the Nordic countries' societal interventions, through ECE, in relation to at-risk children.

To summarise: if we consider social inequality as a question of diversity in a sociological perspective (inspired by Bourdieu's theory that social inequality evolves from the reproduction of differences in social classes' opportunities for positioning themselves (attaining a position) in society (Bourdieu 1998; Bourdieu and Coleman 1991; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990), we cannot simply look at learning opportunities at the individual level, we must also look at the learning and pedagogical environment with an eye on the implicit in-and exclusion mechanism. We agree with Bennett (2006) when he says: 'Successful programmes do not categorise young children as having developmental or language needs, but believe that young children will learn and develop quickly if given a supportive pedagogical environment' (150).

The analysis of research about the Nordic situation thus shows growing awareness of a number of problems that are important to take into consideration in future interventions, e.g. what it means for the effect of ECE in the Nordic countries that almost every child is in day care, which on the one hand provides unique opportunities for supporting all children through learning, but which also on the other hand produces a risk of maintaining or even strengthening the reproduction of socio-cultural differences. This is what a Danish intervention study, the ASP project takes is designed to study.

Action Competencies in Social-pedagogical Work (the ASP project)

ASP is a project with a dual purpose: to develop an intervention, and to test the intervention's effects. The intervention strategy is aimed at enhancing socially endangered children's life opportunities through learning and social inclusion. The ASP intervention is based on a Nordic model of learning (Jensen 2008), and is designed as follows:

An overview of design

Methods

The study of 2700 three to six-year-old children in 60 day-care centres is based on an RCT-design, i.e. the institutions are randomly selected through a segmentation model that divides the institutions into analytically relevant sub-groups in terms of social background and institutional/municipal conditions. Hence, the selected day-care centres are located in areas with different degrees of social strains (education, social welfare, unemployment etc.). Within each of the demographic segments, an equal number of intervention institutions and reference institutions, respectively, were randomly selected.

The ASP intervention programme

The intervention consists of a 'qualification package', which comprises three elements constituting the programme's goal and theoretical basis:

- A qualification folder aimed at the pre-school teachers' learning;
- A competence development process for the pre-school teachers;
- Implementation strategies and processes, specification of working with the ASP intervention programme.

The combination of controlled and uncontrolled aspects of trials

The ASP-programme provides a contribution to the development of RCT designs, from controlling methods to controlling goal and theory with a focus on staff-driven innovation. Uncontrollable aspects of the design are allowed for and even used actively in the analysis in order to identify indicators of 'best practice'.

Outcomes

Effects of the intervention on socially endangered children's learning and competence development are measured with pre-school teachers and parents as informants. Institutional processes and conditions are measured by means of interviews, observations and self-descriptions.

Analyses

Multivariate analyses are applied.

The expected effect of the intervention

Intended effects are increased outcome on different type of measurement of behaviour, such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQs). We expect that socially endangered children in particular will benefit from the intervention. We also expect that peer group influence, i.e. the average performance of other children, might influence the particular child, either because of endogenous effects (one child's behaviour might influence the other) or contextual effects (such as resource or staff requirement; the more endangered the children, the less effort per child). Unintended effect inclusive that more privileged children might experience a less favourable development in the intervention day-care centres/pre-schools compared to the reference day-care centres due to resource constraints in the day-care centres. However, this may have a research interest in its own, because this illustrates a general limit to what we might expect from day-care centres all together. We also expect 'Hawthorne' (endogenous effects from the experiment on the reference group) and 'John Henry effects' (endogenous effects from the intervention on the reference group). However 'John Henry' effects could be expected to be small, because the reference group is unaware of the content of the intervention. There is not much we can do about the Hawthorne effect in the current study. Usually, in the econometrics literature, lasting effects is taken as evidence that an observed treatment effect is not due to Hawthorne effects (Krueger 1999) and this seems to be the current technique to disentangle such effects. Therefore, this is beyond the scope of the current project, but it might be possible to address in a planned follow-up study.

The ASP project's approach is based on theories of science, which assume that practice will change if a user perspective, i.e. involvement of participants and ownership, becomes central (Eraut 1994; Mullen, Bellamy, and Bledsoe 2005; Sommerfeld

et al. 2005). Furthermore, implementation research (Winter 1998), theories on culture from a communication perspective (Keyton 2005) and innovation research in working life in other fields (Elkjaer and Wahlgren 2006; Høytrup 2006; Siggaard Jensen 2007) have documented that circumstances related to the processes of learning and knowing in work organisations can either restrict or promote a social innovation process (Denvall and Nielsen 2006; Jensen, in press).

The Danish intervention and effect-study will contribute to our understanding of the opportunities for day-care/pre-school for actually having an impact on the life trajectory of socially endangered children. The design enables us to identify whether children from the intervention institutions do better than children from the reference institutions according to a pre-defined set of parameters. Another advantage of this design is that it enables us to identify the individual factors that make a difference for the children.

Discussion

This present analyses of the Nordic model of ECE systems have documented five basic problems that were also been in the preliminary analysis of ASP.

The Nordic model's emphasis on student participation, democracy, autonomy and freedom requires a lot of the children, because they are seen as agents in their own learning processes, and as competent persons who are assumed to engage actively in the surrounding world. From a sociological point of view, this may be difficult, because at socially endangered children in particular, have difficulties entering communities on equal terms with other children as well as performing linguistically and socially as children of their own age. ASP baseline assessments of children's social and learning competences do in fact indicate that children's qualifications are very different.

The pre-school teachers are also met with very demanding requirements; they are expected to create an inclusive educational environment and at the same time support each child in his/her free choice and interests, aiming at competence development and learning. Today, the pre-school teachers' key responsibility is to create these learning environments in order for the children's curiosity, imagination and creativity to be stimulated, and at the same time these learning environments should enable children to acquire experiences with meeting the surrounding society's demands, culture and challenges. The problem of social inequality and socially endangered children has reached the political agenda and has thus become something the institutions are expected to take care of. This requires that the pre-school teachers are able to reflect on their own practice and on new learning strategies in relation to including children in communities with other children. The ASP project's preliminary analyses of institutions and case studies indicate that this constitutes a big challenge for the teachers. Preliminary results furthermore show that pre-school teachers think that a targeted focus on exclusion risks, identified in previous Nordic research, is very relevant. According to the innovation and learning theoretical basis, on which the intervention is based, the opportunity for institutional change may occur if the usual routines fail.

We have found huge differences between the quality and the implementation in the various institutions, owing to structural differences in the earlier study (Jensen 2005): financing, poor child/staff ratios. Furthermore, it is documented that one result of poorly educated or non-educated staff is that the pedagogical practice is

based on insufficient theory and practice. The preliminary descriptions of the institutions in the ASP project demonstrate that this lack of theoretical background may cause the intervention to be insufficient. This problem has also been identified in other OECD countries.

The absence of planned structured programmes and learning standards may obstruct the implementation of a curriculum adjusted to pre-school children's right to and need for learning possibilities. The ASP programme is based on the Nordic model, and it is expected that each institution defines the content of the learning and development programme. We will find out whether institutions that have the most structured programme will be the most successful. At the same time we will see whether such programmes will enable teachers to work more goal-oriented with a community-oriented and inclusive educational strategy, which, according to a Bourdieu-approach, is a successful way to address the problem of social inequality.

Finally the ASP programme is built upon theory and empirical methods that should ensure that the intervention becomes evidence-based. The pre-school teachers must connect with the theoretical basis, otherwise, it may be difficult to acquire and implement new knowledge in the field.

We do not know exactly what impact these issues and conditions will have on the effect of the ASP intervention, but intervention experiences and analyses (to be published from May 2009) will comprise preliminary evidence of with the effects of this intervention programme.

Conclusion: ECE systems – new challenges and perspectives in a time of globalisation

The purpose of this paper was to shed light on the questions: Who are the socially endangered children? What do they need and what can society do to provide better life chances for all children?

The definition of socially endangered children applied in this paper is: Socially endangered children are children that are at risk of being in or being placed in a vulnerable position, personally, socially and societal, as a consequence of being brought up in families marked by poverty and other vulnerable living conditions, and as a consequence of how they are greeted from a very early age by society's children's institutions. As shown, socially endangered children do not need to be met by adults and a society that see them as children of flaws and shortcomings. On the other hand, they need to – and have the right to – be acknowledged on equal terms as children the same age. As I have discussed throughout the paper, the overall problem has to do with social inequality and differences that are produced and reproduced through everyday social relations and in institutions. ECE systems have to be based on an acknowledgement of such problems. Social inequality is a societal problem – and the task of future research is to contribute to societal initiatives that seek to incorporate the complex problem into ECE systems and to investigate both possibilities and barriers for implementing this double perspective in practice. There are no easy solutions to such a complex problem. One beginning, however, would be to make this problem a highly profiled area, as we can observe within the framework of OECD (cf. Bennett 2008)

As shown, the Nordic model is very different from the structured programmes, and so far no study provides sufficient evidence that the Nordic model is more (or less) efficient than the international efficient model programme. Nevertheless, Esping-Andersen's (2005) findings that the variation in children's competences is less in the

Nordic countries than in other OECD countries, cause surprise and give occasion for investigating possible explanations. The sociological perspective, which, together with a learning perspective, constitute an alternative setting for working pedagogically with the gap between privileged and less privileged children, offer new reflection and action opportunities in the pedagogical practice. The Danish ASP project contributes with new knowledge about effects and the preconditions for creating effects.

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